

Joseph Ratzinger's failed papacy may have fatally undermined the Vatican

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And so we are to see an end to the rule of Joseph Ratzinger at the Vatican. At such times it is usual to break out into a chorus of "Ding, Dong the Witch is Dead" from the Wizard of Oz, but we fear that Ratzinger's successor will be as bad, if not worse, than the man himself.

Ratzinger has ruled for decades at the Vatican, even before he became Pope. He was chief inquisitor under the rule of John Paul II, and as the old Pope's health failed, Ratzinger ramped up the reactionary agenda. (Not that John Paul II was any slouch at authoritarianism and bigotry).

Under Ratzinger the Vatican has become despised and resented throughout the world. He has played a major role in reducing the Catholic Church's popularity and its authority.

Catholics have deserted the Church at an increasing rate, repelled by the inhumanity of Ratzinger's unbending adherence to what are perceived as cruel doctrines.

When he came to Britain in 2010, we were told that the visit had been a huge triumph. In fact, it was an abject failure as the official statistics showed and the Catholic Church's own [research](#) confirmed. The visit did succeed, though, in generating the [largest protest march ever seen against a papal visit](#).

Of course, the endless child abuse scandals that have been exposed have been a major factor in Ratzinger's failure as pope. As one revelation followed another, it was clear that for centuries the Church has been covering up the crimes of its clergy. It has put the safety of children well behind the interests of those of the Church.

Every single accusation of child abuse landed on Ratzinger's desk when he was in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In most cases they were kept secret. Only when the civil authorities became involved did the Vatican come clean about its activities – and even then it had to be forced.

For all its claims that it has now cleaned up its act, new cover-ups seem to be discovered almost every week. And we should not forget the horrible attempts to avoid paying compensation to people whose lives they have ruined and who the Church sometimes dismissed as liars and money-grubbers.

Under Ratzinger, too, the Catholic Church has become crazily politicised. He has instructed his bishops to go out into the world and aggressively push legislators to obey Vatican edicts.

In this, too, he has failed dismally.

When you recall the apocalyptic language that the Catholic Church has been using to oppose gay marriage, and its predictions of the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it, (including several increasingly [hyperbolic interventions](#) by Ratzinger himself) you would have thought that Catholic politicians would have felt it beholden upon them to vote against.

But not so. An interesting by-product of the controversial Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill was the number of supposedly Catholic MPs who voted in favour of it.

There are 82 known Catholic MPs. Of them, 57% voted for the Bill with 34% against and 9% registering no vote.

But this illustrates that Catholic politicians in this country do not, in general, take their whip from the Vatican. ([Some do of course](#), and are quite open about it). Even so, politicians still labour under the impression that there is a "Catholic vote" that can be corralled. There is no such constituency.

But this is the latest of many recent indications that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has become increasingly isolated under Ratzinger's arrogant rule. Its many political confrontations with governments around the world who are trying to modernise their societies usually result in defeat for the Church.

Let's have a look at a few:

During the American presidential election, the Church decided that it was totally opposed to President Obama's plan to introduce a health insurance mandate. The reason? It would include funding for contraception.

In an effort to placate the bishops, Obama has since offered two radical modifications that would relieve the Church of having to provide contraception to its employees. But, as is its way, the Church will accept nothing less than total surrender.

There is a strong suspicion that this confrontation was manufactured as a means of defeating Obama at the election. It was presented as "an attack on religious freedom", but it was perceived as a peevish assault on the rights of women.

As we know, the Church's attempt to derail Obama's campaign failed. Indeed, it could be argued that the Church's hysterical behaviour and childish demands for complete obedience went a long way to ensuring that Obama got his second term.

The Catholics in the pews suddenly started thinking for themselves and the bishops were unable to order them into voting the way the Church told them to. Instead of rushing to the polling booths to defeat Obama, Catholics voted for him in record numbers.

In Spain – once regarded as the most Catholic country in the world – the previous secularist Government legalised same-sex marriage. The Church set its face against such a reform and agitated violently against it. The reform passed. The new Government, which is supposedly sympathetic to the Vatican promised to repeal the law. It has failed to do so, thwarted by the constitutional court. Abortion reforms were enacted, Church privileges were reduced, and changes made to the stranglehold the Church had on education.

In Portugal, similarly, same-sex marriage is now legal. This despite the Catholic Church's best efforts to defeat it.

In the Philippines, the Church declared that a Bill in parliament to make contraceptives legal and freely available must not pass. It passed.

In Ireland, once unquestioningly under the thumb of the Catholic Church, the child abuse revelations have been so extreme that it caused the Prime Minister to denounce the Church in parliament and has since closed the Irish Embassy at the Vatican. The Church is also trying to

defeat a small change to the stringent abortion law that would allow women who have been raped to have an abortion. It is unlikely that the Church will prevail.

In South American countries, which the Pope could once guarantee to rule with a rod of iron there have also been rebellions. In Brazil gay marriage was approved (although the Church succeeded in defeating attempts to reform the harsh abortion laws). In Mexico City same-sex unions are now legal.

This political agitating, and these attempts to interfere in democratic parliaments is increasingly resented. [Poll after poll shows](#) that the Catholic population do not agree with or accept the Vatican's doctrines on abortion, contraception, homosexuality or assisted suicide.

This is reflected in the dwindling number of Catholics who continue attend Mass – or have anything else to do with the Church.

Joseph Ratzinger will now disappear from the scene. Many will sigh with relief at his departure. But we shouldn't celebrate too soon. He has put in place a college of Cardinals that are as reactionary as he is – or even more so.

Whoever they elect as the next Pope, there is unlikely to be much improvement.

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Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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