Keeping the Faith

Paolo Pellegrin/Mangum, for The York Times

Spreading the Word Postcards for sale at one of the many kiosks near St. Peter's Square.

By RUSSELL SHORTO
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Walk into a shop to buy a newspaper or a wurst or a Game Boy in the German city of Regensburg and your server will probably welcome you with a brisk “grüss’ Gott,” shorthand for “God greet you.” It’s the local form of hello: street-corner dudes and grandmas, everyone says it. This is Bavaria, Germany’s Catholic heartland, a region that gives the lie to the popular notion that Western Europe has tossed its Christian heritage in history’s dustbin. Bavaria is as modern as you please — a center of the European telecommunications industry, the home of BMW (as in Bavarian Motor Works) — but on any special occasion you see couples wandering around looking like Hansel and Gretel, in lederhosen and dirndls. Elsewhere in Germany, Bavarian jokes serve the same function that Polish jokes used to in the United States. Bavarians will tell you they hold to tradition, religion and antique styles of speech not out of stupidity or addiction to kitsch but because they believe these things encompass what is real and true.

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Crowd Pleaser Despite his professorial style, Pope Benedict often outdraws his more theatrical predecessor, John Paul II.

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Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum, for The New York Times

Empty House The numbers of both parishioners and seminarians are diminishing rapidly throughout much of Roman Catholic Europe.

The center of Regensburg is all old stone, a carefully preserved medley of medieval towers, gates and spires clustered on the banks of the Danube, and in various ways — the firmness of the material, the rigorous workmanship, the serious commitment to the past as a component of the present — you might see this clutch of buildings as a metaphor for the mind and heart of Bavaria's most illustrious native. Joseph Ratzinger — Pope Benedict XVI — was born in a little village tucked between a ridge and a broad plain of farmland to the east, and the major events of his childhood and much of his adulthood played out around here. It was in many ways an idyllic, almost fairy-tale youth. The family home in Traunstein was an 18th-century farmhouse with a single wood-shingled roof covering living quarters, hayloft and animal stalls. The Roman Catholic Church provided both structure and spectacle: at Eastertime, black curtains hung on the windows of the village church, so that, as Ratzinger wrote in his 1997 autobiography, "the whole space was filled by a mysterious darkness. When the pastor sang the words 'Christ is risen!' the curtains would suddenly fall, and the space would be flooded by radiant light. This was the most impressive portrayal of the Lord's Resurrection that I can conceive of."

The Bavarian idyll dissolved: Nazi songs crept into the music books at school. Ratzinger entered the seminary in 1939 as Hitler's soldiers completed the occupation of Czechoslovakia. Shortly after, at age 16, he was drafted and began his much-reported stint in the Hitler Youth, assigned to guard a BMW plant north of Munich. When the Americans arrived, they used his family home as their base and took him as a war prisoner. Throughout the Nazi experience, his father guided him to see it as an outgrowth of modern godlessness. The effect was to reinforce the idea of the church as a bulwark against darkness — against secularism and rationality run amok.

Returning to the seminary immediately after the war, Ratzinger became deeply influenced by the philosophy of personalism, which saw the basis of reality not in bloodless science but in the individual human being and whose adherents would come to include Vaclav Havel and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He looked, too, to the German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger as guides, for their inquiries into "pure being" allowed for a more human understanding of the world than the scientific materialism that was rapidly winning acceptance in Western culture. But all of this was mere supplement to Catholic theology. "Dogma" wasn't a dirty word — it was the ground. "Dogma was conceived not as an external shackle but as the living source that made knowledge of the truth possible in the first place," he wrote in his memoirs. Ratzinger rose rapidly through the ranks of Bavaria's intensely rigorous Catholic institutions, holding the chairmanship in dogma at the University of Regensburg from 1969 to 1976, until he was appointed archbishop of Munich and Freising and his career focus shifted toward Rome.

So the occasion of the speech that Benedict made at the University of Regensburg last September — the speech that caromed around the world and caused protests in the Middle East and attacks on Christians and churches in Iraq, Somalia and the West Bank for his seeming to say that Islam is a religion of violence — marked a homecoming, albeit an incendiary one.

The speech was a setback for relations between Islam and the West (by most accounts the pope regained some ground on his subsequent trip to Turkey last November), yet it also laid bare the foundation of the pontificate Benedict would pursue and so in a sense marked the real beginning of the post-John Paul II era in the Catholic Church. Today, as he approaches the second anniversary of his papacy (April 19) and his 80th birthday (April 16), it seems clear that Joseph Ratzinger's lifelong agenda — rooted in Bavarian Catholicism and his experience of Nazism — has been updated, and he is now trying to bring it to bear on the post-9/11 world.

As it routinely does with journalists, the Vatican declined requests for a papal interview for this article, but Benedict has made his objectives clear in a variety of ways. Compared with his predecessor, who was elected pope at the age of 58, he knows he has a limited time and has been rather direct in advancing his theme. The poles of his papacy might be seen in the subjects of two books by him just being released in the United States. One is about Jesus. The other is titled "Europe Today and Tomorrow." Benedict is one of the most intellectual men ever to serve as pope — and surely one of the most intellectual of current world leaders — and he has pinpointed the problem of the age, as well as its solution, at the level of philosophy. His argument, elaborated in the years leading up to his election and continuing through his daily speeches and pronouncements, reduces to something like this: Secularism may be one of the great developments in history, but the secularism that holds sway in much of the West — that is, in Western Europe — is flawed; it has a bug in its programming. The mistaken conviction that reason and faith are two distinct realms has weakened Europe and has brought it to the verge of catastrophic collapse. As he said in a speech in 2004: "There exist pathologies in religion that are extremely dangerous and that make it necessary to see the divine light of reason as a 'controlling organ.' . . . However . . . there are also pathologies of reason . . . there is a hubris of reason that is no less dangerous." If you seek a way out of the vast post-9/11 quagmire (Baghdad bomb blasts, Iranian nukes, Danish cartoons, ever-more-bizarre airport security measures and the looming mayhem they are meant to stop), and for that matter if you believe in Europe and "the West" (the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a bottle of Chateau Lafite Rothschild, the whole heritage of 2,500 years of history), then now, Benedict in effect argues, the Catholic Church must be heeded. Because its tradition was filtered through the Enlightenment, the thinking goes, the church can provide a bridge between godless rationality and religious fundamentalism.

One remarkable thing about Benedict's papacy has been that he has largely disarmed the left wing of the church. In his 24 years as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican enforcement office once known as the Inquisition, he built a famously fearsome reputation for doctrinal correctness: disciplining Latin American practitioners of liberation theology; restating the ancient dogma that "there is no salvation outside the church"; adamantly resisting any effort to change policies regarding birth control, priestly celibacy or the ordination of women; and having no qualms about stepping into the political arena, as when he instructed American bishops during the 2004 presidential campaign that it was wrong to grant Communion to a Catholic — like John Kerry — who supports abortion rights.

But when Ratzinger became Benedict, "God's Rottweiler," as he was sometimes known, grew far tamer; he has instead played the roles of pastor and father. With some notable exceptions (he issued a reminder last month that "hell, of which so little is said in our time, exists and is eternal"), the emphasis has been less on railing against the Catholic evils of abortion and birth control than on occupying the safe high ground: peace in Iraq, religious freedom, confronting poverty. One reason may be that while Benedict is the same person as the Cardinal Ratzinger who served as John Paul II's enforcer, "he is also the same person as the young theologian who helped craft some of the progressive measures of the 1960s" during the Second Vatican Council, the Rev. Keith Pecklers, a professor of liturgical history at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, told me recently. "Perhaps he's rediscovering some of that freedom."

Immediately after the white smoke went up, the liberal theologian Hans Küng — who for decades has called for the church to decentralize, accept birth control and allow priests to marry — declared Ratzinger's election "an enormous disappointment." But a year later he said he saw "signs of hope," and in a recent e-mail message, he

indicated to me that he still does, albeit with reservations. Another church figure known for his liberal views, who spoke on condition he not be identified, said of the pope: “He has surprised everyone. You can’t take the things he wrote in his earlier role and use them as guidelines.”

Benedict is a man of curious contrasts. People who know him well use the same words to describe his personal demeanor, which runs counter to the image he developed in his previous role: they say he is meek, shy, courtly, modest, and indeed, seeing him in person — his eyes wide, his gaze soft and searching, as if for something he lost — you get the impression less of a holy warrior than of a kindly grandfather. Although a consummate Vatican insider, he has a certain lack of savvy, as evidenced in Regensburg and again in January when he appointed to the archbishopric of Warsaw a man who, it turned out, had ties with Poland’s Communist-era secret police and who was forced to resign two days later. Friends say that at the table he is abstemious, typically taking modest portions of one or two dishes (he has a special fondness for mozzarella cheese) and drinking a small amount of red wine. Yet he has also been known to wear Prada and Gucci.

As a longtime university professor, the pope is well known for his collegiality, his reaching out to, and exchanging ideas with, a broad spectrum of Catholics as well as with nonbelievers. This may explain why, despite the fact that his core conservative convictions are unchanged, he has managed to get many left-leaning church figures to rally around his central focus. Notker Wolf, abbot primate of the worldwide Benedictine order, himself a Bavarian who has known the pope for decades, was critical at the start, based on Ratzinger’s actions in his previous job. But Wolf, too, was won over. As we sat in the serene Sant’Anselmo monastery on the Aventine Hill in Rome, which serves as the headquarters of the Benedictines, he distilled the pope’s core message for me this way: “Western society has become detached from the roots of its creator. This is the basic view of the pope, and it is my view also. What the Muslims say about the decadence of Europe is partly right, and that’s because we think we have to set up everything as if God doesn’t exist. On the other hand, faith also has to be reasonable — it has to stand in front of reason. I would say that he means this not just regarding terrorism but also charismatics. He says we have to remain sober in this religious way of thinking. The old Occidental tradition has been a fruitful tension between faith and reason.”

Recent events elsewhere — China’s Communist government’s nominating its own bishops and creating a kind of shadow Catholic church, a renegade Zambian archbishop’s ordaining married priests in Africa even after being excommunicated — demand a great deal of the Vatican’s attention and underscore the fact that the church’s growth and future are in parts of the world where Catholicism is an alien culture. Yet Benedict is European to the core, and for him Western Europe remains the heart of the church. It is also, in his view, the place where the tension between reason and faith is most acute and most potentially explosive. Thus the import of the speech he delivered on his native soil. The paradox he put forth in the address is that where the secular West tends to think it has expanded the scope of reason, in fact it has done the reverse. Many of the problems facing the West, he argues, stem from the fact that secular Europe is losing its ability to communicate with the rest of the world. This dangerous chasm has to be bridged. “We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way,” he said, “if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable and if we once more disclose its vast horizons.”

Talking about the speech, the Rev. Thomas Reese, former editor of the American Jesuit journal America, who, interestingly, was fired from that post by then-Cardinal Ratzinger for allowing too broad a range of ideas in its pages, told me: “The Regensburg address was not about Islam. The pope’s primary target is Europe. He sees a great need for it to get back to its Christian roots. That is his main goal, and if he accomplishes it, it would trump John Paul II’s achievement in helping bring down Communism.”

Then again, what nobody knows — as I learned in travels through traditionally Catholic parts of Europe over the fall and winter — is whether it is too late. As one retired archbishop said to me, speaking on condition of anonymity, “There are European bishops who feel you can’t talk about a Christian Europe anymore without insulting people’s intelligence.”

> “Europe is infected by a strange lack of desire for the future.”
> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Without Roots,” 2004

Six nights before Christmas, I wandered into the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in central Rome. The church is one of Catholicism's great Gothic temples, a soaring, vaulted space in which the tombs of popes and saints line the nave. The building dates to the 13th century, but as its name suggests, its lineage goes much further back. It was erected on the site of an eighth-century church, which in turn was constructed over an ancient shrine to the Roman goddess of wisdom.

As it happened, vespers Mass was just beginning, so I slid into a pew. This being the holy season, the Mass featured a phalanx of seven priests, resplendent in purple raiments. What skewed the picture was the congregation: a total of 11 people, all but lost in the soaring stony grandeur, the only ones clearly under the age of 70 being three African women in head scarves and floral dresses. It may have been incongruous, but it wasn't unexpected. This is the face of European Catholicism — of Christianity in general in Europe — that we have come to expect in recent years as studies and news reports back up the notion of a continent that has seemingly outgrown its ancient spiritual practices: the splendor and majesty of the Western tradition reduced to a geriatric, art-filled echo chamber.

Comparing survey data on church attendance in Europe and the United States is doubly revealing. In Western Europe as a whole, fewer than 20 percent of people say they go to church (Catholic or Protestant) twice a month or more; in some countries the figure is below 5 percent. In England, fewer than 8 percent go to church on Sundays. In the U.S., by contrast, 63 percent say they are a member of a church or synagogue, and 43 percent of respondents to a 2006 Gallup Poll said they attended services weekly or almost weekly. But the story is more complicated than this. "The interesting fact is that people responding to questions about religion lie in both directions," says the Spanish sociologist José Casanova, who is chairman of the sociology department at the New School for Social Research in New York and an authority on religion in Europe and the United States. "In America, people exaggerate how religious they are, and in Europe, it's the other way around. That has to do with the situation of religion in both places. Americans think religion is a good thing and tend to feel guilty that they aren't religious enough. In Europe, they think being religious is bad, and they actually feel guilty about being too religious."

The landscape of the church in Europe — and not just the Catholic Church but nearly all forms of organized Christianity — is changing at a lightning pace. As precipitous as the decline in parishioners is, the drop-off in seminarians is even greater — in Ireland, there are only 3.6 seminarians per 100 priests, as compared with 10 per 100 in the U.S. and 22.5 per 100 in still-faithful Poland — so that with fewer new priests every year, the church in Western Europe is forced to import. It's not uncommon to find African priests saying Mass in Tuscany.

Few of the people I talked to in the vast and effusive crowds swarming central Regensburg while the pope was there said they believed he would succeed in bringing back the European church. "This pope is good for Germany and for all the world!" a man selling Tyrolean sausages in the town's central square said proudly. But when asked about the future of the church, he laughed. "In Germany, church attendance is down and down. I don't think he can change that." Sociologists and even some church officials routinely apply the term "post-Christian" to Europe or parts thereof. Spain is still deeply Catholic in its cultural identity, yet polls show half the country "almost never" attends Mass, and the government has defied the church in legalizing same-sex marriage and making abortion easier to obtain. A recent survey of the Church of England by researchers at the University of Wales showed that only 60 percent of its clergy believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, and 1 out of 33 Anglican priests doubts the existence of God.

This picture — of a continent that is truly and profoundly secular, that has lost its ear for the spiritual — is what Benedict railed at in his Regensburg talk: "A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures." Writing in 2005, just before his election, he laid the blame squarely on Western Europe: "While Europe once was the Christian Continent, it was also the birthplace of that new scientific rationality which has given us both enormous possibilities and enormous menaces. . . . In the wake of this form of rationality, Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner hitherto unknown to mankind, excludes God from public awareness. . . . A culture has developed in Europe that is the most radical contradiction not only of Christianity but of all the religious and moral traditions of humanity."

And yet there are indications that reports of the Continent's spiritual death have been exaggerated. Consider the

curious fact that Benedict's Wednesday prayers in St. Peter's Square routinely attract many more people than did those of the wildly popular John Paul II — this despite the fact that Benedict's style is more professorial than theatrical. Consider that 79 percent of Spaniards still think of themselves as Catholics and that more than 90 percent of Italians sign their children up for Catholic religious instruction.

Or consider that after I attended the nearly empty Christmas season Mass at Sopra Minerva in Rome, I strolled a few hundred yards away, just across the Tiber, to find a radically different spectacle. The Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere is just as ancient and just as packed with icons that are featured in art-history texts as Sopra Minerva. Here 300 people filled the pews, as is more or less the case seven nights a week at 8:30 p.m. They were mostly in their 20s to 40s, most seemed to be professionals, a group both well shod and featuring some extreme eyewear. The setting couldn't have been more Catholic, and yet it wasn't a Mass that was taking place. No priest officiated; there was no Communion offered, no body and blood of Christ. It was an energetic, soulful lay service, a 30-minute meditation — a well-orchestrated mix of prayer and song on a spot where Christians have celebrated their rites since around 300 A.D., conducted by and for ordinary people. Precisely at 9 o'clock it ended; people gathered into clusters and chatted briefly and then everyone headed into the night.

This is the home church of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay movement that began here in the Trastevere section of Rome in 1968 and now has a presence in 70 countries. The roots of it are these prayer events, which take place every evening in cities around the world. "I would say half of us had left the church or were never in the church," Leone Gianturco, a 44-year-old economist with the Italian Treasury, told me following the service. "This is personal fellowship. It's a community that makes sense for us."

Lay Catholic movements have made little headway in the United States, but they have proliferated in Europe. The secret of the lay movements, Pecklers, the liturgical history professor, says, is that "they have a language that reaches people. Look at the average European parish, where there aren't many people in church for Mass. They don't know one another, the priest comes out of the sacristy and begins Mass. There's no contact between the priest and the people. The homily may be quite abstract. What would attract a young Italian or Spaniard to go to church, except obligation? The individual is not being nourished. That's why you find people shopping around."

Each lay group attracts particular kinds of people. Sant'Egidio's focus on poverty and peace draws activists. Its leaders helped mediate between warring factions in Mozambique, Uganda and Kosovo; several times the group has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The current focus is on a program to make H.I.V. drug therapy more widely available in Africa. (The program also includes distribution of condoms, but quietly, since Sant'Egidio wants to maintain good relations with the Vatican.)

Focolare, another lay movement that began in Italy and has spread worldwide, has a more inward focus and a more conservative bent. The core members live together in small units of three to five people, which are the contact points for the wider community. The organizing principle is "unity." "We achieve this unity by loving, because when we love one another then Jesus is present, and it grows, so that 2 or 3 becomes 10 or 20," says Julian Ciabattini, a member of the Focolare board. Focolare claims two million followers worldwide, with the strongest growth in Italy, Germany, Brazil and Argentina.

Most of these lay Catholic movements began in the 1960s and '70s in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, started by young Catholics who chafed under the top-down system of control operated by elderly celibate males. The groups remained small for years. Since they existed outside the power structure of the church, they weren't entirely understood by church leaders, many of whom were suspicious. But early in his pontificate John Paul II embraced and encouraged the movements and gave them official standing, so that during his tenure the varieties of lay groups and their membership increased precipitously. When John Paul held the first World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities in 1998, 400,000 people, representing more than 100 lay Catholic groups, gathered in St. Peter's Square in Rome. That was one indication, for many church leaders, that something remarkable was afoot.

The next was John Paul's funeral in 2005, which became an international event on a scale the modern church had never experienced. According to many observers, the lay movements substantially accounted for the unimagined

numbers of mourners who poured into Rome. Data on declining church attendance obscure the fact that there is a good deal of spiritual hunger in Europe, but it is largely outside institutional religion, a phenomenon that the British sociologist Grace Davie calls “believing without belonging.” The Vatican is aware of this and says that the lay Catholic movements may represent a bridge, a way to bring the aimless, searching, largely secular Europeans back into the fold.

Msgr. Donald Bolen, an official with the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, told me that the lay movements “are movements of the Holy Spirit. The temptation in the church has long been to try to keep the parishes filled, to spend energy on maintenance. These movements are not about maintenance of old structures. But this isn’t a new thing. When Francis of Assisi started with his little band of disciples, some were confused. Movements within the church are not new.” The pope’s media spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, made much the same point to me: “The lay movements are a sign of life. The Vatican is not the whole church.”

But the problem is that the spiritual hunger that exists in Europe seems to be precisely for what the church can’t provide. Polls show that Europeans distrust institutions of all kinds. For an institution that is practically synonymous with hierarchy and control, the lay movements may represent as much a threat as a promise. Some of the groups have been chastised by the Vatican for straying from doctrine on issues like marriage and confession; some are so insular and devoted to following the teaching of their founders that critics have compared them to cults or sects. (There is at least one Web site devoted to helping “recovering” members of Focolare.)

In an age when the church is struggling against the twin tides of secularism and resurgent Islam, conservatives say that Rome needs to assert its authority to ensure that its message and power are not diluted. Alessandro Maggiolini, the recently retired bishop from Como in Northern Italy, has argued that in 50 years the church itself will be extinct not because of outside forces but because of disobedience to church teaching. On the other side, Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Belgium has called for the church to decentralize, to open itself up to its own people. This is the question that has divided the church since the reforms of Vatican II in the 1960s: Is the church the people or the institution? In Europe, the institution may be on life support, but the Vatican knows there is energy to be harnessed among the masses. So far, Benedict seems to want to have it both ways. When he held the second gathering of lay movements in May 2006, attracting a crowd in the hundreds of thousands, he praised their energy, but the praise came with a warning and a reminder that they are not citizens in a religious democracy or diners at a spiritual buffet but are members of an institution whose power flows from the top, its infallible leader, and moves through the channels of the bishops and priests down to the laity. “I trust in your ready obedience,” he said.

> “The Muslims ... feel threatened not by the foundations of our Christian morality but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundations.”
>
> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures,” 2005

Deep in the old quarter of Brussels called the Marolles — an area with a mixed population of impoverished immigrants and Gauloise-smoking hipsters — sits a decaying pile of a church, the Ãglise des Minimes, that was built in the early 1700s on the site of a whorehouse. One afternoon in late December, I showed up in time for the 12:15 Mass, but the church was completely empty. After a while, a man appeared and pointed me to a door. In a side chapel no bigger than a family dining room, I found the congregation, which in its entirety consisted of a woman in her 60s, a man in his 50s and the priest, who stood before a small table covered with white cloth on which sat a Bible, a missal, two white candles and a six-inch crucifix.

After he had said Mass, Abbé Jacques van der Biest, 78 years old but built like a wrestler, gave me an account of what had transpired in his church a couple of months before. In October, a group of illegal Iranian immigrants barricaded themselves inside and began a hunger strike, trying to force Belgian officials to grant them asylum. It ended several days later, with two of the men climbing onto a nearby crane and threatening to jump while others inside vowed to light themselves on fire. The police surrounded the building; eventually the men gave themselves up. Far from minding his church being taken over, the abbé had rather encouraged it — he had given sanctuary to Muslim asylum-seekers in the past and joined the refugees inside the barricade. “For me the question isn’t

Muslims or not Muslims," he said. "They are people who are looking for refuge, who need help."

The event, and others like it, caused a stir in this small nation that prides itself on progressive values. Starting in 2005, as part of the most recent wave of illegal — mostly Muslim — immigrants entering Europe seeking asylum, and amid the backlash across Europe, many Catholic churches opened themselves up as sanctuaries, places where immigrants could stay as they fought for asylum. While the Vatican was supportive — "The church has always sided with the weak," said Karl-Josef Rauber, the papal nuncio to Belgium — many conservative Catholics were outraged. "While Western Europe is turning Muslim, its Christian churches are committing suicide," wrote Paul Belien, editor of the Brussels Journal.

Meanwhile, in Genoa late last year, a Capuchin friar sparked a nationwide outcry by offering local Muslims a parcel of church land on which to build a mosque. Currently, in the Andalusia region of Spain, Muslim leaders are locked in a struggle with local bishops over plans to build mosques and an Islamic center, in what some Catholics fear is a plan to turn the Spanish province back into al-Andalus, the Muslim stronghold of the Middle Ages.

Conservative Catholics see all of these as variations on a dark theme: the barbarians are not only at the gate; they have swarmed the temple. As these critics well know, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Europe. Estimates of the Muslim population in the 25 nations of the European Union range from 15 to 20 million, and the U.S. National Intelligence Council projects the number to double by 2025.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which Christians and Muslims in Europe see themselves as being in the same boat. I spent time in Rome at the Pontifical Gregorian University, the Vatican's premier training ground for priests and others entering religious life, in order to learn about a program, begun in 2000, that brings graduate students from the Muslim world to study Christianity alongside seminarians. The purpose is not to convert the Muslims. "The aim is that they will go back to their own country and speak of their experience here and testify that something different is possible," said Gaetano Sabetta, who works in the program, and by "something different" he meant a new model of cooperation and understanding as both faiths grapple with secular culture. The Muslim students say they feel bewildered by Italian society but are comfortable at the Gregorian itself. "Within the university, the atmosphere is very religious," says Omar Sillah, a student from Gambia. "It feels natural to me, as a religious Muslim. But as soon as you step outside the premises, it's a different world." The chief reaction of these devout, culturally savvy Muslims to living in Europe seems to be pity. "The situation of Christianity here is very sad for me," says Ahmet Kademoglu, from Istanbul, who sometimes gives talks on religion at public schools in Italy. "When I speak to groups of students here, I feel they treat religion like a football club, a side you are on. Whereas for me religion is where I find answers to the problems of life."

Kademoglu brought my attention to a significant paradox. His home, Turkey, is a secular country where studying Arabic is problematic, but the language is offered at the Gregorian. "Here I spent three years learning the language of the Koran and did it alongside priests and nuns who wanted to understand my religion," he said. This seems to be what the pope had in mind in his Regensburg address when he talked about the Catholic Church's blending of reason and faith. "Christian worship . . . is worship in harmony with the eternal word and with our reason," Benedict said. His choice of name reflects his emphasis on the intellectual tradition of St. Benedict, whose religious order preserved knowledge in Europe through the Middle Ages. Catholicism, for Benedict, has always been about study, intellect, reason. "We are part of the modern world," he says in effect. "We do reason. We study other faiths. We'll even teach you Arabic."

While the address on his native soil was condemned for his reference to Islam and violence, the larger issue, which is perhaps no less incendiary, is his implicit notion that Islam lacks this rational gene. He noted in the talk that "not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature" and quoted a scholar, seemingly approvingly, who contrasted this with Islam: "But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality." Benedict was taken to task by 38 Muslim scholars, who wrote a joint letter indicating that his words distorted Muslim thought on reason and faith and stating that Muslims acknowledge "a hierarchy of knowledge of which reason is a crucial part." But while the Vatican backpedaled, Benedict was probably addressing a concern of many Europeans, both in the church and out.

> “The positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly: we are all grateful for the marvelous possibilities that it has opened up for mankind and for the progress in humanity that has been granted to us. The intention here is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism but of broadening our concept of reason and its application.”
>
> Pope Benedict, address delivered in Regensburg, Germany, Sept. 12, 2006

Two weeks ago, as part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which created the European Economic Community, Benedict addressed the cardinals and bishops of Europe along with an assortment of politicians. His theme was the need for Europe to return to the church, and after duly noting the extraordinary economic success that the E.U. has achieved, he added: “One must unfortunately note that Europe seems to be traveling along a road that could lead to its disappearance from history.”

This theme was familiar to many of those present, who had not only heard it from Benedict before but had sounded it themselves in recent years. The attempt to fashion a European Union Constitution mostly made news in the U.S. when it was shot down in 2005 by voters in France and the Netherlands. But in Europe there had previously been considerable fuss over the wording of the preamble, in which some felt it necessary to define “Europe” beyond mere geography. In terms of history and culture, authors of the document were happy to refer to European roots in Greek and Roman antiquity and to acknowledge the Enlightenment and the scientific tradition. But when Pope John Paul II made a push for recognition of the role of Christianity, and in particular Catholicism, in shaping Europe, he was rejected. “The lay character of French institutions does not allow them to accept a religious reference,” the president of France, Jacques Chirac, said.

Quite a few Europeans were spurred to action by this rejection. It happened that on successive days in May 2004, Cardinal Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Marcello Pera, then president of the Italian Senate, who was also once a philosopher at the University of Pisa, gave speeches on the topic of European identity on each other’s turf in Rome, the churchman in the Italian Senate and the senator at the Pontifical Lateran University. Ratzinger’s theme was “the spiritual roots of Europe,” and he criticized a culture that gave value and protection to other religions — notably Judaism and Islam — but that denied the same to Christianity. With his trademark bite, he identified “a peculiar Western self-hatred that is nothing short of pathological.”

Though Pera is a nonbeliever, both men were struck by the fact that the two speeches overlapped a good deal. “It got a lot of people thinking,” Pera told me.

Pera and Ratzinger eventually published a book together called “Without Roots,” which criticized the secular European mind-set and concluded that European secularism is disastrously misguided. “I began to realize that if we cannot recognize the fact that Christianity shaped our culture, then we lose our identity,” Pera said. “And then how can we have a dialogue with other civilizations? That’s exactly what has happened with Islam. Europe is losing its soul. Not only are we no longer Christian; we’re anti-Christian. So we don’t know who we are.”

Ratzinger, meanwhile, scathingly compared contemporary Europe with resurgent Islam. Islam today, he wrote at the time in an essay that is part of the book on Europe that was just released, “is capable of offering a valid spiritual basis for the life of the peoples, a basis that seems to have slipped out of the hands of old Europe, which thus, notwithstanding its continued political and economic power, is increasingly viewed as a declining culture condemned to fade away.” At the Mass following the death of John Paul II, it was Ratzinger who gave the homily to his fellow cardinals, which amounted to a restating of his theme: “We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” The “dictatorship of relativism” trope sharpened — not to say hardened — the church’s position vis-à-vis secular European culture and may have been what swept him into office.

Senator Pera exemplifies a species that virtually doesn’t exist in the U.S.: a politician who publicly professes his

lack of religious faith and who is a conservative to boot. He was the No. 2 man in Silvio Berlusconi's government, and he is blunt in expressing his beliefs about the Muslim presence in Europe. ("I use the term 'invasion,' " Pera told me.) But the alignment of intellectuals behind the Ratzinger-Benedict call for a renewed appreciation of religion and the church in Europe extends leftward as well. In 2001, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, arguably Europe's most distinguished intellectual, was set to accept an award in Frankfurt, but the Sept. 11 attacks, just three weeks earlier, caused him to rethink his remarks. Like many philosophers, Habermas is not spiritually inclined, but he refocused on the subject of the interaction of faith and reason. Religious convictions, he said, are not the nonsense that philosophy has long portrayed them to be but rather pose a genuine "cognitive challenge" that philosophy has to take up.

In January 2004, the Catholic Academy of Bavaria invited Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger to air their ideas about the moral foundations of society in a public forum. There, Habermas used the term "post-secular" to describe what modern society ought to be. Secularization, he and others have argued, was first the process, begun in the 17th and 18th centuries, of prying the fingers of the church from government and economy — all the aspects of life in which it had gained control. The idea emerged of the state as a neutral foundation for its citizens and their varied beliefs. But in Europe, secularism then came to mean antireligion. Historically, this antipathy was directed at Catholicism as well as at Protestant churches; Muslim immigration has teased it back to the surface and given it a new target.

But keeping religion in a cage has been a huge mistake, according to some intellectuals on both the left and the right. "I don't say that we need religion because we need conservative values," Casanova of the New School for Social Research told me. "From the left, the point is not to defend religion per se but to defend the principle of free exercise."

The Catholic Church has always been the dominant religious institution in Europe, but the global, high-profile papacy of John Paul II had the effect of making the church, and the pope in particular, something more: the flag bearer for Christianity. As a result of John Paul, Bishop John Flack, the archbishop of Canterbury's representative to the Holy See, told me: "I think there are quite a number of Christians around the world who would say that while we may have questions about the papacy, we have come to see the Catholic pope as a leader. There's a sense in which he represents Christians." Indeed, after meeting with Benedict last August, Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, who is herself a Protestant, backed a renewed push for a European Union Constitution and one that would explicitly refer to Europe's "Christian values."

Because Benedict is a theologian, and one whose emphasis is on ancient Christian writings dating before the split among the various forms of Christianity, leaders of the Orthodox churches in Russia, Eastern Europe and Turkey have indicated that they see in him some hope of transcending differences. Benedict is steeped in Christian symbolism and has used it to send signals across these divides, which go under the radar of most people. When he became pope, for example, he adopted a style of palium — a neckpiece — not worn by popes since the first millennium, before the schism between the Eastern and Western churches, which had partly to do with the claim of papal supremacy. "I met in the past six months with Orthodox leaders in Europe," Father Pecklers told me. "And they all commented on that. They said, You have no idea what that meant for us, that symbolic desire to reconcile with us."

So in the complicated wrestling match involving secularism, Christianity and Islam, some non-Roman Catholic Christians are looking to Benedict for leadership while others are trying to influence him. "One of the things that we are trying to do — the people behind the scenes in Rome — is to encourage the pope to speak more and more about what we might call the world's agenda," Flack said. "The future of the planet, the environment, poverty in Africa and India. How do we cope with rising fundamentalism not just in Islam but all the world religions? We need to hear what he feels about those things, not just internal church issues."

> "How much filth there is in the church and even
> among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him!"
>
> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,

Stations of the Cross meditation, Good Friday, 2005

Last month, the pope stood on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica and exhorted the thousands gathered below for his Saturday greeting that they must pray every day, telling them that prayer is "a question of life or death." It was Benedict speaking, not Ratzinger. As pope, he has focused attention on such matters as the need for Catholics to reconnect with the Virgin Mary, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the importance of the liturgy in the Mass — all touchstones of Roman Catholic piety.

But the church is more than piety. It is undergirded by a network of rules, obedience requirements, punishments and admonitions of which Ratzinger is perhaps the chief modern architect and by a system of protecting its own that is centuries old. If the church fails to realize Benedict's goal of bringing Europe back into the fold and of making itself a mediator between godless secularism and the fervent Islam of many of the Continent's newest residents, what may be the prime reason for that failure was laid out for me by a calmly impassioned 40-year-old man sitting in a boxy, Ikea-style office just off leafy and genteel Merrion Square in Dublin. Colm O'Gorman is the founder and director of a counseling center called One in Four, the ratio referring to the percentage of adults in Ireland said to have suffered sexual abuse as children. Beginning when he was 14 and serving as a choirboy in the rural diocese of Ferns, O'Gorman was repeatedly abused and raped by the local priest. In 1998, he filed a lawsuit against the diocese as a way to get the church to recognize the problem of pedophilic clergy. In 2003, the diocese agreed to pay $325,000 to settle the suit. Meanwhile, as attention built, the Irish government opened a formal inquiry and issued a damning report in 2005. O'Gorman is now a celebrity in Ireland and currently is running for Parliament. The United States is the country with by far the largest number of sex-abuse claims made against Catholic priests, but Ireland has that distinction in Europe, and in both countries the number of priests who have committed sexual crimes on minors has been estimated at 4 percent.

O'Gorman told me the issue of sex abuse among the Catholic clergy, as big as it is in itself, gets at something even more elemental. Even after years of coverage in the U.S. and Europe, and hundreds of lawsuits and tales of woe, he said: "The Vatican has never, ever accepted responsibility for clerical sexual abuse at all. Never. John Paul talked about his hurt. Benedict talked about his devastation. But the Vatican has never acknowledged that they've failed in their responsibility." While Benedict has said many things on the issue over the years, advocates for victims of abusive priests still rankle over his declaring in 2002 that "I am personally convinced that the constant presence in the press of the sins of Catholic priests, especially in the United States, is a planned campaign." Regarding the longstanding policy of transferring abusive priests to other dioceses, O'Gorman said: "This wasn't some passive benign failure. This was an active approach that was taken to these cases. In my view, there's a system at work in this, and the Vatican is at the heart of it."

A 2005 survey found that 34 percent of Irish Catholics attend Mass weekly, one of the higher percentages in Europe. But in 1973 the figure was 91 percent, so the decline is actually among the steepest in Europe. As far as O'Gorman is concerned, the connection between the church's handling of the sex-abuse issue and the drop-off in Mass attendance is direct: "For the church to criticize secular society while at the same time not looking in any way at itself — for most people this is a reason they turn away from it. There's a huge credibility problem, and I wonder if they're capable of recognizing how much their currency is devalued. They don't have any moral authority."

The sex-abuse issue is part of what Hans Küng calls "the long-term structural problems of the church," most of all its hierarchical decision-making process, which has kept church leaders looking out for their own and which ensures a broad gulf between what the cardinals and the pope decree and the way most Catholics live. Like John Paul II, Benedict XVI has shown little interest in reforming some of the basic policies affecting the lives of ordinary Catholics. "We can lament the rising divorce rate, but it's a reality," Pecklers said. "On Sunday mornings, the people in the pews, in Europe or America, are very often divorced or gay or are using birth control. Or else they're not in the pews; they've left the church." As Küng wrote last year, "For as long as the absolute primacy of Rome prevails, the pope will have most of Christianity against him." That may be too strong to apply to Catholics everywhere, but it seems to ring true for Western Europe.

Benedict may be right that the Catholic Church has a world-historic chance to transform Europe and bring about change. But the church's own strictures could work against that. The paradox may be that for all his stylistic softening as pope, Joseph Ratzinger's own labors through the decades, applying his life experience with such rigor

to protecting and preserving the church, are precisely what prevent Europeans from reconnecting with their roots. “Think of the silencing of theologians in recent decades,” said Father Reese, the former editor of the Jesuit journal America. “The suppression of discussion and debate. How certain issues become litmus tests for orthodoxy and loyalty. All of these make it very difficult to do the very thing Benedict wants. I wish him well. I want him to succeed. But it seems everything he has done in the past makes it much more difficult to do it.”

Russell Shorto, a contributing writer, frequently covers religion for the magazine. His last article was about the battle over contraception.