

The Pope Emeritus experiment is working



Two years ago Benedict XVI became the first Pope Emeritus in the Catholic Church's history. Thanks to his wisdom and restraint the historic innovation hasn't led to disaster

Two years ago this month shock waves ran through the world's media as Benedict XVI announced his resignation. There was much speculation concerning the reasons for his unexpected decision and the identity of his successor, while many commentators wondered about the consequences for the Church of having "two popes".

Within hours further details emerged: the outgoing pontiff would not revert officially to being Joseph Ratzinger or even to the appellation of Cardinal Ratzinger. He would retain the name of Benedict XVI, which he had assumed upon election to the See of Peter, and would continue to wear the white cassock worn by successive popes. His

official title, from the moment on which he renounced office, on February 28, would be that of Pope Emeritus.

The title was without precedent. Popes had resigned before, of course. The most recent – the holy but ineffectual hermit Celestine V – was pope for a few months in 1294. Far from assuming a position of honourable retirement, he was imprisoned in a papal fortress where he quickly succumbed to old age. One hopes that mistreatment did not contribute to his demise, but his successor had good reason to fear the consequences of leaving him at liberty. A former pope might have become the tool of a faction unfriendly to the new incumbent.

The College of Cardinals was notoriously prone to factional intrigue. Political leaders, aware that the stakes were high in terms of political and economic power, were only too willing to exploit divisions among churchmen. So medieval popes could not afford to be sentimental when the unity of Western Christendom was at stake.

Though he was to be canonised not long after his death, Celestine V was a danger while he lived. A gentle sequestration was seen as a necessity, rather than an affront to the dignity of the unfortunate ex-pope, who in any case was a renowned ascetic unlikely to protest vigorously against the rigours of his isolation.

The monastery of Mater Ecclesiae, within the walls of the Vatican City State but secluded from the workings of the curial machine, might seem not dissimilar to a form of incarceration. But Benedict XVI's seclusion there has been totally voluntary and he appears only too grateful to have been relieved of the burdens of office. This has not stopped commentators both within and outside the Church voicing concern that the newly invented status of Pope Emeritus might prove problematic. Anybody who has had a superannuated predecessor hanging round the office – or the parish – will understand this fear.

Days after Benedict's resignation, I was asked by a taxi driver – a non-Catholic presumably little acquainted with ecclesiastical power play – if there was not a risk of Benedict cramping the style of his successor. Many then shared his anticipation that the presence of “two popes” in the Vatican might undermine the authority and freedom of action of his successor. Some even thought – including some of those with a direct stake in the outcome – that the conclave was going to be difficult with the former pope still around behind the scenes. But Benedict announced quickly that he would play no part in the conclave (he was already past voting age even if he was deemed still a cardinal).

But this was not enough to reassure the doubters. They feared (and some hoped) that the cardinals might feel unable to choose someone uncongenial to the former pope as long as he was felt to be hovering in the background. Then, once the new pope took over, would Benedict be able to refrain

from trying to influence his decisions? Might he not become a focus of dissent, if the successor attempted to pursue a different path?

I told the taxi driver that what I knew of Benedict XVI's character made me sure that these apprehensions would not be realised. He is a humble man, a shy academic more at home in the tutorial than in the eye of the media and having little interest in the machinery of power. He truly believes that the Holy Spirit guides the Church, through (and sometimes in spite of) the decisions and actions of the men who govern her, even at the highest level. I was sure he would respect the liberty of his successor, remaining silent even if he had his private misgivings.

Moreover, Benedict is a theologian whose ecclesiology is probably more balanced than that of anyone else in his generation. He knows that, simply put, there cannot be "two popes". Once a canonical election has taken place, and as soon as he consents to his election, the new pope is Bishop of Rome, successor of Peter and Vicar of Christ.

In the two years since I gave this answer to my cabbie's question, nothing has led me to revise it. It is clear to all that the new Pope is markedly different from his predecessor in style, and there are certainly differences of substance with regard to questions like the relation of pastoral activity to doctrine and missionary strategy. But it is not yet clear how far-reaching the differences are. Many Catholics, including influential members of the hierarchy, are alarmed and perhaps inclined to look towards the Pope Emeritus for guidance. His choice has been to remain silent.

There was a direct and unambiguous confirmation of this during the family synod last October. It was reported then that a group of cardinals thought that Pope Francis was overturning the clear and repeated teaching of his predecessors. Supposedly, several of them formed a delegation and went to Mater Ecclesiae to see Benedict, asking him to intervene. His response, they said, was simply to state that, since he was no longer pope, he had no authority in the matter, and that they should address their concerns to Pope Francis. According to some versions of the report, he himself informed his successor of the visit. If the report is true, the cardinals would certainly have been disappointed.

Archbishop Georg Gänswein, Benedict's faithful assistant, has insisted the story is false. But we all know that denials concerning politically charged matters in the Church are to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Archbishop Gänswein is not to be suspected of untruthfulness, but he will be quite familiar with the principle of mental reservation – the more so now that he works for a Jesuit pope. A version of events containing even relatively minor inaccuracies can be denied without prejudice to honesty, especially when the subject matter is itself confidential. Even if the story were totally invented, it still would serve to illustrate what I am convinced Benedict would do in such circumstances – and, indeed, what he must do, both as a matter of professional ethics and in Catholic ecclesiology.

So those who wish for direct intervention by the Pope Emeritus will remain unsatisfied. There is one respect only in which he will continue to exercise a role in the debates, and that is by the force and cogency of his writings both before and after his election.

It is true that he chose to revise his writings on the question of the re-admission to Communion of the divorced and remarried, renouncing his former advocacy of this pastoral accommodation at the very time it was the burning issue of the day. But even this is at most only an indirect intervention, and Archbishop Gänswein has assured us that it was long since planned and that its timing was purely coincidental.

The archbishop is, in fact, the channel through which the world gets most of the information about Benedict that the Pope Emeritus wishes to transmit. From him, we have learnt that he enjoys good relations with his successor, whom he likes and respects, and that he does not regret his decision to resign, and judges still that it was necessary for the good of the Church.

But it is less easy to explain away two further gestures by Benedict, relating to reforms that defined his pontificate: the liberation of the traditional Latin Mass and the creation of the ordinariate. On October 10 last year he sent a letter to traditionalists saying he was glad that the Extraordinary Form “now lives in full peace within the Church, also among the young, supported and celebrated by great cardinals”. On the very same day, he wrote to the Friends of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, welcoming the growth of the body for ex-Anglicans in England.

Such actions intensify the speculation, especially among those ill at ease with the orientations of Pope Francis. There are persistent rumours that Benedict’s resignation was not entirely free, and these are potentially damaging to the unity of the Church, because if this were the case then both his resignation and the election of his successor would be canonically invalid. In a rare, direct interview with a German journalist with whom he has close contacts, Benedict categorically denied that he was forced to step down.

Yet there were some genuinely puzzling details. For example, asked why he continued to wear papal white, Benedict explained that there were no other clothes available – a claim impossible to take seriously given that a trusted employee could easily have made a quick trip to one of the numerous clerical outfitters across the piazza from the Apostolic Palace in the days between the announcement of the resignation and its taking effect. Perhaps he was simply joking.

Then there is the ambiguity about what exactly a “free” decision to resign is. It is not clear exactly what sort of pressures constitute a lack of freedom as Canon Law would understand it, and it is certainly true that Benedict was under pressures from inside and outside the Church that would have crushed lesser men. In spite of this, all the evidence suggests that the decision was taken by Benedict himself, that he truly considered it necessary for the good of the Church, and that he still does.

Attempts to undermine Pope Francis’s papacy by alleging that his election was invalid for other reasons have gained little traction. The best known is that of Antonio Socci, an Italian journalist of no little standing and a fervent Catholic, though certainly no fan of the current Pontiff. Socci’s book *Non è Francesco* (“It’s not Francis”) alleges that the election was invalid due to procedural irregularities whose complexities will go above the head of all but the most expert canon lawyers. So far it has failed to convince anybody whose opinion would count and has been all but ignored by other Vaticanologists.

Another opinion publicised by Socci, and this time quoted approvingly by others, is that Benedict has willingly renounced the government of the Church but preserves for himself some spiritual aspect of papal authority. According to this theory, Francis refers to himself as “Bishop of Rome” rather than “Pope” precisely to accommodate this mysterious division of labour. But this distinction holds no water theologically. It is the Roman Church which holds the primacy over the Universal Church; it is the Bishop of Rome who exercises all and every authority involved in that primacy.

What is plausible is that Benedict, in renouncing papal authority, did not mean to renounce the burden which comes with it – what St Paul calls “solicitude for all the churches”. He now carries the Church only in his prayers and by his example. Part of this spiritual responsibility involves support for his successor, for whom he prays, as we should. It is not insignificant that Benedict only appears in public alongside Francis and, indeed, at his invitation.

It cannot be easy for Benedict to witness everything that is happening in Rome today, even if the

contrasts between him and Francis are not the hard and fast oppositions some take them for. It must cause him some chagrin to see some of his orientations for the Church neglected or even reversed, and some of his most trusted lieutenants marginalised while former adversaries are promoted.

But he remains serene because he has an unshakeable faith in the Church and in God, who guides her with a steady hand while human leaders come and go. In this respect, as in so many others, we should heed him and seek to imitate him.

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