

# Sainthood scoop: Book on the “real” John Paul II snubbed at Vatican

VATICAN CITY – When it was unveiled in late January, the insider book about the “real” Pope John Paul II looked at first glance like the Vatican’s own effort at a pre-beatification biography.

But as the fallout over the next two weeks made clear, the Vatican was not directly involved. Nor was everyone happy that the book was co-authored by the official postulator, or promoter, of Pope John Paul’s sainthood cause, using information that is generally considered confidential.

In addition, several officials thought the book’s simple presentation of the late pope’s reported penitential practices, with little explanation or context, was unwise and counter-productive.

The book reported that Pope John Paul regularly carried out various types of self-mortification. “In his closet, among the cassocks, there was a hook holding a particular belt for slacks, which he used as a whip,” it said.

That news made headlines and prompted questions and even a bit of ridicule by people unfamiliar with the history of penitential practices in the church.

Monsignor Slawomir Oder, the postulator of the cause, teamed up with an Italian Catholic journalist to write, “Why He’s a Saint: The Real John Paul II According to the Postulator of His Beatification Cause.” Apparently no one at the Vatican told him not to write a tell-all book, so he did.

After the fact, however, the displeasure was quietly communicated in a number of ways. For one thing, no active Vatican official attended the book’s presentation at a hotel a few steps from St. Peter’s Square. The Vatican newspaper has not written a word about the book.

Polish Father Adam Boniecki, a longtime aide to Pope John Paul, said bluntly that

Monsignor Oder had improperly published “episodes, documents and revelations about the private life” of the late pope.

“It is a surprising and serious thing that it was the postulator who wrote such a book,” Father Boniecki said.

Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz was said by Polish sources to have been upset and to have called Monsignor Oder for an explanation.

Top officials at the Congregation for Saints’ Causes refused official comment, but were also described as perplexed and unhappy at the book’s publication. By early February, Monsignor Oder had withdrawn into “total silence” and was refusing to talk about the book, according to his secretary.

The role of postulator of a sainthood cause typically involves quiet investigation and discretion. Sources in Rome with experience in handling these causes said that while Monsignor Oder may not have technically broken any rules, he had acted imprudently on a couple of counts:

- If writing a book about the subject of a sainthood cause, the postulator should be careful not to cite information provided by witnesses, because this could make future witnesses reluctant to come forward. This is particularly true if a witness has something to say against a sainthood cause, they said.

“If a witness feels he has to make objections and the next day it’s in the newspapers, people will not be so willing to testify the next time. A postulator has to know these things, but publishing them is an entirely different question,” said one church official.

- Monsignor Oder cited unnamed members of the pope’s Polish entourage as the source of the reports of self-mortification, but it was unclear whether he had asked and obtained their permission to publish this information. And even if he did, such a request might condition people’s answers.

Italian newspapers speculated that the quiet controversy over the book’s publication might even delay the beatification of Pope John Paul. Sources told Catholic News Service that was unlikely; the late pope’s cause is awaiting approval of a miracle,

and many believe the beatification could come later this year.

Others wondered if Monsignor Oder would be dismissed as postulator. That, too, seems improbable. "In the past, he might have been replaced. But that's not the way things are done around here now," said one Vatican official.

Publishing evidence of a "hidden" side of a would-be saint is not completely new. In 2002, the year before Blessed Mother Teresa's beatification, the postulator of her cause, Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, posted an article about Mother Teresa's "dark night of the soul," detailing her feelings of inner doubt and spiritual darkness.

But in this case, the details of the "crisis of faith" came from Mother Teresa's own letters, not from witnesses called to testify in the sainthood process. Father Kolodiejchuk's 2007 book detailing the correspondence, "Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light," caused quite a stir, especially because Mother Teresa had repeatedly begged for her personal correspondence to be destroyed.

That wish was ignored by her spiritual advisers and others, who felt the letters offered future generations a witness of unique holiness.