

# Hans Küng:



Hans Küng, a Swiss Catholic priest, theologian, and author, entered eternal life on April 6, 2021.

He is long regarded as an icon in the catholic reform movement.

This tribute appeared in *The Tablet* on April 15th. Michael Walsh is a historian and biographer.

“He knows I am an honest person. And I think he knows very well that I am a good Catholic in my own way and that I am not alone at all [in my views],” Hans Küng told Robert Mickens, then *The Tablet*’s Rome correspondent, during his interview with him in October 2012.

The “he” is, of course, Pope Benedict XVI, with whom Küng had something of a shared history. They were both German-speaking theologians of similar age, Küng born in Sursee in the Swiss canton of Lucerne on 19 March 1928 to a prosperous shoe merchant married to a farmer’s daughter; Josef Ratzinger, just eleven months older, was born near Munich to a police inspector and his wife, a cook: when Ratzinger was made Prefect of the Congregation for the Faith (CDF) by Pope John Paul II in 1981, Küng joked about his youthful links to the police service.

The younger man was ordained in 1957 and served for a few months in a parish in Lucerne. Both men gained doctorates in theology, Ratzinger studying in Munich, Küng at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University in Rome. “No doubt that’s the reason it is so often said I am a Jesuit,” he told an interviewer for *Commonweal* in 1971. “I’m quite flattered, of course. But I am a secular priest of the diocese of Basel. I suspect that there are intelligent people outside the Society of Jesus.” From Rome he went on to Louvain and Paris, where he completed his study of justification, the key doctrinal divergence between sixteenth-century Reformers and Catholic teaching.

He wrote about it with reference to the writings of Karl Barth: when it was published, as, in its English translation, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (1964) it carried a laudatory preface from Barth himself.

The two young theologians met in 1962 when both attended the Second Vatican Council as advisers – *periti* – to bishops. It is frequently said that they were invited by Pope John XXIII, which may technically be true, but Ratzinger was in reality invited as his theological adviser by Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, and Küng by Carl Josef Leiprecht, the Bishop of Rottenburg. Küng had a clear idea of what he wanted from the Council, and expressed it in *The Council and Reunion*, which appeared shortly before it began. *The Tablet* published extracts in three successive issues, the first of Küng’s many appearances in the pages of this paper. Even during the gathering he was an indefatigable author, producing *The Living Church: Reflections on the Second Vatican Council* in 1963 and the following year – before it was over – *Council Speeches of Vatican II*.

Küng professed himself disappointed in the outcome of the Council, more so than Ratzinger, though even the latter had his problems, especially with the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the World. Despite their shared unease they nevertheless collaborated in establishing an international journal to continue the work of the Council, calling it *Concilium*.

# A Good Catholic in His Own Way

After teaching for a year at the University of Münster, in 1960 Küng was offered a professorship in the prestigious Catholic faculty of the University of Tübingen. When a vacancy occurred in the faculty, he proposed his friend Josef Ratzinger. They were colleagues for a couple of years, lunching together once a week, but they were very different characters: Ratzinger shy and retiring, riding around the university town on a bicycle while Küng, who was anything but retiring, with good looks, a mass of wavy hair, natty suits and a permanent slight tan, a consequence perhaps of his passion for skiing, a pursuit he kept up until his eighties, drove about in a sports car.



It all went wrong for Ratzinger in 1968. The student revolt unsettled him and he went off to join his brother Georg in tranquil Regensburg. Küng, on the other hand, seems to have revelled in the turmoil. Their ways deviated further when Ratzinger abandoned Concilium and helped to set up a much more conservative rival, *Communio*, a vehicle for articles advancing his “hermeneutic of continuity”.

Küng kept writing. Just how many books he published over a long lifetime is difficult to calculate, given the various editions and different translations. Mickens, in the interview already quoted, says that his official bibliography “runs to 140 pages and includes more than 70 books”.

Küng categorized them for him: “Looking back I can say that in the 1950s I dealt with the problems of personal existence and justification; in the 1960s, the problem of the Church, renewal and ecumenism; in the 1970s, the basis of Christianity, with *On Being a Christian, Does God Exist and Eternal Life?*; in the 1980s, Christianity and world religions; and in the 1990s, finally, ethics.” But there were other books that fall outside these categories, such as one on St Thomas More, *Freedom in the World*, published in 1965. Another, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, came out in 1992. This last one at least must have pleased the piano-playing cardinal, then in charge of the CDF: Mozart is Pope Emeritus Benedict’s favorite composer.

Ratzinger was still Archbishop of Munich when in 1979 the Vatican took its most serious action to isolate Küng. In 1970, he had published in *German Infallible: An Enquiry*, the English version appearing a year later. In it he criticized, with much attention to papal history, the doctrine of infallibility as it had been defined in 1870 at the First Vatican Council: he preferred instead the term “indefectibility” as applied not solely to the papacy but to the Church as a whole.

Without a rethink on the doctrine, he argued, ecumenical progress would be impossible, arguments he repeated in his introduction to August Bernhard Hasler’s 1979 disturbing account of the machinations at Vatican I, *How the Pope Became Infallible: Pius IX and the Politics of Persuasion*.

The CDF, which had maintained a file on Küng at least since the appearance in 1967 of his book *The Church*, with the support of Archbishop Ratzinger, now took action. His *missio canonica*, or licence to teach as a specifically Catholic theologian, was withdrawn and he had therefore to leave Tübingen’s Catholic faculty. He continued to head the university’s ecumenical institute which he had helped to set up.

He was not the only one to suffer at the hands of the CDF in the pontificate of Papa Wojtyla.

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When in 1980 Peter Hebblethwaite published *The New Inquisition?*, in the subtitle he associated Küng with the Dutch Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who had been summoned to Rome to answer charges brought against his 1974 book *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. Schillebeeckx was prepared to go to the Vatican to answer for his convictions, Küng was not, insisting that his accusers should come to him.



The clash between the CDF and Küng over *Infallible?* was far broader in its implications than a simple debate about papal prerogatives. The dogma – not a word in any case with which Küng was at ease – of infallibility had been promulgated by a Council of the Church. If Vatican I's authority was to be questioned, that threw into doubt other church councils, not least the Christological councils of the early centuries, Ephesus and Chalcedon, as the Jesuit Father (later Cardinal) Avery Dulles remarked in 2007 in his review of *On Being a Christian* in these pages.

Dulles wrote that Küng seemed to have a particular antipathy to St Cyril of Alexandria. The following year, when reviewing, also in *The Tablet*, the second volume of Küng's extensive memoirs – there was to have been a third – John Wilkins quotes the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner telling the Tübingen theologian: “Your book is a deadly threat to my Catholic faith.”

As *On Being a Christian* demonstrated, Küng continued to write books to appeal to the laity within the Church. He remained a priest in good standing, and to mark his eightieth birthday he celebrated two Masses, one in Tübingen and the other in his home town. His interests, however, began to shift away from Catholicism to world religions, as his 1993 *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* indicated. There was also, published in the same year, a book on Chinese religion, while a year earlier he had produced a volume on Judaism. He established, with its headquarters in his house in Tübingen, an institute for what he called “Weltethos”, – World, or Global Ethics – and he drew up a manifesto, *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*.

It was debated, and endorsed, at the 1993 World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago: his often-repeated mantra was: “No peace among nations until peace among religions”.

It was his Global Ethics project which was, it seems, the main topic of conversation when in 2005 his old friend Josef Ratzinger, shortly after his election as Pope Benedict, invited him to Castel Gandolfo for a meal. Küng had frequently written to Pope John Paul II seeking a meeting, but his letters had been ignored, something that clearly rankled. Küng had assured Benedict beforehand he did not want his *missio canonica* reinstated, nor would he touch on theologically controversial matters, and the encounter was cordial. Nonetheless, Küng was later outspokenly critical of Benedict's pontificate.

In a celebrity-obsessed world, Küng held the rather niche role of a celebrity theologian. For many liberal Catholics he was the go-to person on such issues as clerical celibacy – he was against it, and the ordination of women – he was for it. He wrote also, and perhaps not surprisingly in view of his own ill health in later years, when his eyesight degenerated and he suffered from both arthritis and Parkinson's Disease, in favor of euthanasia, although his contribution to this debate predated these debilitating conditions.

# A Good Catholic in His Own Way

When it was evident that Küng no longer had long to live, Cardinal Walter Kasper, the former President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, was asked by Pope Francis “to convey his greetings and his blessings to him ‘in Christian communion’”. Kasper told the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, the day after he died: “Hans was overjoyed. It was important for him. He now felt reconciled with the Church and with Pope Francis.”

Pope Emeritus Benedict had also known how serious Küng’s condition was and was praying for him, Kasper said. The Pontifical Academy for Life paid tribute to Küng, describing him as a “great figure in theology in the twentieth century”.

Asked about demands for the Vatican formally to rehabilitate Küng, Kasper remarked: “There is no point in starting a procedure when the person concerned is dying. A different judgement awaits us.” Küng will be buried in the old city graveyard (alter Stadtfriedhof) in Tübingen.

Writing an appreciation of Küng in *America* magazine, the Jesuit theologian Roger Haight, himself no stranger to Vatican

censure, classed Küng as the third most significant theologian of the twentieth century. Ranked before him he put, first, Karl Rahner and then Schillebeeckx. League tables are perhaps not hugely helpful. Many will have their own favourites, wanting for instance to include Yves Congar in the list above Küng, or even Hans Urs von Balthasar. Josef Ratzinger himself might well be on the list; he has, after all, been rather more popular as a theological writer than he ever was as a Cardinal in charge of the CDF, or as Pope. And the French-born, but largely American-educated, René Girard, not technically a theologian, is likely to be cited more frequently than Hans Küng.

What marks out Girard, Rahner, von Balthasar or Ratzinger and others is that, however one may judge their theology, they have a methodology, a “school”, a following. That seems to be less true of Küng, not least because he was something of a gadfly, addressing such a wide variety of issues, and appearing happiest as a critic. *Nonetheless On Being a Christian, Justification, and The Church* will without question remain for many years to come as significant contributions to our understanding of the Catholic faith.



In my conversations with Hans Küng, I was taken with his openness to wanting to help. He was willing to be videoed with me in place of traveling for a talk for the American Catholic Council (<https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/american-catholic-council-convene-detroit-junen>) 2011. He had asked that Theresa might join us.

I asked him why he remains Catholic and what makes him hopeful. I was inspired with Küng’s deep commitment to Christ. It was Christ that led him to identify himself as a Catholic and made him committed to being Catholic all his life. Christ as an anchor was a powerful part of Küng’s life and his Catholicism can be explained by this. In his commitment to Christ, it was Küng’s ability to explain his commitment to Catholicism and to hope.

It seemed to me that Christ was central in a very powerful way to Küng’s life. He was a gracious host and had a lovely lunch prepared for us at his home in Tübingen where he has lived for many years. This is a memory that brings us joy.

Anthony T. Padovano