

# Conservatives see limits of Benedict's reign

by [David Gibson](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue

When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, the surprising choice cast a pall over the liberal wing of the flock and left conservatives giddy with the prospect of total victory.

Ratzinger had for decades served as the Vatican's guardian of orthodoxy, the man known as "God's Rottweiler," and his vocal fans were crowing about the glorious reign to come.

"He'll correct the lackadaisical attitudes that have been able to creep into the lives of Catholics," M. Price Oswalt, an Oklahoma City priest who was in St. Peter's Square that April day, told the *New York Times*. "He's going to have a German mentality of leadership: either get on the train or get off the track. He will not put up with rebellious children."

Now, however, with Benedict retired eight years later in an unprecedented departure, many on the Catholic right are counting up the ways that Benedict failed them and wondering how their favorite watchdog turned into a papal pussycat.

"Although Pope Benedict XVI's highly unusual resignation is said to be for reasons of health, it fits the character of his papacy: all his initiatives remain incomplete," Michael Brendan Dougherty, a Latin mass enthusiast, lamented. "He was consciously elected to rescue the church from itself, but he failed to finish what he started," Dougherty said.

Since then the criticisms have continued to come in from a range of onetime champions, and on a spectrum of issues: Benedict did not sufficiently clean house in the clergy sexual abuse scandal and did not appoint enough hard-liners to the hierarchy; he did not bring the old Latin rite schismatics fully back into the fold, a mission that will likely end with his pontificate; he was too quick to mollify Muslims or pursue ecumenical gestures; and he charted, as Dougherty put it, "a precarious

middle course” theologically.

Even his three encyclicals—the most authoritative documents a pope writes—focused on social justice issues and often embraced the kind of liberal policy prescriptions that send conservatives into conniptions.

To be sure, liberals would note that theologians and even American nuns were investigated and disciplined under Benedict’s rule, and he appointed some pretty staunch conservatives as bishops and promoted others to the College of Cardinals that will choose one of their number to succeed Benedict.

But if he was not exactly a pleasant surprise to the left, neither did he fulfill the great expectations of the right.

Disappointment may have been inevitable because the hopes of Benedict’s fans had blinded them to the parts of his writings (on charity and justice, for example) or his personality traits (such as his loyalty to friends, no matter how incompetent) that didn’t fit with their plans.

That leads to a second factor, which is that popes may enjoy great authority but cannot act like autocrats. Benedict, more than his supporters, knew he had to be the pastor of a huge global flock, not just a “bad cop” who tells people to follow the rules and drums them out when they disobey.

Finally, Ratzinger was always at heart—and in his head—a scholar and theologian. He had a German’s intellectual bearing but little of his countrymen’s renowned knack for organization. “I am not an administrator,” he warned his fellow cardinals during the 2005 conclave as he saw the momentum swinging in his direction. —RNS