

'Countdown with Keith Olbermann' Special Edition for April 19

Read the transcript to the Tuesday show

Updated: 2:29 p.m. ET April 20, 2005

Guest: Jason Berry, Steve Waldman, Anthony Figueiredo, Frank Flinn, Deal Hudson, Carl Bernstein

KEITH OLBERMANN, HOST:
His predecessor evaded and fought the Nazis. He was a Hitler Youth and has spent a lifetime atoning for the decisions of a child.

His predecessor was, among the Vicars of Christ, young and unexpected. He is the oldest of the chosen in 275 years, and long thought a likely candidate.

His predecessor seen in his outreach, in his charisma, in his media presence, almost radical. He, just yesterday preaching the homily in his predecessor's memory, and insisting on conformity and doctrine.

His predecessor reached out to Jews as the older brothers of his faith. He, five years before his election, called the other Christian churches deficient.

His predecessor was a human magnet. He heard his own brother say, He doesn't have the faculty to fascinate people.

His predecessor took the name of the man who had served before him for just 33 days. He chose the name last selected by a pope in 1914.

Tonight, there is a new pope, but the memories of his predecessor linger still, and may linger long.

This is COUNTDOWN's special coverage of the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI.

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Good evening

OLBERMANN: Benedict XV was one of the first popes to push for real interaction with the United States.

Coming to Vatican just a month after the beginning of the first World War, he reached out directly to the leaders of all the nations involved to plead for peace. Only the American president, Woodrow Wilson, even replied. And that was negatively.

Now there's a Pope Benedict XVI. And how he handles the United States may make or break whatever he hopes to do worldwide. His record so far doesn't seem to offer much room for hope of a great relationship. Cardinal Law of Boston, who helped shuttle abusive priests from diocese to diocese, was very much a part of the farewell ceremonies for Pope John Paul and for those election ceremonies of Benedict.

And, in 2002, the new pope had given an interview in Spain which seemed to dismiss as exaggerations the painful and pervasive priest abuse scandals in this country, seemed to say that some pedophilia was OK, but focusing excessively on it was not.

In the church, the then cardinal said: "Priests also are sinners, but I'm personally convinced that the constant presence and the press of the sins of the Catholic priests, especially in the United States, is a planned campaign, as the percentage of these offenses among priests is not higher than in other categories, and perhaps it is even lower. In the United States, there is constant news on this topic, but less than 1 percent of priests," he said, "are guilty of acts of this type. The constant presence of these news items does not correspond to the objectivity of the information, nor to the statistical objectivity of the facts. Therefore, one comes to the conclusion that it is intentional, manipulated, that there is a desire to discredit the church. It is," he concluded, "a logical and well-founded conclusion."

Joining me now is Jason Berry, co-author of "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of Pope John Paul II."

Mr. Berry, good evening. Thank you for your time.

JASON BERRY, AUTHOR, "VOWS OF SILENCE": It's been my pleasure.

OLBERMANN: Are Cardinal Ratzinger's comments for 2002 on the abuse scandal as bad as they seem? Was there something in there I missed? Did he mitigate them later, as was suggested by one of our earlier guests?

BERRY: Well, they're as bad as they seem on the face of it.

And I think he's been a little more conciliatory in the last couple of years. I think it's important to understand the odyssey that he's gone through on this issue. In 1998, nine men filed a Canon Law case in the tribunal of Cardinal Ratzinger's congregation requesting in effect a prosecution of Father Maciel, the head of the Legionaries of Christ, one of the most powerful priests in Rome.

Ratzinger sat on it for a year and a half and then tabled pretty much without explanation, although he told a Mexican bishop that it was a delicate situation. Then, in 2001, Pope John Paul II gave him the responsibility for defrocking all the pedophile priests whose files were sent to Rome. They went to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

By the end of the 2002, with the scandal spreading internationally, he was faced with a serious dilemma. How could he remove many of these pedophile priests and, at the same time, continue to shelter Father Maciel, who had been accused by nine men going back to the 1970s. Maciel is pretty much the living symbol of the scandal today. And he's still in his position.

Interestingly, in December, just a few months before Pope John Paul II died, Cardinal Ratzinger quietly reopened the investigation against Maciel. And so, in the coming days, I think he's really at a kind of crossroads. Who does he stand with, St. Augustine, who said, justice is that virtue which gives everyone his due, or Father Maciel, this most discredited priest.

OLBERMANN: So, is the handling of the case of Father Maciel the—conceivably the first thing we should look for in this papacy in terms of how Benedict is going to respond to the American scandal? Is it a bellwether for that?

BERRY: Oh, I think it's more than a bellwether, Keith. He cannot respond credibly to this crisis within the Catholic Church unless he makes a definitive and public move on Maciel.

And the interesting thing about it is that there has been pressure put upon Cardinal Ratzinger before he became pope by Cardinal Sodano, the secretary of state, who had befriended Maciel in Chile when he was papal nuncio there during the Pinochet regime. So, I think, in a sense, Benedict XVI is now sort of freed of the pressure from the secretary of state's office.

It's a very interesting tension, when you think about it. As a theologian, Benedict XVI is an absolute fundamentalist. A diplomat, Cardinal Sodano, the secretary of state, is not—diplomats in general aren't interested in moral truth and high points of theology. They're interested in advancing the interests of the given state they represent, in this case, the Holy See. And I think Sodano probably thought it would be a scandal if Maciel were removed.

OLBERMANN: So, is that—does that make this for this new pope and his hope for achievements in this country and in others, where this issue has reared its head, does that make it an opportunity for him or is it some sort of impediment to his papacy?

BERRY: Well, that's a very good question, because it can go either way. It either becomes an albatross around his neck, if he doesn't do something with it, which is certainly an impediment, or indeed he can show himself to be something of a reformer on an issue that's haunted many Americans.

But the most important thing he can do, besides resolving this case with Maciel, is to sit down and meet with an international delegation of these abuse survivors. The reform group Voice of the Faithful has asked for this; 23,000 signatures they got for a "New York Times" ad, a very reasonable request.

And, you know, however conservative he is—and there's been a great deal of talk about that in the press and media today—he's also a man who has a pastoral sensitivity. And he has that background in the darkness of Nazism, just as John Paul did. And I think the idea of a meeting, a reconciliation with a number of these people who have been so terribly harmed would stand him well in the court of public opinion.

OLBERMANN: Jason Berry, co-author of "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of Pope John Paul II," an extraordinary story and obviously something to look for here in the early stage of the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI. Our great thanks for your time tonight.

BERRY: Much obliged.

OLBERMANN: These events are primarily about the world's one billion, 700 million Catholics. But it's not just about them. To paraphrase an old commercial for rye bread, you don't have to be Catholic to have your life changed by a pope.

And if you missed it live, upcoming, your chance to see how it all unfolded early this historic morning.

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