

Doctrine & Life

Vol. 63 March 2013 No. 3

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Fresh Possibilities for All Future Popes

EUGENE DUFFY

THE WORLD was taken completely by surprise on February 11 last, when Pope Benedict announced his intention to resign the papacy on February 28. It was headline news because no pope had done so for over 600 years; the Pope did not appear to be seriously ill; nor had there been any leaks that such an event was likely.

Yet for those who have been following his reflections in recent years the surprise lay not so much in the fact of his resigning as in its timing. In October, 2010, he gave a series of interviews at Castel Gandolfo to Peter Seewald, published as *Light of the World*.¹ During the course of the interviews Seewald talked to him about the impact of the sexual abuse scandals and how they inevitably burdened his pontificate. He asked him if the enormity of this challenge ever led him to consider resigning and the Pope said, no: 'Precisely at a time like this one must stand fast and endure the difficult situation'. The interviewer pressed him further: 'Is it possible to imagine a situation in which you would consider a resignation by the Pope appropriate'. Benedict replied: 'Yes. If a Pope clearly realizes that he is no longer physically, psychologically, and spiritually capable of handling the duties of his office, then he has

1. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010

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a right and, under some circumstances, also an obligation to resign'.²

The clarity of his response shows that the idea of resignation, at least in principle, was one that he had obviously considered for some time and he was confident that such a course of action would be the only responsible one in certain circumstances.

A LOW KEY CONSISTORY

Benedict made his announcement to the cardinals who were gathered in the Consistory Hall to hear about the forthcoming canonisation of three new saints. If this is all that were happening at the consistory, the world would have hardly known it had even taken place. Yet a consistory means that all the cardinals are invited and so a significant number of them were present. Therefore, the Pope took advantage of the occasion 'to communicate a decision of great importance for the life of the Church'. He did not seek either their advice or their approval for the decision he was about to announce. Rather, he was merely informing them of it.

In this regard he was following the letter of the law, as one might expect from him. The Code of Canon Law does legislate for the retirement of a pope (c 332, § 2). All that is required is that the Pope make his decision 'freely and that it be duly manifested, but not that it be accepted by anyone'. In the case of the Pope, there is no specification as to whom or how his decision is to be manifested. However, one can be guided by another provision of the Code, namely, that resignations are to be communicated to 'the authority who is responsible for the provision of the office, and this is to be done in writing or orally in the presence of two witnesses' (c 189, § 1). Since there is no authority in the Church superior to the Pope, then he is not reporting to any superior, but he is reporting to those who are responsible for filling the vacancy once he resigns, namely the College of Cardinals.

Strictly speaking, it is only those under 80 years of age who can actually take part in the conclave to elect his successor. However, the rest of the College do exercise a role in the overall process because they participate in the congregations or meetings which are held to prepare for the conclave. One can see then that Benedict was apply-

2. Ibid., 29-30

ing to himself the law of the Church, even beyond what was required of him, by making his intentions known in this context rather than in any other.

The public nature as well as the freedom of his action was important. It means that the legitimacy of his resignation from office will not be open to challenge in the future. It was plain to see that there was a significant body of witnesses present and that the Pope himself was lucid and acting knowingly and freely. Were he to have made his intention known, for example, to his Secretary of State and his personal secretary, then at a later stage others could question the conditions under which he made his decision and consequently even call into the question the legitimacy of his successor.

A PRIVATE, CONSCIENTIOUS DECISION

One of the few well recorded precedents of a papal resignation has lessons regarding the freedom of the pope being possibly impugned by friendly advice. When Celestine V resigned in 1294 a contemporary wrote: 'On Saint Lucy's day, Pope Celestine resigned and, he did well.'³ He had been elected pope after a conclave that had lasted 27 months, having moved around Italy in the process. Celestine had been a hermit, poorly educated and with no administrative experience. He was the stooge for Charles II, King of Naples and Sicily. After five months he realised that the task was beyond him and he resigned. He did take advice from the canonists, among whom was Benedetto Caetani, his immediate successor, Boniface VIII. The fact that Boniface advised him cast a certain cloud over the freedom with which he made his decision. However, historians seem agreed that he acted freely and legitimately, even if the cloud hangs more heavily over Boniface than Celestine.

From what we know at this time, it appears that Pope Benedict kept his decision secret up to a few days before his public announcement, and then disclosed it only to two or three others. This means that his freedom remains unquestioned. In this case, then, it can hardly be claimed that interested parties prevailed upon him to resign with a view to advancing their own positions in the succession.

3. John O'Malley, *A History of the Popes: From Peter to the Present* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 134.

THE PAPACY NO LONGER FOR LIFE

Consistent with what he had said to Peter Seewald, he told the cardinals: 'After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry'. He acknowledged that he did not have the strength of mind or body to continue this arduous task.

This decision for the Pope was one of conscience. It was a profoundly moral decision on his part and not the kind of routine decision anyone might take at reaching a statutory retirement age. The fact that the papacy has always appeared as a lifelong commitment has added to its mystique and the reverence in which the office is held. In this regard, the Bishop of Rome seems to have been an exception. All other bishops are requested to submit their resignations on reaching 75 and are 'strongly requested' to do so if they are in ill health. It is even remarkable that someone who was already past the normal retiring age for a bishop should have been elected the Bishop of Rome, in the first instance, considering the more onerous nature of his ministry.

This decision by the Pope has opened up fresh possibilities for all future popes. It will be much easier for them to decide when, in conscience, they are no longer able for the burdens of office, whether on the grounds of age, health or other incapacities. Beyond that, too, it will make it easier for bishops anywhere to assume a greater freedom in discerning the limits of their abilities to remain in office. Benedict has changed once and for all the way in which the papacy will be understood and how the duration of the appointment will be interpreted.

This is in very sharp contrast to how his predecessor bore the burden of his office amidst great suffering and pain, publicly and to the end of his life. It is now very obvious that the Petrine ministry does not demand that kind of heroic endurance. While Benedict does acknowledge that the role involves prayer and suffering, he is realist enough to see that other natural faculties are necessary for it to be exercised responsibly. It is obvious that if the Pope is not fully in charge of his faculties then the role of supreme governance cannot be properly exercised nor is this a role that can be delegated to another.

SHAKEN BY QUESTIONS OF DEEP RELEVANCE FOR THE LIFE OF FAITH

Apart from the personal qualities and levels of energy required to exercise the Petrine ministry in normal circumstances, the context in which it is exercised can also add to its burdens. Benedict was clearly aware of this when he spoke of 'today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith'. He did not spell out what these issues are but one can speculate.

There is no doubt that his pontificate was marked by very serious challenges at many different levels. Since his resignation address conspiracy theorists have been at work and the rumour machine has been in overdrive. Everything from the state of his health to domestic scandals within the papal service has been aired as reasons for him having to abandon his leadership of the Church.

Leaving aside these sensationalist reports, any objective observer can see clearly that the past eight years have been difficult at many levels for a man who, by disposition, is gentle, reflective and academic in his approach to governance. His style was that of the reserved professor, in sharp contrast to the extrovert, charismatic and star-like personality of his predecessor. From the start he was less likely to engage in the robust public way John Paul II had done and he was also more likely to be misunderstood as the nuances of his own thought patterns and positions were not readily appreciated by a media-formed public that deals in sound bites. Nor was he personally adept at handling the media as were John Paul II and his advisors. He also laboured under the shadow cast by his long tenure as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which often meant that he was starting from a position of disadvantage as far as commentators were concerned.

Despite Benedict's personal serenity, his time in the papacy was marked by major turbulence around him. Cases of clerical child sexual abuse which earlier seemed to be a phenomenon confined to the English-speaking world now surfaced in Holland, Belgium, Austria and his native Germany. He expressed his surprise at the scale of the problem in Germany in the course of his interview with Seewald.⁴ It was as if the problem were closer to home than he had ever suspected.

4. *Light of the World*, 27

His relations with other faiths were not always easy. His Regensburg address angered the Muslims and caused violent reactions towards Christians in some parts of the world. The Pope capitalised quickly on the negative reactions to his address and made remarkable progress in healing the hurt and putting dialogue with Islam on a more positive footing.

The Jewish world was disappointed by his lifting of the excommunication of the Lefebvrist bishop, Richard Williamson, who had denied the Holocaust, as well as by his prayer in the Good Friday Tridentine liturgy interceding that the Jewish people would acknowledge Christ as the Saviour of all people. As in the case of his exchange with the Muslim world, he went a long way towards healing the hurt by his visit to the Holy Land in 2009.

In ecumenical matters, his path was not always smooth. Although a minority of Anglicans might have welcomed his outreach to those who wished to unite with Rome, a majority were not pleased with his gesture in *Anglicanorum coetibus*. Yet, when he visited England he made an enormously positive impact and was moved by the liturgical richness of the Church of England and showed great warmth towards the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was as if in the privacy of his study he lacked the capacity to evaluate the impact of his teaching in the public sphere and at the same time when he engaged with those whom he appeared to upset, he more than compensated for the perceived hurts.

No matter how one views these events, it is inevitable that they took their toll on his mind and spirit, causing him to question his own capacity for assessing the impact of his words in the modern world.

Within the Church, some of his episcopal appointments too caused much controversy and embarrassment. One notable appointment that went wrong was that of Stanislaw Wielgus as Archbishop of Cracow. He had been a collaborator with the Polish communist secret police. He had to resign his office an hour before being officially installed on January 5, 2007. Gerhard Wagner had been appointed auxiliary bishop of Linz in January 2009 but had to resign two weeks later amidst protest from clergy because of his claims that Hurricane Katrina was a punishment on the city of New Orleans for its decadence.

Benedict found himself having to remove bishops from office

because of what he perceived as their non-adherence to certain magisterial teaching, notable among them, Bishop Bill Morris of Toowoomba, Australia. On his watch, too, he witnessed the emergence of priests groups in Austria, Australia, Ireland and elsewhere that campaigned for changes to Church discipline that he found inadmissible. Within the Church, then, he experienced trends that he found difficult to comprehend or even deplored. All of these had to impact on his energies and strain his ability to engage with them.

Within his own household, too, all was not well. The publication in 2012 of Gianluigi Nuzzi's book, *His Holiness: the Secret Papers of Benedict XVI*, put some of his personal correspondence and internal Vatican documents in the public domain, fuelling suspicions of irregular business dealings and intrigue within the Holy See. Even since he announced his resignation reports of the findings of an enquiry, conducted by three elderly cardinals into how these leaks occurred, appear to raise further questions about the moral probity of some of his closest collaborators. For a person with such a regard for the office of the papacy, this must have greatly upset his confidence in those immediately around him, those from whom he would surely have expected utter confidentiality and loyalty. At a human level it must have made the burden of life in the Vatican particularly stressful and hard to handle.

HOW SHOULD VATICAN II BE RECEIVED AND INTERPRETED?

In his final, impromptu address to the clergy of the diocese of Rome it became clear that he saw the reception of a proper interpretation of the Second Vatican Council as one of his great concerns. He suggested that for too long the Council had been interpreted in purely socio-political categories by the media and that this interpretation had been guiding too many in the Church. He contrasted the Council of the Fathers with the Council of the Media or the Virtual Council. He blamed the latter for propagating a distorted version of what the Council actually promoted. It is worth quoting at length because it reveals the real passion he felt about this movement that he seems to blame for so much that has gone wrong with the Church since the Council:

The Council of the journalists, naturally, was not conducted within the faith, but within the categories of today's media, namely apart from faith, with a different hermeneutic. It was a political hermeneutic: for the media, the Council was a political struggle, a power struggle between different trends in the Church. It was obvious that the media would take the side of those who seemed to them more closely allied with their world. There were those who sought the decentralization of the Church, power for the bishops and then, through the expression 'People of God', power for the people, the laity. There was this threefold question: the power of the Pope, which was then transferred to the power of the bishops and the power of all – popular sovereignty. Naturally, for them, this was the part to be approved, to be promulgated, to be favoured. So too with the liturgy: there was no interest in liturgy as an act of faith, but as something where comprehensible things are done, a matter of community activity, something profane. And we know that there was a tendency, not without a certain historical basis, to say: sacrality is a pagan thing, perhaps also a thing of the Old Testament. In the New Testament it matters only that Christ died *outside*: that is, outside the gates, in the profane world. Sacrality must therefore be abolished, and profanity now spreads to worship: worship is no longer worship, but a community act, with communal participation: participation understood as activity. These translations, trivializations of the idea of the Council, were virulent in the process of putting the liturgical reform into practice; they were born from a vision of the Council detached from its proper key, that of faith. And the same applies to the question of Scripture: Scripture is a book, it is historical, to be treated historically and only historically, and so on.

We know that this Council of the media was accessible to everyone. Therefore, this was the dominant one, the more effective one, and it created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed, convents closed, banal liturgy ... and the real Council had difficulty establishing itself and taking shape; the virtual Council was stronger than the real Council. But the real force of the Council was present and, slowly but surely, established itself more and more and became the true force which is also the

true reform, the true renewal of the Church. It seems to me that, 50 years after the Council, we see that this virtual Council is broken, is lost, and there now appears the true Council with all its spiritual force.⁵

This closing reflection on the period since the Council reveals the Pope's distress at what happened; the disappointment with the outcome is palpable. He sees the Year of Faith as the opportune time now to harvest the fruits of 'the Council of the Fathers'. It is as if this is his last project to ensure a proper interpretation of the Council and to see that its real vision and hopes can at last be realised.

Given this perspective, it is little wonder he says that the world is 'shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith'. It is strange that for a man so profoundly steeped in the life and thought of the Church that so many of his efforts within the Church were fraught with difficulties, while on the other hand, his work outside the Church, his dialogue with philosophers and parliaments evoked profound engagement and admiration. After all, he attended the whole of the Council and so had a first-hand experience of its progress and outcome. He reminded his audience how enthusiastically he set out with Cardinal Frings over 50 years ago to engage in the task of renewing the Church for its engagement with the modern world. Now it seemed as if so much of that enthusiasm had been quenched by secular forces beyond his influence or control.

It is little wonder then that he may feel personally exhausted in his efforts to effect the renewal and reform of the Church according to his interpretation of the Council and its documents. There is a resignation in his outlook that suggests he has given this project his best shot and now he leaves it to others to continue the renewal for which he hopes.

RETIRING TO A HIDDEN LIFE

He made the time of his resignation very precise: 20.00 on February 28. From that moment the See of Rome will be vacant. He later clarified that he will then depart for Castel Gandolfo. Thus he indicated that he was not to have any part in the conclave to elect his successor.

5. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130214_clero-roma_en.html

Naturally, this would be inappropriate.

He was also creating a space for those coming to Rome in preparation for the conclave to meet freely and not to be influenced by his presence or to take advantage of his availability. He told the Roman clergy that he would be 'secluded in prayer' and told the weekly audience that he would be 'hidden from the world'.

It later emerged that he intends to take up residence in a monastery within the confines of the Vatican. There is certainly no precedent for this move. Boniface VIII first allowed Celestine V freedom to live among his former hermit confreres but later became worried that he might become the agent of his enemies and so had him imprisoned in the Castle of Fumone, south of Rome. Given Benedict's naturally retiring disposition, it is unlikely that his presence within the Vatican should prove problematic for his successor.

Nevertheless, while it appears to be a reasonable and humane arrangement given the Pope's long residence within the Vatican, it might prove to be an unhelpful precedent. This arrangement would surely have been better delayed until a new pope had been elected and the invitation to reside within the Vatican been allowed to come from him. It is obvious that residence elsewhere could prove to be a security nightmare and raise various diplomatic concerns. There is little doubt that he will do as he promised in his retirement: 'devotedly serve the Holy Church of God in the future through a life dedicated to prayer'.