

Is Benedict returning to role as enforcer?

by [David Gibson](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue

As Pope Benedict XVI marked his seventh anniversary as pope last month, many Catholics were wondering if the pontiff is finally becoming the doctrinal enforcer that some feared—and others hoped—he would be when he was elected in 2005.

The questions were prompted by the mid-April announcement that Benedict had signed off on a crackdown on the organization representing most of the 57,000 nuns in the United States, saying that the group was not speaking out strongly enough against gay marriage, abortion and women's ordination.

The investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was launched by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican agency charged with overseeing orthodoxy and the department that Benedict—then as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—led for nearly a quarter century before his election to the papacy.

During his time there, and as a top aide to the late Pope John Paul II, Ratzinger oversaw a range of investigations into priests, theologians, nuns and church groups perceived as straying too far left. That earned German theologian Ratzinger a host of epithets, such as the “Panzerkardinal” and “God's Rottweiler”—harsh nicknames that Ratzinger's fans considered badges of honor.

In the years after his election, however, there was almost a sense of disappointment among some on the Catholic right that Benedict was not moving swiftly to crack down on liberal dissidents. One reason for that perception was that as pope, Benedict has to be a pastor to his global flock more than a disciplinarian. “It was easy to know the doctrine. It's much harder to help a billion people live it,” he once told a dinner companion.

Another reason for the relative lack of tough talk coming from Rome during the early years of Benedict's papacy is that he had already done much to quell dissent. The Pax Romana that he helped install has meant that theologians and church officials know there will be consequences if they step out of line. At the same time, the Vatican has installed more conservative bishops who are willing to do the disciplining themselves.

In the U.S., bishops in recent years have taken action against a number of theologians, most notably last year when the bishops' doctrine committee sharply criticized the work of a highly regarded theologian, Sister Elizabeth Johnson, saying it contained “misrepresentations, ambiguities, and errors.” In March, Spanish bishops warned Catholics that the writings of one of the country's best-known theologians, Andrés Torres Queiruga, were “distorting” certain “elements of the faith of the church” and should not be read.

In short, local church authorities are now doing the work that the Vatican used to do, and there has been less of that work for it to do.

Still, there are signs that the Vatican's approach may be changing. In countries like Ireland, Austria and even Benedict's native Germany, hundreds of priests who think the church is not doing enough to stanch the exodus of Catholics from the pews are forming organizations aimed at opening up debate on—or overturning—church teachings on priestly celibacy, women's ordination and other topics the Vatican considers off-limits.

After watching such developments for a couple of years, Benedict may have had enough. On Holy Thursday, he issued an unusual and direct public rebuke of a prominent group of dissident Austrian priests who say they represent about 10 percent of the country's clergy. In the same month, it was revealed that the Vatican had

silenced two outspoken priests from the Redemptorist order. One of the priests, Tony Flannery, has been a vocal critic of the clergy sexual abuse crisis in Ireland; he is also a founder of the Association of Catholic Priests, a new group of some 800 priests that has challenged church teachings.

At the same time, the Vatican also indicated that it is nearing a reconciliation with a controversial right-wing splinter group of Catholic traditionalists who would much prefer to return to life before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) revamped church teachings and upended centuries of tradition.

Whether the crackdown on the LCWR is another sign of a renewed Roman assertiveness is unclear. Much may depend on whether the American nuns find a way to accommodate the Vatican's demands, or whether the sisters sparked a backlash that the pope is facing in other countries.

In its response issued April 19, LCWR officials said they were “stunned” by the Vatican action and called this “a moment of great import for religious life and the wider church.” They asked for “prayers as we meet with the LCWR National Board within the coming month to review the mandate and prepare a response.” —RNS