

Prisoner of Prejudice

*Commentary on Benedict XVI./Joseph Ratzinger's analysis on sexual abuse
by the spokespersons of the German Association of Moral Theologians*

Evidently, Pope em. Benedict XVI., Joseph Card. Ratzinger intends to make haste to help his Catholic Church which finds itself shattered by the recent scandal of sexual abuse. On 11th April 2019, he offered his thoughts in an analysis on the causes of the sexual offenses against minors performed by priests and members of religious orders. In this context, he does not hesitate to severely criticise the theological discipline of moral theology by stating that since the 1960s, the “collapse of Catholic moral theology has left the Church defenceless against certain developments within society.” As elected spokesmen of the German Association of Moral Theologians, and in accordance with many of our colleagues, we feel obliged to comment on this reproach and insult to the reputations of former and current members.

According to the conviction of the Pope emeritus, between 1960 and 1980 the standards of sexual morality were "chipped away" in a manner that has led to a "normlessness". Thus, a society that has become morally unsustainable consequently tolerates even pedophilia – in the same way that it tolerated adolescent sexuality, contraception or homosexual conduct. Moreover, a relativistic moral theology has not been able to oppose this development because it no longer felt obliged to support the clear prohibitions rooted in traditional moral teaching. In addition, moral theology has fallen into error by contending that human beings can perceive without divine instruction and without the magisterium how to behave in a (truly) human way.

The attempt by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI to blame the social upheavals of the 1960s to 1980s and the reforms within moral theology during this period for the abuse scandal is by no means new. In the past, he already portrayed the Church as victim of a hostile world. By stating this, however, he conceals the fact that in many cases it was the ecclesial office holders themselves who, by denial and cover-up, knowingly shielded the perpetrators. The other fact he overlooks: the initial wake-up call for the church from its moral lethargy came from a morally sensitive public and from their media. Of their own volition, those in authority within the Church did not develop an appropriate response nor did they even come to terms with the situation, as many of the victims have repeatedly told us.

The analysis of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is based on a number of false assumptions. It is assessed by us as a failed and improper contribution to the resolution of the abuse crisis.

- (1) The reflections of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI are totally negligent with regard to any scientific research on the subject within human or social sciences. His escapist approach to theology can only perceive the more general phenomenon of abuse in the Church in a distorted manner. He does not offer a distinction between different offender profiles. Not all offenders can be classified as pedophiles in a medical sense. The problem of sexual abuse in the Church not only involves pedophilia. Furthermore, homosexuality as such is not a cause of sexual abuse.

- (2) It is known that the phenomenon of sexual abuse pervades church history. It would be misleading to insinuate that in Catholic milieus, completely untouched by any form of sexual emancipation or theological renewal, abuse did not (and will not) occur. An unhistorical glorification of the past necessarily cynically excludes the victims of authoritarian or patriarchal structures. Consequently, sinful ecclesial structures which existed at all times have no place in the former Pope's idea(l) of the Church.
- (3) His account of the development of moral theological renewal testifies to a certain lack of intellectual effort. The issue of abuse is instrumentalized by Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI in order to reiterate his well-known criticism of a moral theology whose positions on sexual ethics he does not share. In doing so, he obviously lacks willingness to render a fair judgment. For example, any moral theologian denying that a homosexual act in a committed partnership must always and in any case be regarded as a grave (mortal?) sin does not at the same time legitimate sexual violence. Another example: Anyone daring to criticise the traditional rigorous condemnation of contraception from a moral theological point of view does NOT automatically plead for a moral relativism (normative blankness). Is it from lack of good will or lack of understanding that Ratzinger/Benedict XVI does not see that a moral theological appreciation of dignity and inalienable rights for each and every human being does not at all lead to moral arbitrariness?
- (4) After the Second World War, we witnessed at a global level a profound change in normative beliefs, but not their complete disappearance. From there, it has to be ascertained: The "new" as well as the "old" ethics does indeed acknowledge absolute moral obligations! The dispute however continues about which actions fall under this category and for what reasons. With his new assessment of the death penalty in 2018, Pope Francis has demonstrated how a change in moral teaching is made possible by a reinterpretation of the normative implications of human dignity.
- (5) If we today morally and legally prohibit every form of sexualized violence, this can be attributed to recent changes in moral reflections on sexuality and gender issues rather than to a resurgence of so-called "traditional values". The legal status of sexual self-determination is not an invention of the Catholic Church. That tradition glorified by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI generally did not condemn sexual abuse from the perspective of the victims. It was more often concerned with the sexual "purity" of the clergy than with the sexual integrity of children and adolescents.
- (6) It has always been the major concern of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI not to let faith become torn apart from reason in the Catholic Church. Alas, his recent "analysis" threatens this cohesion, because it refuses to appreciate without prejudice the moral-theological efforts to establish a Christian ethics of freedom and responsibility as well as the scientific findings on sexual abuse.

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