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Europeans and Catholics Rally to Pope's Defense

Pope Benedict's comments last week that sparked such a furor have united the Muslim world. But the bigger story is the effect those comments are having among Catholics.

- Trumpet Staff
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Anger toward Pope Benedict xvi is unifying Muslims, but a growing sense of sympathy and loyalty to the pontiff is rousing Catholics and Europeans to his defense. We have all seen the images of rage-ridden Muslims rioting in the streets, torching churches and demanding and re-demanding an apology from the pope. Largely underreported, however, is the growing number of Catholics and Europeans surging to Benedict's defense. Islamic rage is igniting a deeper respect and loyalty among Europeans and Catholics for the Vatican.

In many ways, the consequences of the pope's remarks on Catholic Europe are as important, if not more so, than those in the Muslim world.

Respected analyst George Friedman, from think tank Stratfor, is among the handful of analysts considering this controversy's potential impact on Europe. In his September 19 analysis, Mr. Friedman first dispelled the theory that the pope's remarks were casual and spoken "off the cuff" (emphasis ours throughout):

Benedict's words were purposely chosen. The quotation of Manuel ii was not a one-liner, accidentally blurted out. The pope was giving a prepared lecture that he may have written himself—and if it was written for him, it was one that he carefully read. Moreover, each of the pope's public utterances are thoughtfully reviewed by his staff, *and there is no question that anyone who read this speech before it was delivered would recognize the explosive nature of discussing anything about Islam in the current climate.* … It is true that Benedict was making reference to an obscure text, but that makes the remark all the more striking; *even the pope had to work hard to come up with this dialogue* …

Clearly, the pope intended to make the point that Islam is currently engaged in violence on behalf of religion, and that it is driven by a view of God that engenders such belief. … Benedict said what he said intentionally, and he was aware of the consequences. Subsequently, *he has not apologized for what he said*—only for any offense he might have caused. *He has not retracted his statement.*

Pope Benedict xvi's remarks were carefully considered and calculated. But *why?* Dr. Friedman pointed out that "the general thrust of his remarks has *more to do with Europe."*

There is an intensifying tension in Europe over the powerful wave of Muslim immigration. Frictions are high on both sides. Europeans fear that the Muslim immigrants will overwhelm their native culture or form an unassimilated and destabilizing mass. Muslims feel unwelcome, and some extreme groups have threatened to work for the conversion of Europe. … [W]ith his remarks, [the pope] moved toward *closer alignment with those who are uneasy about Europe's Muslim community*—without adopting their own, more extreme, sentiments. *That move increases his political strength among these groups and could cause them to rally around the church.*

The world has witnessed the fiery backlash of Muslims. Streets are filled with wrath-filled rioters. A Catholic nun was slaughtered in Somalia. Churches have been firebombed. Numerous Islamic terrorist groups have redeclared their intentions to annihilate the West. Catholic leaders in Muslim nations have been threatened, forcing many to flee to safer climates. The pope has received death threats, and has beefed up security.

Amid all this hoopla splashing across the headlines, the stance that Europeans and Catholics are taking is barely being reported. As Dr. Friedman noted, Benedict's remarks were largely designed to put some fire under Europeans and Catholics and rally the Continent around the Vatican.

This is precisely what is happening.

On Monday, EUobserver.com reported on the European Commission's reaction to the pope's comments and the Muslim uproar. "The European Commission has said it was wrong to pick out quotes from the pope's controversial speech in which a link between Islam and violence was suggested and deliberately taking them out of context."

A statement from Commission spokesman Johannes Laitenberger was pointed and unapologetic: "… I can also say that reactions which are disproportionate and which are tantamount to rejecting freedom of speech are unacceptable, and let me conclude with this: *Freedom of speech is a cornerstone of the EU's order as is the freedom and respect of all religions and beliefs …"* (ibid.).

As Muslims rage, many Europeans are calmly (so far) but definitively rising to the defense of their beloved pope. In fact, Dr. Friedman reports that there are "emerging pockets of anger among Catholics over the Muslim world's reaction to the pope …" (op. cit.). The longer Muslim rage persists, the more fiery and irritated Europeans and Catholics are becoming.

In Germany, where the pope made his remarks, the daily *Die Welt* said that "anger in the Islamic world about the quote used by Pope Benedict xvi is groundless because it merely expressed a 'historically documented fact'" (bbc News, September 18). The paper condemned Muslims for exploiting the opportunity to start a clash of cultures.

Edmund Stoiber, a prominent German politician and friend of the pope, insisted that there were "no grounds for criticism" in the pope's comments. Switzerland's daily *La Tribune de Geneve* reported that "Islamists are again showing they are 'the worst enemies of Islam'"—and, regarding the murder of the nun in Somalia, said, "If fundamentalists were trying to confirm Benedict xvi's declarations, *they could not have done better!"* (bbc News, op. cit.).

El Mundo in Spain linked the recent Muslim backlash to the cartoon crisis episode from earlier this year. "The pope does not have to apologize for expressing an opinion," it wrote. "He upheld an idea we fully share: tolerance." The article grew stronger as it progressed. "To bow to Muslim protests and accept that Benedict xvi must apologize is tantamount to questioning freedom of expression and of thought, which—however much Islam dislikes it—is the main conquest of our civilization" (ibid.).

Polish President Jaroslaw Kaczynski defended the pope, condemned Muslims as being a "little too easily offended," and asked, "Where is the line that a Christian or Catholic cannot cross and say what they think?"

The message steadily trickling out of Europe is clear and definite: Muslim rage, no matter how vehement it might grow, will not stain the reputation of the pope among Catholics, nor will it cow the Continent into a defensive posture.

The fact that Europe is standing up to Muslim war-mongering is the *real* story.

This is a deeply significant event in Muslim/Catholic relations. After all, the controversy wasn't orchestrated by an everyday Catholic, but by the supreme leader of the Roman Catholic Church, a man whose authority is respected by more than a billion people. If Muslim fury persists, this event could be a potential milestone event for Europe!

Even if the controversy subsides quickly, the obvious fault line between Muslims and Catholics has been exposed. Catholics and Europeans see the danger rising against them. This controversy has evolved into a rallying cry for Europeans, as well as the one billion Catholics scattered across the globe.

Even as far away as Australia, Catholic leaders are standing behind their beloved patriarch. Head of the church in Australia, Cardinal George Pell, not only defended Benedict but said that the Muslim reaction "justified one of Pope Benedict's main fears" about Islam. The pope is also receiving support from other Christian religions. In Britain, former head of the Anglican Church Lord Carey not only defended the pope and praised his speech as being "extraordinarily effective and lucid," but also warned, according to the *Times,* that the "'clash of civilizations' endangering the world was not between Islamist extremists and the West, but with Islam as a whole" (September 20).

As you watch the controversy between Muslims and Catholics unfold, keep a keen eye focused on *Europe's* response to the tidal wave of hatred slamming Pope Benedict xvi. Nearly two years ago, *Trumpet* editor in chief Gerald Flurry wrote about the coming clash between Islam and Catholicism. The latest remarks by Pope Benedict xvi and the intense reaction by Muslims have thrust the world closer than ever to this cataclysmic clash. ▪