

Commonweal

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Cardinal Gerhard Muller speaking with Cardinal George Pell in 2014 (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

New Year in Rome, normally a quiet time, is when the Vatican slowly emerges from the post-Christmas shutdown. While keeping one eye on the pope's address to foreign diplomats, many reporters dare to take time off. In January 2023 that was a bad idea.

The passing of Benedict XVI—ninety-five and long ailing—on December 31 was followed by the unexpected death on January 10 of a giant figure of conservative Catholicism, Cardinal George Pell, eighty-one, who had concelebrated Benedict's funeral just five days earlier. What made this one of the most turbulent months of the past decade was not just these two deaths but what they exposed: the tactics and mindset of a group of conservatives who, smelling the end of the Francis era, are determined to secure its reversal in the next conclave. Yet by playing their hand too hard and too early—confident that a papal transition was imminent—they have been exposed as disloyal and unecclesial.

The first was Benedict's longstanding private secretary and gatekeeper, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, who had a tell-all book ready the moment the pope emeritus left this earth. As thousands were still filing past Benedict's body in St. Peter's Basilica, the Italian publishing giant Mondadori was emailing journalists with PDFs of *Nient'altro che la verità: La mia vita al fianco di Benedetto XVI* ("Nothing but the Truth: My Life Beside Pope Benedict XVI"), whose last pages even contained details of the pope emeritus's final hours.

Gänswein's compendious memoir, compiled with help from the journalist Saverio Gaeta, revealed confidences that Benedict never intended to be made public. Even more damagingly, Gänswein offered a series of anecdotes insinuating that the pope emeritus had reservations about some of the teachings of Francis's pontificate. The claims were selected to inflame conservatives against the pope, for whom Gänswein—still technically Prefect of the Papal Household, and anyway a curial employee—still worked.

This jaw-dropping double disloyalty threw a shadow over Benedict's simple, sober funeral on January 5. Privately, curial officials (I spoke to two) were stunned. Publicly Gänswein was censured by cardinals from Vienna (Christoph Schönborn called [1] it an "unseemly indiscretion") to Caracas (Baltazar Porras told [2] Religión Digital that Gänswein had been unfaithful both to Benedict and—by weaponizing legitimate differences between the two popes in order to harm Francis—to the Church).

Then came the news that Pell, the former Archbishop of Sydney, had died suddenly of heart failure following hip surgery at Salvator Mundi hospital. As the news sank in, Pell gave a blast from beyond the grave: the *Spectator* rushed out an article [3] he had written deploring the current synod as a "toxic nightmare" and "neo-Marxist." Although Pell had hardly been reticent in his criticisms of previous synods, Damian Thompson, a polemical traditionalist at the UK conservative weekly, claimed it was a characteristically courageous act by Pell, who knew he would face "the fury of Pope Francis" when the piece was published.

Yet that same day Pell was shown to have been anything but courageous. His death had freed the blogger Sandro Magister to reveal [4] that the cardinal was the author of the anonymous "Demos" memo he had published in March of last year. That rambling diatribe, packed with conservative talking points, many of them bizarre, had begun by claiming that "commentators of every school" saw the Francis pontificate as a "disaster" and a "catastrophe," before spelling out a nine-point case for a restoration of the *status quo ante*.

Yet in the midst of all this, Francis—far from furious—praised Pell to the dean of the college of cardinals, Giovanni Battista Re, as a "committed witness to the Gospel and Church" who had led Vatican financial reform with "determination and wisdom" and "unwaveringly followed his Lord with perseverance even in the hour of trial." The pope gave the final blessing at Pell's funeral on January 14, and later told [5] the Associated Press that the cardinal had the human right to criticize him, adding: "He was a great guy. Great."

But Pell's behavior was a second shock to Roman sensibilities. Just as Gänswein had betrayed the curial code of confidentiality and loyalty, Pell had cast aside his cardinal's vow of loyalty to the pope. Among those [6] who had admired Pell for his directness if not his dogmatism, it was hard to compute. He had enjoyed [7] Francis's trust as his finance head but also as a member of his nine-member cabinet of cardinals tasked with reforming the Vatican, at whose meetings over many years all could speak freely.

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The betrayal felt personal, too. When the cardinal returned to Australia in July 2017 to face sex-abuse charges for which he was convicted the following year, Francis had always stood by him, defending his innocence; and then, following the overturning of Pell's conviction after thirteen months in prison, Francis had welcomed him back to Rome in September 2020. Pell had been careful not to criticize Francis in public, referring [8] to him as recently as his last public Mass on January 7 as *buono e bravo*. Now, it seemed, Pell was no better than those who—as Francis described them in 2019—"smile while stabbing you in the back."

By the time of Pell's funeral another tirade against Francis was making the rounds in advance of its publication at the end of January. Vatican reporter Franca Giansoldati's interview book with Cardinal Gerhard Müller—whom Benedict XVI had named prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the

Faith in 2012, and whom Francis made cardinal two years later—was more of a brazen, full-frontal assault. It added little to what Müller had spent five years broadcasting on conservative channels and circuits since Pope Francis refused to renew his term of office in 2017. But what made *In Buona Fede: La religione nel XXI secolo* (“In Good Faith: Religion in the Twenty-First Century”) remarkable, especially coming from a cardinal, was the degree of acidic contempt directed at the pope. Its sneering innuendo (“Ill-intentioned people say...of course I don’t know if that’s true...”) has done little to dispel the common view in Rome that Müller is a disturbed character. But the book’s purpose is clear, and Müller pursues it with vigor. Like Pell’s secret memo, it is a bid to carve out an alternative pontificate that would reverse the past decade in all its essentials.

Why all this, and why now? The simple answer is that over the past year the tight-knit opposition groups in Rome became convinced there would soon be a conclave, and they are ambitious to shape it. They foresaw Benedict’s death as imminent and expected Francis’s resignation to follow soon thereafter—next month, if he chose to follow Benedict’s own timetable. Hence the rush to get the books out now.

The idea that Francis was close to resigning was circulating already during Lent last year, when Pell asked Magister to publish his secret memo [9]. At the time the pope was in intense pain from a torn ligament, and confined to a wheelchair. The chatter was fueled by the pope telling people that he had refused an operation because of the side-effects of general anaesthetic; yet surgery for a torn ligament needed only a local anaesthetic. The truth was that he had a small bone fracture in addition to the torn ligament, which now appears to have healed after laser and magnetic therapy. At the time, the rumor was that his 2021 colon surgery had revealed a cancerous tumor, even though this had been explicitly denied at the time of the operation.

So when Francis announced a meeting [10] of the whole college of cardinals at the end of August last year—an unprecedented moment for a consistory, the first full meeting of the college in many years—the opposition believed he would use the moment to step down. When he didn’t, the assumption was that he would soon. Pell told [11] John Allen of *Crux* that “Pope Francis was suffering from an undisclosed illness” and said there would be “a conclave by Christmas.” In December, Pell wrote his takedown of the synod for the *Spectator*. His friend George Weigel, who helped him draft it, recalled [12] that, just before he died, Pell was anxious because the article hadn’t yet appeared, “given what he regarded as the urgency of the situation.”

Pell, who worked for Benedict’s election in 2005, lived in the same Vatican apartment block (across from the Sant’Anna gate) as Müller, the editor of Benedict’s *opus*, and they were close. Müller was a regular visitor to the “Monastery,” as Benedict’s retirement home was known, where Gänswein, custodian of the Benedict legacy and executor of his will, held sway.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, what emerges from the texts of all three men is in three particulars remarkably similar. The first is their indignant arrogance, manifest above all in their contempt for Francis. The second is the way they use the controversy surrounding the use of the Tridentine liturgy to drive a wedge between Benedict’s legacy and Francis. The third and most revealing is the vehemence of their opposition to the synod and their determination to reject the vision of the Church to which the synod is giving birth.

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“Arrogance” refers not only to haughtiness and disdain—although these are not lacking, especially in Pell and Müller—but also to the quality signified by the Latin root *arrogare*: “to claim for oneself.” All three men see themselves as custodians or repositories—of truth and tradition, and specifically of

Benedict's legacy. All three paint Francis as an unworthy interloper, unable to be trusted with that same responsibility. There is no faith that the Spirit could be at work through papal elections, even less that the Spirit might be doing a new thing through Francis. Indeed, Pell's claim in his "Demos" memo that "the College of Cardinals has been weakened by eccentric nominations" hinted that the next conclave could not be relied on to produce the right outcome.

In both the memo and in the *Spectator* article, Pell restates his *idée fixe*, drawn from his 1972 Oxford thesis on St. Irenaeus, that the pope's unique task is the "preservation of apostolic tradition" faced with the threat of modernity and that the bishop is "the guarantor of continuing fidelity to Christ's teaching." The memo indicts Francis for failing to do this—specifically, for his "silence" on the German synod's discussion of homosexuality, women priests, and communion for the divorced, and for failing to "correct" the relator of the current synod, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich for what Pell claims (without justification) to be his "explicitly heretical" views.

For Pell, the purpose of the pope and the bishops is to act as border police, preserving the Church from contamination through vigorous condemnation and correction. Any other way of operating is read as surrendering that duty. Hence the most curious assertion in the memo, which comes right after the list of Francis's "silences": that "Christ is being moved from the center" under this pope. Given that Francis has done almost nothing since 2013 *but* re-focus the Church on the person and experience of Christ, Pell's bizarre remark can only mean that Christocentrism requires the vigorous condemnation of heretics.

Müller similarly indicts Francis for ambiguity, lack of clarity, and theological mediocrity. "At this time I see the Church on a precipice and am put in mind of the siege of Constantinople," he declares. The idea of a crisis of authority, so beloved of conservative gatekeepers, has been a consistent theme for both Pell and Müller. They paint a picture of the People of God wandering around in a daze of confusion from which they offer to rescue us. Müller claims, for example, that the 2016 exhortation *Amoris laetitia* has caused "internal lacerations" in the Church, with cardinals "openly denouncing supposed theological deviations." But he doesn't identify himself as one of the tiny group of cardinals doing so, all of whom are now retired, if not dead. Where are these "internal lacerations" but in the minds and websites of people like Müller and those who follow him? In dioceses that have implemented *Amoris laetitia*, the exhortation provides for new marriage preparation and accompaniment programs that bring healing and cause no division whatever.

Astonishingly, Müller cannot admit that it was his behavior over *Amoris laetitia* that led to his sacking as CDF prefect. Francis entrusted the communication of the exhortation—fruit of an exhaustive two-year synod process involving hundreds of bishops—to Cardinal Schönborn, a close collaborator of Pope Benedict, who clearly explained its Thomist orthodoxy. Yet Müller, openly disagreeing with Schönborn and claiming to be *the* authoritative interpreter of the document, characteristically did his own thing, touring TV studios to critique interpretations of the exhortation that the pope himself had approved.

Few were surprised when, at the end of his five-year term as prefect in 2017, Francis let him go; the surprise was that Francis had not removed him sooner. Müller's refusal to serve the papal ministry rather than promote his own convictions was incompatible with his office and had caused endless tensions at the Congregation. Yet in his interview with Franca Giansoldati, Müller blames everyone but himself. Martyred on account of his "rigor in doctrinal matters," he claims to be the victim of prejudice, of Latin-American inferiority complexes. He says Francis was manipulated by rival theologians. As for his own conduct, he regrets nothing.

Gänswein, meanwhile, has arrogated the right to break the pope emeritus's vow of "unconditional reverence and obedience" to his successor. Ironically, his memoir details the lengths to which Benedict went to adhere to this commitment: never allowing people to criticize Francis, always proclaiming his affection and loyalty to him. Yet in *Nothing but the Truth* Gänswein makes Benedict do the opposite—by quoting *in toto* Benedict's written response to Francis's interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro in 2013, and by sharing what he claims were Benedict's negative reactions to three paragraphs of *Evangelii Gaudium* that "to the theological sensibility of Benedict...sounded strange".

Later Gänswein says it would have been an “illicit interference” for Benedict to have written anything down or said anything in response to questions put to him about *Amoris laetitia*. But then Gänswein, winking at the reader, tells us that Benedict disapproved of the way “a certain ambiguity” had been allowed, that he “did not share the strategy of allowing various interpretations to play out before then favoring one of them,” and was left “humanly surprised” by Francis’s decision not to respond directly to the so-called “dubia” letter of the four cardinals.

Like Müller, Gänswein boils with resentment at Francis, who never gave him the deference to which he considers himself entitled. The idea that he could be both Benedict’s secretary and prefect of the papal household was “somewhat naïve,” he says, given the lack of “an appropriate climate of trust” between him and Francis. But he does not ask why it was so hard for Francis to trust him, or consider that his memoir might show the wisdom of the pope’s judgment. After one incident in which some apparent slight left him feeling humiliated, he complained to the pope, who apologized, but added that “humiliations do a lot of good.” Anything to learn there? Gänswein does not think so.

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Later he was furious that an apartment in the Apostolic Palace he believed he deserved was given instead to the Vatican’s chief diplomat, Archbishop Paul Gallagher. Despite insisting to the pope that “it was normal for the Prefect to reside there,” he was given an apartment that he describes as “far from the Apostolic Palace” (in fact, it’s about a five-minute walk) in the old Santa Marta building by the Paul VI hall.

Fed up with the antics surrounding Benedict’s posse—the last being the *imbroglio* ^[13] over Cardinal Sarah in January 2020, which Gänswein (convincingly) blames on Sarah —Francis asked Gänswein to concentrate on caring for Benedict (“he needs you: protect him”) and to no longer work in the papal household, though he could retain his title. Furious, Gänswein told the pope, “I do not accept it at a human level, and do so only out of obedience” to which Francis gently replied that, in his experience, “accepting in obedience’ is a good thing.” Another opportunity for self-reflection is lost: Gänswein’s sole concern seem to have been his *bella figura*. This memoir is his bid to get it back.

Months later, Gänswein was still stamping his foot, complaining to the pope that his suspension was being perceived as a punishment. Francis reassures him that it wasn’t, tells him not to worry what people think, and shares with him some of his life experiences in Argentina, “saying that the stoppages in his life had served to mature him.” Gänswein recounts these conversations with a tone of astonishment, his bruised ego unable to absorb the spiritual lessons the pope is trying to teach him.

There is one group to which Pell, Müller, and Gänswein all actively appeal in their bid to shape the next conclave. Pell’s memo talks briefly of “the active persecution of the traditionalists” at the hand of Francis, and warns of schism “when liturgical tensions are inflamed and not dampened.” Müller dedicates a whole chapter to *lo strappo* (“rip” or “tear”), claiming that Pope Francis’s decision to allow bishops to once again regulate the Tridentine Mass was “a slap in the face” that had deepened division. Gänswein, too, takes up the theme, claiming that Benedict saw Francis’s July 2021 edict *Traditionis custodes* as “a mistake, because it placed at risk the attempt at pacification” he had sought in his 2009 edict liberalizing the use of the old rite.

Curiously, despite dedicating pages to the topic, neither Müller or Gänswein ever acknowledges or engages the reasons Francis carefully spelled out in the letter to bishops that accompanied *Traditionis custodes*: How it had been called for by bishops following a worldwide consultation carried out by the CDF, which had brought to light the divisive impact of groups using the liturgy to oppose Vatican II; why he believed it now right for them to monitor the use of the pre-Vatican II liturgy; and how, despite Benedict’s good intentions, the edict of 2009 had not served to unify the Church but had triggered a movement aggressively promoting the old rite as the “true” Mass. Gänswein simply repeats the story behind Benedict’s edict, claiming it was a mystery to the emeritus pope why the results of the CDF

consultation of bishops was never made public.

For his part Müller again claims, again without any evidence, that Francis was manipulated by “a group of advisers.” He then goes on to make a revealing insinuation: that Francis’s real agenda is a “modernization” of the Church that is liberal or Protestant in nature, one that ignores tradition; and that, although Francis is not interested in liturgy, he sees “traditionalists” as a barrier to that reform, who must therefore be suppressed. The claim is not only absurd, inflammatory, and wrong on every count; it also shows that for Pell, Müller, and Gänswein the traditionalists are useful cannon fodder in their campaign..

Appealing to the grievances of the traditionalists is part of a broader power bid to pit Benedict against Francis, one couched in the hypocritical language of regret at the “divisions” between the two popes. This is perhaps the most noxious element of the Müller and Gänswein books: the way they pretend to mourn a polarization between Benedict’s vision of the Church and Francis’s vision while doing their best to increase that polarization.

Gänswein, for example, claims that the problem was less the coexistence of “two popes” than two visions of the Church. Müller notes how “one part of the Church identifies with Benedict, another part with Francis.” Yet neither presents any evidence for this broad claim, or bothers to explain how these visions are supposed to differ. While there are indeed differences between Francis and Benedict, it is simply not true that they represent rival or incompatible ecclesiologies, despite the strenuous efforts of Müller and Gänswein to promote this idea.

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Finally, and most revealing of all, are the reactions of Müller and Pell to the current synod on synodality (ignored by Gänswein). Müller and Pell speak of the three-year process —which began in October 2021 with a worldwide gathering of ordinary faithful—with horrified disgust. “What is one to make of this potpourri, this outpouring of New Age good will?” asks Pell in the *Spectator* of the Document for the Continental Stage (DCS ^[14]). Müller sneers that the synod amounts to a “democratization, a *de facto* Protestantization.”

But even more striking than their disgust is their ignorance, sign of an inner isolation from the body of the Church. In claiming that the Synod of Bishops is *per se* the expression of episcopal collegiality, Müller takes no account of the authoritative International Theological Commission’s 2018 document ^[15] clarifying the distinction between collegiality and synodality, or of that year’s apostolic constitution ^[16] *Episcopalis communio*, which—drawing on the ancient traditions of the Church—says “the Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God”.

First, synodality is not just for bishops, a point deduced from the experience of the early Church, which Müller and Pell do not bother to engage. Second, the bishops remain the decision-makers and final discerners, with and under the pope—an essential point that distinguishes Catholic synodality from deliberative parliamentary processes in Protestant churches. “Bishops are not there simply to validate due process and offer a ‘nihil obstat’ to what they have observed,” declares Pell, who seems not to have noticed that *Episcopalis communio* n. 7 makes clear precisely this: “Consultation of the faithful must be followed by discernment on the part of the Bishops chosen for the task, united in the search for a consensus that springs not from worldly logic, but from common obedience to the Spirit of Christ.”

Pell says bishops are “governors and sometimes judges, as well as teachers and sacramental celebrants, and are not just wall flowers or rubber stamps.” What is missing from that list is listening to the *sensus fidei*. The *Ecclesia docens* cannot be separated from the *Ecclesia discens*. A teaching Church is one that listens to the *sensus fidei*—“a mutual listening,” as Francis put it in his 2015 speech

on synodality [17], “in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (John 14:17) in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Revelations 2:7).”

This is what happened in the synod on synodality’s first stage: a worldwide mutual listening to discover what “new thing” (Isaiah 43:9) the Spirit may be saying to the Church at this time. The syntheses of that listening, both national and global, took for granted the Church’s apostolic tradition and its teaching. Its purpose was not to restate what is settled; nor was it intended as a teaching document (which it had no authority to be). The DCS, as the document itself makes clear, was a summary of the listening process, which sought to be faithful to what had been heard.

“It is not a summary of Catholic faith or New Testament teaching,” says Pell of the DCS, without any awareness of how odd it would be if it were. The purpose of the DCS was to synthesize what emerged from the global discussion of what people experience as enabling or blocking communion, participation and mission within the Church. Obviously, that meant considering who experiences exclusion, who is “outside,” those whose gifts are not recognized as they should be. Pell describes as “neo-Marxist jargon” the DCS’s references to exclusion, alienation, identity, marginalization, and the voiceless. Yet these were words that appeared in virtually all the national synthesis reports. They were not culled from sociological textbooks; they were used by ordinary Catholics to describe what they saw.

Pell claims, absurdly, that “by an enormous margin, regularly worshipping Catholics everywhere do not endorse the present synod findings.” Numbers are hard to come by, but where they have been published—the U.S. document says 700,000 took part; Spain says 200,000; France, 150,000—the figures are impressive, even if they represent less than 10 percent of the total Mass-going population. There is no evidence to suggest that what participants in the listening sessions expressed was not representative of the views of other Mass-goers, and plenty to suggest that it was.

Pell is horrified by the DCS’s call to “enlarge the space of your tent”—a quote from Isaiah 54:2 that the group in Frascati (I was one of them) felt captured what the Spirit was saying through the reports. Pell reads this as a bid to “accommodate... anyone who might be interested enough to listen.” By “accommodate” Pell means diluting Christ’s message for the sake of appealing to the *zeitgeist*. Yet the DCS makes clear that the words “help us to focus on what the Lord is calling us to through the experience of lived synodality,” which is then explained in paragraphs 26–28 as an invitation to self-emptying and conversion in order to be better able to deepen communion. Only an extreme hermeneutic of suspicion is capable of reading these paragraphs the way Pell does.

The cardinal adds, quoting from the document, that “participants are urged to be welcoming and radically inclusive: ‘No one is excluded.’” The phrase “No one is excluded,” which Pell quotes with derision, appears twice in the DCS. In the Introduction, it comes in the context of “listening as openness to welcome: this starts from a desire for radical inclusion—no one is excluded—to be understood in a perspective of communion with sisters and brothers and with our common Father.” Part 4.1 states that the “message of our synodal way is simple: we are learning to walk together.... Everyone is called to take part in this journey, no one is excluded. To this we feel called so that we can credibly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to all people.” In neither case is the phrase used as a justification for accommodating or diluting teaching or doctrine, but as a hermeneutic of listening and proclamation: the missionary starting-point of Jesus himself, who sent his followers out to make disciples of all nations with a message that no one was excluded from God’s love and mercy.

Shortly after Pell’s death and his well-publicized broadside, I was in Luxembourg for a meeting on the experience of local synodality in European dioceses. At a Mass for us celebrated by the city’s archbishop, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, who is also the synod’s relator, he began by noting “all these attacks, all this fear and accusation” around the synod, adding, with a smile, that “God clearly has a great plan” for it.

“As a Jesuit, in my own spiritual journey, I know that when you have a lot of opposition to something, that can be a sign of confirmation,” he told me after Mass. He explained that one clear sign of where

the attacks are coming from is the way they are made: *ad personam*, viciously, in secret memos and the like. “When I get attacked, I always feel that Pope Francis is aimed at,” he said. “For my own journey, Francis has been very important. I heard him proclaim the Gospel and I knew I had to change, and that made me very happy. I wish the same happiness, the same conversion, for all the bishops—and lay people—who attack the synod.”

We all had to work together, in our imperfection, for the good of the Church and its mission, the cardinal added. For this, he said, “we have to enlarge the tent.” But there were some people who did not want that, who wanted to keep the tent small.

“It’s their responsibility,” he added. “But it’s sad.”

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