



Joseph Ratzinger's Very Critical Diagnosis and Apology of the Catholic Church

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Abstract: Many devoted and well-educated Catholics begin to doubt the need for the Church. Flooded by the plethora of publications about the Church's dark pages and scandals in the past and today they feel pain and are ashamed. On the other hand, they realize that the Church can be neither a mistake nor a lie. Undoubtedly, Catholics and Catholic theology need today an honest and serious apology of the Catholic Church that will not conceal any of her true weaknesses. This paper seeks to prove that such an apology is offered by Joseph Ratzinger (1927–2022). It is an attempt to recreate it on the basis of his entire intellectual output. His diagnosis of the Catholic Church is bitterly critical, he indicates many ecclesial problems that seem to be carried over from one generation to the next. At the same time, he provides an original apology of the Catholic Church that can surely be helpful in accepting the bipolar truth about her: God's real presence has been so many times mediated by the disappointing Church. This article's final part attempts to critically evaluate the effectiveness of Ratzinger's apology from the contemporary perspective of ardent Catholics.

Keywords: Joseph Ratzinger, Catholic Church, ecclesiology, Catholic ecclesiology, critical diagnosis of the Catholic Church, apology of the Catholic Church, apologetics

In his book on Ratzinger's theology, James Corkery puts forward a claim that the Bavarian's theological method sometimes leads to excessive scepticism about the world and exaggerated idealism about the Catholic Church.¹ But if we precisely collect all Ratzinger's critical remarks about the Church, the outcome proves entirely different. Ratzinger maintains that Christianity has failed appallingly more than once—but so has, and even more so—the Catholic Church and other Churches, even though his criticism concerns mainly the Catholic Church. This Church, he writes, has been “a compendium of all human offenses, defiled and humiliated by a history that has

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¹ “Fundamental hope in the Church will remain pivotal for his entire theological journey. That is why he will always start from the faith of the Church, opposing it, indeed, to the pseudo-wisdoms of this world. This method is rooted in his history and leads him at times to too much scepticism regarding the world and too much idealism regarding the Church” (Corkery, *Joseph*, 23).

not missed a single scandal”; the Church seems to many “not a sign summoning us to faith, but, rather, the chief obstacle to accepting it.”² At the same time Ratzinger speaks forcefully in defence of the Catholic Church—without the Church the Christian faith does not exist at all. How to reconcile these seemingly contradictory theses? Can Ratzinger’s apology of the Church convince those Catholics who feel ashamed of the disgraceful past of the Church?

1. A Very Critical Diagnosis of the Catholic Church

According to Ratzinger, many problems in the Church started a very long time ago. Since the third century the concept of Christian brotherhood has been narrowed down to members of monastic communities and the clergy. They were regarded as the proper representatives of Church life. In this way the original awareness of the Church and her sense of communion, fraternity and collegiality were compromised. Ratzinger does not write how and when this happened. Nonetheless, he points out that one cannot come to terms with this phenomenon to this day.³

Although the New Testament does not style those who hold ecclesiastical offices as priests so as not to evoke associations with temple and pagan cults (calling only Jesus Christ a priest), ecclesiastical language has done this from the beginning.⁴ Ratzinger notes that the designation of the priest as an intermediary between God and the people comes from the Donatist Parmenian, and it has become quite widespread in the Church. This was already criticized by St. Augustine, who reminded that there

² “not marvellous propagation, but a parochial, stagnant club that was incapable of surpassing in earnest the limits of the European or the medieval mind; not sublime sanctity, but, rather, a compendium of all human offenses, defiled and humiliated by a history that has not missed a single scandal, from the burning of heretics to witch hunts, from the persecution of Jews and the enslavement of consciences to self-dogmatization and resistance to scientific evidence, so that anyone who belongs to this history can only cover his head in shame; and finally, not stability, but, rather, being swept along by all the currents of history, by colonialism and nationalism, and now in the process of coming to terms with Marxism and, if possible, largely identifying herself with it.... Thus the Church appears to be, not a sign summoning us to faith, but, rather, the chief obstacle to accepting it” (Ratzinger, *Fundamental*, 140). As a rule, quotations from Ratzinger’s works in this article are from his texts published in English. Otherwise, they come from the Polish edition of Ratzinger’s collected works translated into English by Tomasz Pałkowski.

³ “In the third century, the idea of brotherhood was reduced to two meanings. On the one hand, it applies only to a monastic community, and, on the other, to clergy. The Church’s original self-awareness came to be limited only to those two groups, which now consider themselves to be the proper representatives of the ecclesiastical life. Even here, though, this original idea is overshadowed by an alien gradation in using titles: the title ‘brother’—which used to be a honourable title for a Christian—was now lower in rank than ‘father,’ a title which was also possible among Christians. In short, a situation has arisen which is still impossible to cope with” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 584).

⁴ Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 613.

is only one intermediary: Jesus Christ.⁵ Ratzinger cites the critical words of St. Gregory of Nazianzus (whom the emperor invited to a council in 380): “At the council, I saw nothing but quarrels, anger, and a mounting conflict.”⁶ The Bavarian theologian reminds also the general, critical remark made by St. Augustine that “there are many things surrounding the Church and within her that do not belong to the New but the Old Testament.”⁷

Ratzinger's observation on the Middle Ages was similar: “The criticism of the hierarchy offered by such great theologians and Doctors of the Church as Albert the Great and Bonaventure can hardly be surpassed in its severity.”⁸ In the Middle Ages, negative effects could be seen in the conduct of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁹ He writes that in the tenth century the papacy “had reached a low point and one might have thought that Christianity in Rome would actually become extinct.”¹⁰ We are surprised by Ratzinger's texts: on the one hand he speaks of a revival of faith visible in the flourishing monasticism of the tenth century; on the other we hear about the disillusionment that this monasticism led to later on.¹¹ In a similar spirit, he comments on the work of St. Francis of Assisi and his (sometimes very disappointing) legacy.¹²

Ratzinger argues that the Middle Ages gave rise to biblical exegesis, founded on principles other than the patristic one. Medieval exegesis made use of “ready-made

⁵ Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 210, n. 55.

⁶ Ratzinger, *W rozmowie*, III, 1172–1173. Ratzinger points out that this statement was invoked by Luther when he was invited to a council.

⁷ Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 368.

⁸ Ratzinger, *Pilgrim*, 279.

⁹ “The medieval shift, which identified the Church with the closed society of the Christian West—where the apostolic successors, who were told not to follow the great of this world (see Mark 10:42; cf. 1 Pet 5:3), suddenly thought it fit to become the princes of this society, since as early as in the fourth century their predecessors saw nothing wrong in sporting the insignia of Roman officials.... Indeed, both the Constantinian Revolution and the medieval theology of the empire should be criticized only for the fact that they bring back the ancient polis and Old Testament theocracy” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, II, 1105–1106).

¹⁰ Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt*, 138.

¹¹ “Poverty, which further increased collective wealth, caused monasteries to lose their former status of *fuga saeculi*, or an escape from the existing world system, but were even its privileged subjects. Cluny, an abbey that underwent a reform from the tenth to the twelfth century, became one of the wealthiest properties, a prominent element of the feudal system. Becoming a monk no longer meant abandoning this world, that is, its rule, and taking the side of the homeless, poor and forgotten, but it meant being admitted to the highest echelon of those in power. First and foremost, religious orders were no longer *peregrinatio* of the Gospel, the missionary anxiety of the apostle, but thanks to their *stabilitas loci*, they consolidated the Church in her static-ecclesial system, devoid of missionary dynamism. They no longer amended the faith of society but demonstrated a complete fusion of faith and society, where the salt of faith necessarily loses some of its poignancy” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 327–328).

¹² “It [Francis giving away his garments] was a corrective to the Church of his day, which, through the feudal system, had lost the freedom and dynamism of missionary outreach” (Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 107); “It is clear that Francis did not have in mind a ‘mendicant order’ but a ‘working order,’ whose poverty followed from its renouncement of the security of the feudal system, acceptance of the uncertainty of daily work, and its readiness to even share the lot of beggars; begging—as humiliation—had also the symbolic function as an image showing an imitation of the poor Jesus” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 328, n. 17).

doctrinal content,” which it regarded as superior to Scripture.¹³ Since the thirteenth century there has been a gradual separation of the doctrine of the Eucharist from ecclesiology leading to blatant simplifications, the effects of which continue to this day.¹⁴ One of them was swapping the referents of the terms *corpus verum* and *corpus mysticum*.¹⁵ He believes that the thirteenth century saw excesses of curialism, which led to the emergence of the myth of the Church as Babylon.¹⁶

In medieval times and in early modernity the fusion of the state and the Church took place.¹⁷ When speaking of this and other related phenomena, and intending to draw general conclusions, here is what Ratzinger stated in 1964:

In the last hundred and fifty years, few things have been as damaging to the Church as clinging to outmoded state–Church standpoints. Actually, only this attempt of the state to protect the faith that was threatened by modern science weakened this faith from within and posed various obstacles on its way to necessary intellectual revival. It helped to present the Church as an enemy of freedom that must be afraid of science and progress and works of the human mind, thus becoming one of the most powerful sources of anti-clericalism. There is no need to show that here, too, evil reaches far back into the past. No historically minded person today would reject the fact that the Church has used the state since the time of Constantine, which culminated in the Middle Ages and in absolutist Spain in early modernity; this fact casts one of the most sinister shadows over the Church’s record. Confusing belief in the absolute truth revealed in Christ with the absolute, immanent legal claims of her institutions, as well as the inability to understand the faith condition of others—who cannot be judged using a measure that is alien to them—has been the Church’s unchanging mindset, which still defines her doctrine on the Church–state relationship.¹⁸

¹³ Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 467, n. 66.

¹⁴ Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 609–610; “Contrary to the interpretation of it [Body of Christ] frequently afforded by modern piety, the original meaning of participation in the Eucharist has little to do with the individual mysticism of a union with Jesus; rather, it constitutes the foundation of a mysticism that is definitely ecclesial, and whose object is to become the Body of Christ, or transform multiplicity into the unity of the Lord’s Body” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 595).

¹⁵ “Having carefully examined this issue, Henri de Lubac further showed that these designations were used in Christian antiquity and the early Middle Ages conversely, unlike in the modern times. *Corpus verum* (the real body) was taken to mean the Church, and *corpus mysticum* (the mystical, sacramental body) stood for the Eucharist” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 136).

¹⁶ “Without the excesses of curialism, which emerged in various forms in the thirteenth century, the fourteenth-century myth of Babylon (and probably also the Reformation myth of Babylon of the sixteenth century) would be impossible. The surprising change in the approach to the struggle about the understanding of papal primacy, which took place at the turn of the fourteenth century, is an urgent appeal for this spirit of moderation and middle course, which—without asking about gains or losses—wants to serve only the truth. After all, this only spirit is the source of genuine advantage for the Church—and for the world” (Ratzinger, *Rozumienie*, 618).

¹⁷ “In the Middle Ages and early modernity, the state and the Church were often fused, which resulted in the claim on the truth made by faith being transformed into compulsion and a caricature of what was really at stake” (Ratzinger, *Wiara w Piśmie*, I, 311).

¹⁸ Ratzinger, *O nauczaniu*, I, 379.

Other texts written by Ratzinger on the *Syllabuses of Errors* of Pius IX and Pius X, and the errors committed by the Magisterium in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century propositions, have a similar, summarising character.¹⁹

According to Ratzinger, in the interwar period Catholic ecclesiology lost its holistic perspective of the Church as a mysterious reality, introducing a division into so-called corpus-ecclesiology, which was incorporated into dogmatics and a study of the external aspect of the Church, which became part of apologetics and later fundamental theology. He is very critical of pre-conciliar apologetics, pointing out that the patristic doctrine of ecclesiastical office was closely associated with eucharistic ecclesiology; their separation, on the other hand, “took place in apologetic treatises of the modern era, where the doctrine of office drew more on Aristotle’s *Politics* than Scripture and in which it would sometimes be hard to find a connection with the fundamental mystery of the Church.”²⁰ Ratzinger believes that the response of Catholic theology to ecclesiocentrism and hierarchocentrism is too feeble.²¹ It even makes the situation worse by proposing the phrase “official [hierarchical] Church,” which is intended to denote bishops.²² This theology often misinterprets the term “hierarchy” as “sacred lordship” or sacred authority. Yet this term means “sacred origin.”²³

¹⁹ “It is absolutely necessary to look at the shift that is closest to the present time and thus the most depressing for it, namely, the narrowing of the Christian reality, which found its expression in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in the *Syllabuses of Errors* of Pius IX and Pius X, by means of which—as Harnack claimed, admittedly exaggerating but not without a grain of truth—the Church condemned modern culture and science while shutting the door on them and, let us add, forfeited the possibility of living Christianity as something of current relevance because she was too attached to yesterday” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, II, 1107); “The history of the Magisterial statements of the past hundred years (but not just that) indicates all too clearly the limits of Magisterial competency. The errors in the decisions of the Biblical Commission, and also in many positions taken by the popes (for instance, in questions concerning the papal states, freedom of conscience, the importance of the historical-critical method), are in plain view of everyone today (though often in a very exaggerated and undifferentiated form); Vatican II was in many respects the collapse of a theology that was one-sidedly built in conformity with the latest encyclicals” (Ratzinger, *Dogma*, 31). See Borto, *Magisterium*.

²⁰ Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 616.

²¹ “Yves Congar pointed out that Catholicism today is understood primarily as unity organized around a hierarchy, especially around a pope, while in the past it also meant unity among Churches, mutual unity of communities” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 598); “It is wrong to identify ‘the Church’ only with hierarchy (the pope and bishops); it is even a greater mistake to identify ‘the Church’ with ecclesiastical bureaucracy” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 448).

²² “It is with impatience that we approach the Church, which seems so devoid of the Holy Spirit, so narrow and fearful. It was for bishops that the meaningless word of the official Church was invented, as if they could be their own Church, as if there were many Churches side by side” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 251).

²³ “I would certainly dispute the well-known translation that gives ‘sacred lordship’ as the meaning of ‘hierarchy’. I am persuaded that the word means ‘sacred origin’. It means that the Church does not spring from any decisions of ours, but only ever anew from the Lord himself, from the sacrament” (Ratzinger, “The Network of the Church”); “The Church becomes crowded and stuffy when those who hold offices in it fail to remember that a sacrament is not about granting authority but about dispossessing oneself for the One ‘in the person of whom’ one is supposed to speak and act” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, II, 1133).

Based on Ratzinger's work, we can sometimes say that God is dying in the Church. The Church of Christ, "His Church," is waning in the Churches existing today (also in the Catholic Church), which often resemble business enterprises. Paradoxically, if it occurs that "someone continuously holds Church offices but is not Christian at all,"²⁴ the Church should probably resign because it has become a "pointless game in a sandbox."²⁵ The Church then has less and less of the truth and its power and truthfulness. The perennial problem in Christianity, and at the same time a dilemma if and to what extent it must be ecclesial, was articulated in modern times by the Reformation. It concluded that true Christianity is independent of ecclesiality, which can distort it, and this was frequently the case. Now, Ratzinger argues, such a view is also becoming obvious to many Catholics.²⁶ Today many of them are very disillusioned with the Church. This feeling is all the more intense when the longing for a true Church is stronger—for an "oasis of freedom," a place of true life and truth.²⁷

Ratzinger devotes much space to the situation of the Catholic Church after the last council, which undertook the task of renewing the Church. He criticizes the trend of "all-too-guileless progressivism" just after Vaticanum II, which was enthusiastic about accepting modernity in the Church and would demonstrate that Christianity must even identify with it.²⁸ The Bavarian theologian explains that "the genuine renewal of the Church always involves the removal of the weeds that grow in particular periods of history (they usually appear unnoticed) and restoration of respect to the clear image of the *beginning*."²⁹ An authentic renewal of the Church is always a difficult task, whereas its uncritical modernization is not complicated. Yet the loss of our identity is the price we pay for it, and the Church "becomes a caricature of herself."³⁰

²⁴ Ratzinger, *Kościół*, II, 1133.

²⁵ Ratzinger, *Fundamental*, 145.

²⁶ "The notion that it is actually only the community that is 'Church' in the true sense (that is, the place of the 'gospel') and that the other—the universal—Church is, by contrast, just an instrument, an organization with no spiritual status—this notion is accepted as self-evident today by the average [Protestant] Christian and exerts a more or less recognized influence also in Catholic circles" (Ratzinger, *Principles*, 291–292).

²⁷ "In a world with harsh discipline and where we face inevitable compulsion at every turn, we still look to the Church with quiet hope. It should be, as it were, an island of a better life, a little oasis of freedom, where we could take refuge from time to time. This is why anger towards the Church or disillusion with it has a unique shade, because in the quiet of our hearts we expect from the Church more than from any institution in the world. This is where our dream of a better world should come true. It is here, at least, that we might like to have a taste of freedom and liberation—an escape from the cave, as put by Gregory the Great in reference to Plato. Now, since the Church in its empirical form is far from making such dreams come true, and since its taste is both of an institution and any human element possible, it elicits exceptional bitterness and anger—unable to relieve this anger because it is impossible to dismiss the dream it is associated with" (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, II, 1127).

²⁸ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 56.

²⁹ Ratzinger, *Głosiciele*, 242.

³⁰ "But when reform is separated from this context, from the drudgery of conversion, and salvation is now expected solely from change in other people, from ever new forms and ever new adaptations to the age,

Ratzinger's criticism of ill understanding of the Church's renewal after the Council is plain and severe. In some religious orders and congregations, he writes, renewal was confused with comfort.³¹ Changes involving merely the repeated administrative introduction of new solutions are likened by the Bavarian theologian to a situation where "the dead are burying the dead and calling it reform."³² His critical remarks concern the shepherds of the Church, too: "A bishop whose only concern is not to have any problems and to gloss over as many conflicts as possible is an image I find repulsive;"³³ "they are, at the same time, attacked by the voice of the faithful, who accuse them more and more loudly of being mute and cowardly watchdogs that stand idly by under the pressure of liberal publicity while the faith is being sold piecemeal for the dish of pottage of being recognized as 'modern.'"³⁴ Ratzinger also concludes that the Church has let spiritual confusion to reign. The Church's suffering today results from the clashing of various attitudes, opinions and visions. The spirit of Christian and ecclesial brotherhood is waning. In such circumstances it is very hard to distinguish between true and false prophets.³⁵

Ratzinger points out that nowadays, as since the beginning of Christianity and the Church, we deal with the dilemma of holiness and unholiness existing side by side within the Church and the problem how to precisely define the Church membership. The Church has grappled with these issues almost uninterruptedly from its beginning. "Again and again there have been tendencies toward forming a church of the wholly pure, a church in which there would be no sinners allowed."³⁶ He also believes it is true to say that nowadays more than half of Catholics are non-practicing.³⁷ Hence the questions: Can they still be regarded as Christians or not? How can we

then many useful things may still happen, but overall it becomes a caricature of itself" (Ratzinger, *Fundamental*, 137).

³¹ "Even in some religious orders and congregations true reform has been exchanged for the relaxation of traditional austerity until then in practice. *Renewal* has been exchanged for *comfort*" (Ratzinger – Messori, *The Ratzinger*, 115).

³² "Is the Church really just an institution, a cultic bureaucracy, or an apparatus of power? Is priestly office only the monopolization of sacred privileges? Also, if we do not succeed in overcoming these ideas affectively, succeed in seeing the Church differently again from the heart, then the liturgy is not being renewed; on the contrary, the dead are burying the dead and calling it reform" (Ratzinger, *Theology*, 449).

³³ Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt*, 49.

³⁴ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 324.

³⁵ "The Church of today is plagued by overlapping attitudes and opinions that clash with one another, so Christians find it increasingly difficult to find their way and tell genuine prophets from false ones" (Ratzinger, *Jezus z Nazaretu*, 883).

³⁶ Ratzinger, *Pilgrim*, 277.

³⁷ "The fact that today, even given an optimistic evaluation, certainly more than half of the Catholics (here we are considering only our Church) no longer 'practice' their faith, should not be explained clearly in the sense that this large number of non-practicing Catholics should simply be called pagans. It is still evident that they no longer simply embrace the faith of the Church, but that they make a very subjective choice from the creed of the Church in order to shape their own world view" (Ratzinger, "The New Pagans").

describe their Christianity or Catholicism? Ratzinger believes that the Church has not yet realized the gravity of this problem.³⁸

More than once has the Bavarian theologian formulated general conclusions on the basis of his very critical observations of the Catholic Church. Rather uniquely, he manifested them in the text of the Way of the Cross celebrated in the Roman Colosseum. His very poignant reflections on Station 9 had these words:

Should we not also think of how much Christ suffers in his own Church? How often is the holy sacrament of his Presence abused, how often must he enter empty and evil hearts! How often do we celebrate only ourselves, without even realizing that he is there! How often is his Word twisted and misused! What little faith is present behind so many theories, so many empty words! How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him! How much pride, how much self-complacency! ... Lord, your Church often seems like a boat about to sink, a boat taking in water on every side. In your field we see more weeds than wheat. The soiled garments and face of your Church throw us into confusion. Yet it is we ourselves who have soiled them! It is we who betray you time and time again, after all our lofty words and grand gestures. Have mercy on your Church; within her too, Adam continues to fall. When we fall, we drag you down to earth, and Satan laughs, for he hopes that you will not be able to rise from that fall; he hopes that being dragged down in the fall of your Church, you will remain prostrate and overpowered.³⁹

2. The Apology of the Catholic Church

Despite the clearly horrifying truth about the weaknesses of the Church, Ratzinger speaks in her defence and even demonstrates her necessary existence. The pre-conciliar Catholic apologetics of the Church used to posit that many times in the past the Church was about to collapse (under the impact of external enemies), but she is still afloat and this is a clear empirical proof for her supernatural nature. Ratzinger does not follow this style of argumentation.

First of all, for the sake of historical truth, he formulates several principles concerning so-called criticism of the Church. The first principle says that, strictly speaking, there is no criticism of the Church but one of people in the Church, specific individuals and structures. The Church as such ("His Church")—as a work of God and the culmination of God's and man's common history—is beyond criticism. Nonetheless, the Church will always need to have the weaknesses of its human dimension

³⁸ "A majority of today's Christians are *de facto* in the catechumenate state, and it is high time for us to take this fact seriously in pastoral practice" (Ratzinger, *Theology*, 585).

³⁹ Ratzinger, "Way of the Cross."

criticized. It should allow and accept it.⁴⁰ The second states the necessity of self-criticism: you need to see your own weakness first to point it out in others.⁴¹ The third principle says that “criticism pursued for one’s popularity is something unworthy.”⁴²

When the document *Memory and Reconciliation. The Church and the Faults of the Past* of the International Theological Commission was presented in 2000, Ratzinger, as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, put forward three principles that should underlie the Church’s self-criticism on account of the wrongs and errors of the past. First, “it is neither possible nor permissible for the Church to dwell arrogantly in the present day, to feel herself exempt from sins and to make out that it is the sins of others, of the past, that are the source of evil. The confession of the sins of other people does not set us free from acknowledging the sins of the present day.”⁴³ Second, the Church must not be falsely modest and consent to be credited with wrongs that were never committed or are not certain to have taken place.⁴⁴ Third, it would be unfair to see only the past sins and faults of people of the Church. For the sake of truth and justice, one must see both the evil and good that Christians (and Catholics in particular) did, despite their sins.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ “Strictly speaking, now the criticism no longer (as opposed to the Old Testament) concerns the *Church herself*, but the *people of the Church*. The Church as a Church, in the very core of her ecclesiality, is—as we have said—beyond the reach of criticism, but there is and should be criticism of Church people (also of her secondary institutions and institutions of ecclesiastical law). To reject such criticism would be just as false a move as an affirmation of further prophetism; it would be equal to claiming for the Church what is reserved only for the ultimate Kingdom of God” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 446); “The Church always has to scrutinize her own institutional structure so that it does not become too heavy—lest it harden into an armor that stifles her actual spiritual life” (Ratzinger, *Pilgrim*, 181).

⁴¹ “As such, criticism of the Church does not exist; nonetheless, it always targets specific people or Church structures; such criticism always runs the risk of not being taken seriously—if it does not imply careful self-criticism, justified by the fact that we ourselves, each in our own way, are ‘weaknesses’ of the Church” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 449).

⁴² Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 452.

⁴³ Ratzinger, *Pilgrim*, 282.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *Pilgrim*, 282; “With regard to the relationship between missionary activity and colonialism, false historical judgements are current right up to the present day, above all in Europe and America – less in Africa itself. Colonialism’s abuses were actually moderated by the fearless activity of so many apostles of faith. They were often able to create oases of humanity in areas which had been ruined by the older misery and the newer oppression” (Ratzinger – Messori, *The Ratzinger*, 191–192).

⁴⁵ “In any honest examination of conscience we can see that for our part in every generation we have done much that is evil. Yet we can also see that, in spite of our sins, God has always purified and renewed the Church and has always entrusted great things to fragile vessels. And who could fail to recognize how much good has been done, for example, in the past two centuries by new religious congregations and by lay movements in the sphere of education, in the social sector, in efforts on behalf of the weak, the sick, the poor, and the suffering, even while those centuries were at the same time ravaged by the atrocities of the atheistic systems? It would be failing in honesty to see only our evil and not the good that God has effected through the faithful—in spite of their sins.... The Church is able to confess the sins of the past and of the present in all openness and confidence, in the knowledge that evil will never completely ruin her; in the knowledge that the Lord is stronger than our sins and renews his Church again and again, that she may continue to be the instrument of God’s good works in our world” (Ratzinger, *Pilgrim*, 282–283).

The Bavarian theologian has put those principles into practice. For example, on the occasion of the opening of the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1988 he wrote:

When the archive was opened, the German press wrote that those dark recesses are full of papers hiding millions of dead bodies, as it was there that all sentences to burn witches and heretics from all history were signed. Thank God it is not that horrible. Regarding witches, any historically versed person knows that they were not burned in the Church State for a reason. The burning of witches originated among Nordic peoples; it took place in Spain and southern Italy but not in the Church State. Of course, here too, people perpetuated widespread superstitions but less fervently. The Holy Office promulgated a code of criminal procedure that virtually banned the death penalty. Alas, north of the Alps this code was not popular.⁴⁶

He also wrote:

When the Pope [John Paul II] recently celebrated a liturgy of penance and reconciliation for renewed conscience and the cleansing of memory, it was well justified for the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to read out an appeal for the forgiveness of false zeal and fallacious methods of seeking the truth. It is some consolation that the Church fares no worse than the secular institutions of the time. The Church would not go beyond their thinking and action. Yet there were also many efforts to seek justice and have clear judgement; therefore, the Congregation is not an archive of evil but rather a reflection of man in his misery and grandeur.⁴⁷

Historical matters aside, Ratzinger admits that these days many people are disenchanted with the Church. He writes: “And so for many people today the Church has become the main obstacle to belief. They can no longer see in her anything but the human struggle for power, the petty spectacle of those who, with their claim to administer official Christianity, seem to stand most in the way of the true spirit of Christianity.”⁴⁸ He means the Catholic Church—which he knows very well identifying therewith, and which he claims to have preserved the largest number of ecclesial

⁴⁶ Ratzinger, *Wiara w Piśmie*, I, 633; “In the latter half of this century, the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was one of the few great historical archives that were closed to research. The archive was likened to an archive of the Soviet secret services, and its impenetrability was thought to be a clear indication that here, too, the dictatorship must be hiding its hideous secrets because it cannot bear the light of truth.... The Enlightenment and the historiography that emerged from it ascribed the most terrifying things to the word ‘inquisition’; now, this has to be finally overcome in the time of tolerance and freedom of conscience. Whoever hears ‘inquisition,’ sees burning stakes and cries of people who were tortured and killed because of their conscience” (Ratzinger, *Wiara w Piśmie*, I, 631).

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, *Wiara w Piśmie*, I, 637.

⁴⁸ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 175.

elements coming from Jesus and the early Church, such as the Deposit of Faith of the Twelve, the Holy Scripture, the Tradition of the Church, sacraments, apostolic succession with the primacy of the Roman Pontiff, the visible unity and oneness of the Church. The most of Christ's Church, as Ratzinger argues, can be found within the Catholic Church. At the same time, he is perfectly aware of the many flaws and sins of the members of this Church, also of its shepherds and of failing to keep up (more than once) the genuine Christian spirit.

The main theological argument in Ratzinger's apology of the Church is that Christianity does not exist without the Church, plain and simple.⁴⁹ The point is not that religion cannot survive for long without a specific structure; after all, religions with rigid structures have vanished. His contention, however, is that the Church was born and directly emanates from the Person of Jesus Christ, his newness and definiteness. An important part of Jesus' messianic consciousness was his Ecclesia-forming awareness, which he no doubt put into action.⁵⁰ If Jesus really was (and is) the Messiah, the Church must have been (and must be) his work, viewed as a community of new humans who enjoy new existence—as his one Body. It is obvious for Ratzinger that there was not, is not, and cannot be a Christianity that is solely individual, confined to the solipsism of a subject isolated from other disciples of the Lord—from the one Body of Christ. Communicating with the Lord is inherent in being a Christian who fully communicates with God only through communion with his Body, that is, the Church. Ratzinger contends that thanks to the Catholic Church, Christianity is a real religion existing in real life and history, not in our thoughts, desires or dreams. He writes: "Faith demands unity and calls for the fellow believer; it is by nature related to a Church. A Church is not a secondary organization of ideas, quite out of accordance with them and hence at best a necessary evil; it belongs necessarily to a faith whose significance lies in the interplay of common confession and worship."⁵¹

Christianity does not exist without the Church; nor can it exist in the sense that the whole Church is rooted in the very essence of the mystery of Jesus and not in its approximations; hence it is in the very centre of the Truth.⁵² Ratzinger puts it very

⁴⁹ "Faith does not embrace merely 'I' and 'You' but also 'We'. In 'We' lives the memory that enables us to find the forgotten anew: God and His Messenger. In other words: faith without the Church does not exist.... An act of faith is always an act of total participation, a *communio* act, an act of sharing in the *communio* of the witnesses, so that in them and with them we can touch the untouchable, hear the unhearable, and see the invisible. Also, De Lubac demonstrated that we do not believe *in* the Church as we do *in* God, but our belief, in essence, is integrated with the belief of the whole Church, and as such can be understood and defended epistemologically" (Ratzinger, *Wiara w Piśmie*, II, 830); "Faith is ecclesial, or it is not faith" (Ratzinger, *Fundamental*, 147). See Ślupek, "Benedykta XVI apologia."

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, *Dogma*, 222–227.

⁵¹ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 52–53.

⁵² "These various opinions [about Jesus: who he is and who people think he is] are not simply mistaken; they are greater or lesser approximations to the mystery of Jesus, and they can certainly set us on the path toward Jesus' real identity. But they do not arrive at Jesus' identity, at his newness. They interpret him in terms of the past, in terms of the predictable and the possible, not in terms of himself, his uniqueness,

succinctly: “In the Church, we shed our paradigms to face the essential Truth.”⁵³ This Truth (Jesus Christ as Logos and Truth), indeed, is the most important guarantor and justification of the Church. The Truth is present in the faith and the Tradition of the Church.⁵⁴ Therefore, for Ratzinger, the Church does not stand in the way of one’s belief or if one wants to embrace faith. The opposite is true because “the Church is the presence of Christ, our contemporaneity with him, his simultaneousness with us. She lives by the fact that Christ is present in the hearts of the faithful; from there he forms the Church for himself, and not vice versa.”⁵⁵ The general rule propounded by Ratzinger concerning the core truth in the Church (that the truth is essentially always one and unchangeable⁵⁶) does not imply that the Church and its Magisterium will not find it difficult to understand, express and apply the truth in various life situations, not only bioethical dilemmas.⁵⁷ Since the Church has and must have an institutional structure and with it “an ‘institutional’ mode of operation”—which can sometimes be inflated beyond measure—it can outshine the one, central Truth, which may thus be less clear. It is also true that, looking at the history of the Church with a wider angle, God calls into existence prophetic persons who remind of the words of the Truth.⁵⁸

which cannot be assigned to any other category. Today, too, similar opinions are clearly held by the ‘people’ who have somehow or other come to know Christ, who have perhaps even made a scholarly study of him, but have not encountered Jesus himself in his utter uniqueness and otherness” (Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 292).

- ⁵³ “In the Church we shed our paradigms to face the essential Truth” (see Mark 4:18; John 16:25). This is what ‘Revelation’ is about; it constitutes the very core of our liberation, it leads us out of the maze of images and historical ideas, bringing us into contact with the reality given to us in Christ” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, II, 691).
- ⁵⁴ For reasons of space, Ratzinger’s understanding of the Tradition of the Church will not be presented here. The Bavarian theologian does not question St. Gregory’s critical assessment of the fourth-century councils (mentioned in the part 1 of this article), but he writes that from today’s perspective councils should be considered extremely useful in the self-cleansing of the Church’s faith. Councils were necessary because their participants grappled with the question of properly defining the content of the Christian faith, which was not an easy task.
- ⁵⁵ Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology,” sec.: “The Church as the Body of Christ.”
- ⁵⁶ “Gradually, it transpired that Tradition, after its overly mechanistic interpretation had been abandoned, could be seen as a dynamic, living development of the once-given truth, without which it would be impossible to preserve the beginnings. Tradition is no longer taken to be a closed treasure chest full of individual truths but a living force thanks to which the one Truth is preserved and fostered in the course of history” (Ratzinger, *O nauczaniu*, I, 294).
- ⁵⁷ “even the Church herself, as a whole, still holds the faith only as a *symbolon*, as a broken half, which signifies truth only in its endless reference to something beyond itself, to the entirely Other” (Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 53); “For example, the situation in American hospitals forced us to deal with whether it is obligatory to continue giving food and water to the very end to patients in an irreversible coma. This is certainly enormously important for those in positions of responsibility, if only because they are really concerned and because it’s necessary to find a common policy for hospitals. We finally had to say, after very long studies, ‘Answer that for now on the local level; we aren’t far enough along to have full certainty about that’” (Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt*, 60).
- ⁵⁸ “Seeing in the Church a left wing and a right wing, dividing her into the prophetic class of the orders or the movements on one side and the hierarchy on the other—nothing in Scripture authorizes us to do that.

According to Ratzinger, it would be unfair to see only the past sins and faults of people of the Church or its structures. In truth, we must see both the evil and the good that Christians, Catholics included, have always done. Sometimes doing good took and still takes a lot of effort and struggle. Surely, they have never been impeded in their faith by the Church; on the contrary, she has always provided indispensable help, she is the Lord's presence, a source of motivation to do good, to be simply Christians. Those people, including the holiest and the martyrs, reveal the essence of the Church. Ratzinger writes: "Only when we rediscover the saints will we also find the Church again. And therein we will find again that same one who is alive in the midst of all the darkness, who dies no more, who does not leave us orphans."⁵⁹ In other words, Ratzinger believes that with the help of his Church, God carries his followers through life as it is, often in the midst of the world's indifference.

At this point we should recall Ratzinger's important observation that the Church is closely linked to suffering in many ways. It is not about the many martyrs, in the past and today, although for the Bavarian theologian they are, above all, the genuine (and clearest) apology of the Church.⁶⁰ Does she really pose an obstacle to faith when one realizes, as Ratzinger does, that "throughout the centuries, the Church has awakened the strength to serve and given meaning to this serving," and that she takes "humility, patience and free-willed restriction of one's freedom for the sake of others' freedom" to be the highest value? These values benefit the suffering, and this is most important, even if they may be mocked and exploited by anyone, for example, by those in power.⁶¹ This leads Ratzinger to conclude that a Church that runs away

On the contrary, that is an intellectual construction quite contrary to the Church. She is constituted, not dialectically, but organically. What is correct is merely that there are various functions within her and that God again and again arouses prophetic individuals—these may be laymen, religious, or even bishops and priests—who call out to her the right message, which does not in the ordinary workings of the 'institution' attain sufficient strength" (Ratzinger, *Pilgrim*, 186).

⁵⁹ Ratzinger, *Dogma*, 55; "The dynamism of the saints can be understood only in terms of the new gravity that broke into their life and changed its dimensions from the ground up. For all the terrible things that Church history has to show, one thing is clear: destruction and indifference did not come from those who were really filled with faith in eternal life. From Benedict via Francis of Assisi to Bartolomé de las Casas, Peter Claver, and Vincent de Paul, the real believers are the rays of hope that taught mankind what being human could be; they are the great consolers who did not offer empty promises but, rather, healing" (Ratzinger, *Fundamental*, 100).

⁶⁰ Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 464; "In her martyrs the Church forever carries the death of the Lord in her body, and in the suffering of her members she perpetuates his Passion. The suffering of Church members is essentially liturgical ministry: it prolongs the Lord's redeeming passion. There is no clear boundary between liturgy and life; the Church's liturgy always transcends the gates of church buildings" (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 153).

⁶¹ "People today smile or even laugh at the fact that the Church throughout the centuries has elicited the strength to serve and has been able to impart meaning to that service. Thus 'undemocratic' virtues such as humility, patience, the voluntary restriction of one's own freedom for the sake of another's freedom, in the view of our progressive contemporaries, at best prove how reactionary those who practice them are or even prompt the critics to label them as 'the fashioning of idols,' as though these virtues

from suffering, wanting to live comfortably, loses credibility and diverges from its core and the source of its power.⁶² In contrast to such a Church stands a hidden and silent Church, a Church of the *anavim*: “quietly and almost voicelessly, between those extremes there are, even today, simple believers, who even in this hour of confusion carry out the real task of the Church: worship and the patience of everyday life, nourished by the Word of God. But they do not fit into the desired picture, and so they remain for the most part silent—this true Church, while not invisible, is nevertheless hidden deep beneath the human additives.”⁶³

Ratzinger is perfectly aware that since her beginning the Church has been faced with the difficult dilemma of having holiness and unholiness existing side by side and the closely related problem of defining the criteria of Church membership. He already addressed those issues in his doctoral dissertation, because they presented difficulty for St. Augustine and many of the Church Fathers. They also led to major rifts in the early Church. Ratzinger presents Augustine’s solution. According to the latter, there is an analogy between the human being and the Church: just as the human body is a veil covering the inner man, so the visible nature of the Church is a veil obscuring its true inner aspect.⁶⁴ Therefore, the Church is inherently dimorphic and paradoxical.⁶⁵ This creates difficulty when the truthfulness of the Church and its criteria for membership are determined. So, does the Church’s truthfulness lie only in its inner side? If so, can it ever be known if it is covered? Can the outward aspect of the Church be completely disregarded in determining its truthfulness? Or, perhaps, the true Church is the Church of the Parousia, *Ecclesia praedestinata*, merely signalled and anticipated by the Church of today? This specific Church of today, which is perceived by our senses, was called *Ecclesia sensibilis* by St. Augustine, while the true Church he called *Ecclesia intelligibilis*.⁶⁶ For him, the Church as the people of the New Covenant belongs to the City of God (in so-called *spirituales, anavim*), but at the same time she belongs to the Earthly City because of her imperfection and earthliness.⁶⁷ “The present state of the Church is similar to the condition of the people

benefited only the ruling powers. ‘They are beneficial to the suffering,’ one ought to reply—but probably the laughter and the smiles in this regard will soon pass anyway” (Ratzinger, *Dogma*, 226).

62 “In the exercise of this authority she must also take Christ’s suffering upon herself. What—let’s put it in a purely human way—gives Christ credibility is, in fact, that he suffered. And that is also the credibility of the Church. For this reason she also becomes most credible where she has martyrs and confessors. And where things go comfortably, she loses credibility” (Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt*, 120).

63 Ratzinger, *Fundamental*, 135.

64 Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 106–116, 372.

65 “That in turn means that she [the Church] is, on the one hand, debased by all human failure, yet at the same time something from God is preserved within her and remains effective, giving man hope and salvation. According to this account, then, the Church is by nature ‘paradoxical,’ dimorphic, a mixture of failings and blessings” (Ratzinger, *Dogma*, 223).

66 Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 372.

67 “The people of God are covered by an empirical veil, which, though inseparable, is not part of their essence but only ‘points’ to them” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 381); “her [the Church’s] empirical people

of God of ancient times, who were led out of Egypt; while crossing the wilderness they were still in a foreign land.”⁶⁸ Augustine believed that because the Church had not yet come to completion it was only on its way to New Jerusalem and would always be as long as history lasted, and that “her appearance is also determined by sinners.”⁶⁹

Ratzinger (like Hans Urs von Balthasar) seeks a solution to the dilemma of the holiness and unholiness of the Church.⁷⁰ Our doubts or sometimes our indignation at the Church having sinful members would be confronted with Ratzinger asking: Who among us is without sin? Who can honestly say that they are not sinners? Does our indignation with the Church, which is fuelled by its sinful members, not imply an implicit conviction, underpinned by selfishness and pride, that the indignant person is without a sin and has an undeniable right to feel indignation over sinners in the Church? Is this indignation with the Church not tantamount to escaping from being truthful about oneself? Well, the truth is that all people, including all Christians and Church members, are sinners, including Peter the Apostle, the Rock, and all his successors.⁷¹ For Ratzinger, the solution to the dilemma of the Church's holiness and unholiness can be found in understanding God's and Jesus' love. The terms “holy” and “holiness” are fully reserved for this love only. In the Church it lowers itself to the level of sinners; it comes face to face with them and their sins; it is ready to forgive, it always brings forgiveness, “it vouches for the fellow human being, stands in for him, carries him, and in so doing is redeeming.”⁷² Whoever is shocked by sinners and sins in the Church (in the past or today) does not understand the love of God, who is not offended but suffers and waits patiently. From what we have said so far it follows clearly that it is wrong to think that dispensers of the sacraments in the Church are or must be holy or flawless. They should be people of constant

are merely a reflection of true people” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 372); “The Church belongs to Christ only as a brotherhood joined by mutual bonds.... This brotherly communion is the Church insofar as the content and center of her communion is Jesus Christ” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 383); “The Church is a corporation [body, realness], but this is possible thanks to her pneumatic communion with Christ” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 383).

⁶⁸ Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 368, n. 23.

⁶⁹ “We are still in Babylonian captivity, awaiting our return to Jerusalem ..., the Church is wearing the dress of Babel; therefore, her appearance is also determined by sinners” (Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży*, 368).

⁷⁰ Ratzinger, *O nauczaniu*, II, 869–870.

⁷¹ “And is it not the same in the whole history of the Church that the successor of Peter was both a Rock and a scandal in one person, both a Rock of God and a stumbling block?” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 420).

⁷² “In this unholy holiness of the Church, which we encounter in spite of the human expectation of *katharós*, or the pure, this specifically new and authentic holiness of the love of God would be revealed to us—one that does not stay away from the untouchable but mixes with the filth of this world in order to cleanse it. The kind of holiness expressed in that, in contrast to the ancient notions of purity, is intrinsically love, that is, vouching for another man, standing in for him and carrying him, and hence redeeming” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 315); “The fact that despite the crucial significance of the pneumatic element sinners are indeed members of the Church, though apparently negating her essence, is justified in that the holiness of Jesus Christ is not exclusive and isolating but is open, carrying and redeeming holiness” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 314). See Barth, “The Notion”; Gózdź, *Logos*, 13–65, 153–227.

Christian *metanoia*; however, because this is not always easy, they too have, as Ratzinger writes, unworthy and imperfect hands.⁷³

It follows from Ratzinger's work that until we have an understanding of the very core of the Christian Truth, that is, the love of God and love of Jesus, as well as the absolute primacy of Jesus Christ in the work of salvation and the agency of salvation, we will not understand the Church either.⁷⁴ There will always be greater or lesser doubts about it, or even indignation will appear. Therefore, Ratzinger proposes to venture, to use his designation, the Church experiment:

Someone who does not get involved at least for a while in the experiment of faith, in the experiment of becoming affirmatively involved with the Church, who does not take the risk of looking with the eyes of love, is only exasperating himself. The venture of love is the prerequisite for faith. If it is ventured, then one does not have to hide from the dark areas in the Church. But one discovers that they are not the only thing after all. One discovers that alongside the Church history of scandals there is another Church history that has proved to be fruitful throughout the centuries in great figures such as Augustine, Francis of Assisi, the Dominican priest Las Casas, who fought passionately for the Indians, Vincent de Paul, and John XXIII.⁷⁵

Fortunately, there have always been these kinds of people in the Church—and they are the most needed for it to be what it is—those “who love the Church more than comfort and the security of their own fate.”⁷⁶

73 “The holiness of the Church consists in that power of sanctification that God exerts in her in spite of human sinfulness. We come up here against the real mark of the ‘New Covenant.’ ... It is holiness that radiates as the holiness of Christ from the midst of the Church's sin. So the paradoxical figure of the Church, in which the divine so often presents itself in such unworthy hands, in which the divine is only ever present in the form of a ‘nevertheless,’ is to the faithful the sign of the ‘nevertheless’ of the ever greater love shown by God” (Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 175); “Is the Church not simply the continuation of God's deliberate plunge into human wretchedness; is she not simply the continuation of Jesus' habit of sitting at table with sinners, of his mingling with the misery of sin to the point where he actually seems to sink under its weight?” (Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 176).

74 “The agency of salvation comes from Him, not from men. This means that Christ's salvation can also be communicated by unholy servants, because it does not come from them but from Him. The primacy of Christology, therefore, implies the objectification of ecclesiastical salvific activities, which are not tied to the subjective dignity of the servant. This makes the role of a cleric who holds an ecclesiastical office relative, demonstrating his secondary position in relation to the absolute primacy of Christ” (Ratzinger, *Głosiciele*, 119).

75 Ratzinger, *Fundamental*, 150–151.

76 “Education towards *sentire ecclesiam* will have to elicit the kind of sober obedience that stems from truth and leads to truth. Today (as in all times), the Church needs no fawners for what there is but people whose humility and obedience are no less important than the exciting struggle for truth, people who give witness despite being underestimated and persecuted in all possible ways; in a word, people who love the Church more than comfort and the security of their fate” (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 425).

3. Conclusions: Is Ratzinger's Apology of the Catholic Church Fully Satisfactory?

Ratzinger tries to see the Church as a whole and looks at her from different angles: as a theologian, a historian of theology, a priest, a bishop (even as a pope emeritus), and a Christian Catholic painfully aware of the very negative image of the Catholic Church in modern times⁷⁷. The apologetic method he consciously chooses always speaks the truth, and it must be admitted that in fact it is the only correct (the most honest) method of defending the Church. His diagnosis of the Catholic Church, then, is bitterly critical and goes much further than many critics of the Church could even expect.

Does Ratzinger take into account all doubts and objections against the Church? The answer must be that probably not all of them, but certainly the most important and difficult ones. No one can pinpoint them all. There are, or can be, a great many. One can try to find doubts or flaws in the whole Bible, in every period of the Church's history, also in all of its documents. Ratzinger's apology of the Catholic Church is addressed to Christians and Catholics. He realizes that non-Christians and post-Christians need a different message from a theologian today. In addressing them, it would be inappropriate to begin by defending the Church. Instead, we must first defend our belief in one God and his Divine Revelation.

Are the apologetical answers of the Bavarian theologian for the Church fully satisfactory if viewed from the perspective of devoted Catholics of today? Essentially, yes. This is not to say that all of his explanations can be easily accepted without reservations. One such underexplained issue is that, as Ratzinger writes, the great saints struggled not only with the world but also had to struggle with the Church of their time, which made them suffer.⁷⁸ He tries to comfort those worried about the situation: "When, today, we look at past history, then we have to say that it is not the Church of the successful people that we find impressive; the Church of those popes who were universal monarchs; the Church of those leaders who knew how to get on well with the world. Rather, what strengthens our faith, what remains constant, what gives us hope, is the Church of the suffering."⁷⁹ Is this explanation fully satisfactory? Are we really impressed by popes, who ruled the world, and others? Yes, we are. We might legitimately ask: what would the Church be now had it not been for

⁷⁷ Benedetto XVI, *Che cos'è il cristianesimo*, 143–160.

⁷⁸ "It is no coincidence that the great saints struggled not only with the world but also for the Church; they fought the Church's desire to become the world—that for the Church and in the Church such men as Francis of Assisi or Ignatius of Loyola suffered. In Salamanca, when imprisoned for the third time, Ignatius lay chained for twenty-two days with his companion Calisto in the prison of the Inquisition and yet did not lose his good cheer and serenity of faith" (Ratzinger, *Kościół*, I, 423).

⁷⁹ Ratzinger, *Theology*, 259–260.

such negative phenomena in the past? What kind of Church is a Church that accepts that the successors of St. Peter the Apostle are the rulers of this world?

Such sharp questions are hard to find in Ratzinger. His realism tells him to avoid mental constructs like “what if”? His reply is both realistic and pragmatic and, indeed, right: “Above all, instead of reckoning up the past, we should face the challenge of the present and try in it not only to profess catholicity in the Creed but to make it a reality in the life of our torn world.”⁸⁰ Nonetheless, some disconcerting questions may still crop up: Why was it so easy for the Church to lose its definitive novelty so many times? We may wonder if whatever was evil in the Church and whatever warped its core had to happen. How can Catholics of today be sure that this evil is not some kind of “systemic,” commonplace evil that hardly moves anyone? Can they be sure that if someone reacts to manifestations of evident evil in the Church today they do not have to fight against the Church as the great saints did?

Christians of today, perhaps the most Catholic ones, have been equipped with a past that is a liability, a past that often cripples them—through no fault of their own. It seems that Ratzinger does not fully capture this pain and shame, though we are tempted to think he knows them (for example, he seems to share the feelings of ardent Christians of today when he is asking seriously: How did Christianity become tedious and tedium-laden?⁸¹). He tries to answer this extensively without, however, pointing at the painful sense of shame in Christians (mostly Catholics) about the Church’s past (and also present), which for many is a source of serious doubt in their belief because they are constantly reminded of this infamous past (and present).

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⁸⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 178.

⁸¹ “Has Christianity preserved this expectation faithfully? However did we arrive at that tedious and tedium-laden Christianity which we moderns observe and, indeed, know from our experience?” (Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 8).

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