

The resignation



“Should it happen that the Roman Pontiff resigns from his office, it is required for validity that the resignation be freely made & properly manifested, but it is not necessary that it be accepted by anyone.” (Canon 332, §2)

It does not really matter how one feels about such things: they are as they are. Those of us who are Catholic, or by tendency orthodox Christians, must orient ourselves to the largest of facts. The battle will be won, with or without us. Christ will ultimately prevail. This is the startling original for the rather cheap Trotskyite notion of being “on the right side of history.” The right side can look very much like the losing side, perhaps for centuries at a time. But a thousand years may be as one day, in the sight of God; & one day as a thousand years. In the light of Eternity, we must endeavour to avoid short-term thinking.

The news of Pope Benedict’s resignation was so stunning that I noticed the first media reports were straightforward, & without comment or insinuations. The reporters & editors must scratch their heads to think how this may be made into another scandal for the Church. As an old media hack myself, I grimace. Yet we may fairly ignore what is said, here today & gone tomorrow.

It has been about six centuries since the last Pope resigned — Gregory XII in 1415, as his part of an arrangement to end a schism in which there were two Popes & two Colleges of Cardinals. These were quite different circumstances from those of today; & indeed a reminder that things can get worse than we are likely to imagine. But, too, what seems impossible may be suddenly resolved, when men put higher interests above their own, & let Christ do His work.

Last before Gregory, I think, was Pope Celestine V, who resigned in 1294 after making a decree which clarified on what terms resignation was possible. (We do not say “abdicated” because the Pope is not a worldly monarch.) There had been a number of papal resignations before that, going back to the first centuries. The precise number depends on historical speculations. But the possibility of resigning has been consistently acknowledged throughout Church history. Pope John Paul II left a letter of resignation in the hands of the Dean of the College of Cardinals to be acted upon should he become incapacitated in any of several ways. Pope Pius XII, during World War II, made provisions for his resignation to be published in the event of his imprisonment by the Nazis, & for the College of Cardinals to meet in neutral Portugal to choose a successor. This is the world, & prudence has always required such measures.

Our own Pope Benedict XVI — God keep this beloved man — gave the reasons for his resignation clearly. He is becoming enfeebled by age. He states the obvious, that “in today’s world, subject to so many rapid changes & shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the bark of Saint Peter & proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind & body are necessary.”

Something more is read between such lines, by this idle observer. The Vatican bureaucracy has been, in recent times, & perhaps inevitably, infiltrated by the very “progressive” forces it exists to fight. The Pope must be entirely on his toes in such an environment. A man of extraordinary humility but also astute, Benedict would be aware of the danger that members of this bureaucracy would exploit his mental & physical decline.

This has become, to my mind, the key practical issue for the Church to face in her immediate future. The Pope & his Bishops have real canonical power, but with the proliferation of bureaucracy within the Church herself, they are required to exert it forcefully. In the Church as in mundane government, the bureaucracies take their own lead. They become too large for detailed supervision; & through the normal operation of organizational politics — a fact of nature — they acquire their own internal directors & directions. Bureaucracy is in itself an evil I have long tried to oppose: it is by its very nature self-serving, & ruthlessly inhumane. I have often compared it to a cancer.

So much is published & taught & done, with Church resources today, that accords far better with contemporary “liberal” ideals than with Church teaching; which twists & compromises the most essential doctrines founded on the teaching of Christ. An impression of authority can be given when heretical statements are left unchallenged, that seem to bear the imprimatur of the Church. But those under holy vows, with the legitimate authority, get their hands so full of trouble they want to avoid “yet another scene.” Cowardice has many arguments; & exhaustion has some more.

At every level, from the parish priest up, the government of the Church must be taken back by those under holy vows, from those who are not, & never were nor will be. The Church must speak with one voice on behalf of Catholic doctrine, or the laity are left in great confusion, with terrible consequences to souls. We need great clarity about what is Catholic & what is not. Then people may decide with clarity whether they are Catholics or not, to live & act accordingly.

It is naturally with foreboding that I look to this immediate future, & to the inevitable tasks of the Church in cultures that are now de-Christianized, & increasingly, sometimes virulently, anti-Christian. I am confident that what must be done will eventually be done, one way or another; confident that in the end Christ will reign. I considered the election of Benedict himself a kind of miracle; the answer to very earnest prayers. And rather than belabour, let me now merely cite the old Catholic prayer during papal elections:

“Lord, do not send us the Pope we deserve.”

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