

The Impact of Benedict XVI's Resignation on Papal Politics

Written by John V. Apczynski

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JOHN V. APCZYNSKI, APR 23 2013

Benedict XVI's resignation earlier this year may prove to be the most significant legacy of his pontificate. I believe this to be so even though most Catholics, at least in Europe and the United States, hardly took any notice.[1] When American Catholics were asked about his resignation, they indicated that they would like his successor to take into account the way they practice their faith, but for the most part assumed the continuing irrelevance of the hierarchy to their everyday concerns. How, then, can something so remote from their lives have any significant impact on the church as a whole?

In order to appreciate the significance of my claim, it is important to be aware of features of the Catholic tradition that have emerged since the latter part of the nineteenth century. These rather recent innovations, in turn, have led to accommodations in the way Catholics live their faith. This is not readily apparent, but social scientific research suggests that Catholicism is comprised, as it were, of two churches, the church of rules and doctrines and the church of practice and devotion.[2] The hierarchy, led by the papacy and Vatican bureaucracy, attempts to uphold a particular and rather restrictive interpretation of doctrine and to assert its authority by the imposition of a narrow set of moral norms. Most laity, along with the clergy that serve them in their parishes, remain devoted to the institutional church because of the liturgical and devotional practices that sustain the personal transformation that their faith engenders. For the past fifty years since the time of the Second Vatican Council this social pattern has been increasingly prominent,[3] and it is manifested in the many discrepancies noted in the media between the hierarchy and the laity on issues such as birth control, married priests, women's ordination, gay marriage, divorce, and abortion.[4]

One unfortunate consequence of this divergence is that the mainstream media tend to identify "the church" with the declarations of the Vatican and the hierarchy, even though they comprise a minority of the faithful. Furthermore, due to the public posturing of some members of the hierarchy, Catholicism is regularly painted as closed, intransigent, autocratic, inflexible, sexist, etc. It is not surprising, then, that sophisticated political theorists misunderstand the complex reality of the Catholic tradition.[5]

One benefit deriving from Benedict's resignation, then, is that it may remind everyone that the papacy does not have to be an absolutist theocracy. Indeed, for much of its history, the Catholic tradition fostered a robust sense of conciliarism where most church matters were decided locally or regionally by councils.[6] To be sure, this is not a version of political democracy as we understand it today, but it was an effective form of governance within the western Church which was relatively open to various voices and strata of society, including laity. Paradoxically, its most memorable achievement, the decree *Haec sancta* (of April 6, 1415) from the Council of Constance, is what salvaged the papacy from its possible demise due to the scandal of the great Western schism with its three papal claimants. Eventually, as it was becoming more and more powerless politically, the Vatican was able to impose a radical ultramontane understanding of the papacy on the universal Church at Vatican I (1870). Only then did the view of the papacy as holding absolute power of jurisdiction become formally recognized in the Catholic Church. Much of the subsequent activity of the Vatican in the early part of the twentieth century was devoted to establishing and maintaining this ultramontane version of papal authority.

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The challenge of making this radical form of ultramontanism effective within Catholicism fell to Leo XIII who attempted to achieve this in a relatively positive manner: he initiated a “revival” of a modern version of Thomism which was to function as the authoritative voice of Catholic teaching.[7] Identifying the “official” teachings in this way effectively encased them in an essentialist language that was beyond history and impervious to modern reinterpretations. Imposing this “revival” of neo-scholasticism on the Catholic community soon led to a uniformity of thinking among Catholic leaders that interpreted freedom of expression and conscience as accepting the universal truths of the Catholic faith.[8] The fruit of this imposition of radical ultramontanism was a culture of rationalism espousing a non-historical orthodoxy expressed in neo-scholastic language that led to talking nonsense, not only to outsiders, but even within the Catholic community itself.[9] It led, in short, to the flowering of a version of Catholic fundamentalism, which provided the illusory security of a safe haven sheltered from historical reality.

Calls for reform by a more attentive appreciation of the historical resources of the Catholic tradition, including its openness to new currents of thinking, gained little traction until mid-century when the Second Vatican Council was convened. The transformation in the official, public self-understanding of the Catholic tradition that resulted was profound. Probably the most important transformation involved the meaning of “church” itself. During the ascendancy of the ultramontanism of the previous century, the Vatican regularly presupposed that the church was a juridical entity, hierarchically ordered by divine right, so that the “church” became identified with its leadership. “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (*Lumen gentium*), on the contrary, begins by describing it as a mystery establishing the relationship between God and the human race (§1). From there the document describes the power of the church in mediating the divine mystery to the “people of God” as a historical movement empowered by the Spirit to be means of salvation for all (§9). It is not until the third chapter that the document discusses the hierarchical leadership of the church, which, while still affirming the prerogatives of the papacy, situates it within the context of the collegial relationship with the bishops (§§18-24) with the principal purpose of ministering to the community. To be sure, the Vatican has engaged in a vigorous restorationist campaign to re-impose the juridical understanding on the meaning of the church. But as I noted above, social research[10] amply confirms that ordinary Catholics have embraced this more traditional understanding of their place in the church to exercise responsibly their gift of the sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*) particularly at the level of social and personal morality (§12).

This recovery of the more biblically informed and historically accurate understanding of the church has been sustained by the encouragement of the people to be active participants in worship promoted by the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum concilium*). Probably one of the most profound transformations taught by the Council involved its clear affirmation of the legitimacy of the freedom of conscience in “The Declaration on Religious Liberty” (*Dignitatis humanae*). This set in motion a universal recognition of human dignity, which entails the need to dialogue with others and which had implications for which the institutional leadership is still struggling (e.g., the exclusion of women from sacramental ministry). Moreover, it commits the church to accepting the reality of the secular state as a political condition that best provides the social conditions for upholding human dignity and religious freedom.

Perhaps the most succinct way of summarizing this transformation in self-understanding which the Catholic tradition adopted a half century ago is that it overcame an a-historical form of neo-scholasticism that presumed to have unchanging and unchangeable insights into the nature of reality authentically interpreted by Vatican authority and accepted instead a sense of the community of the faithful engaged in a historical journey by respectful dialogue with the other toward the promise of the kingdom under the guidance of the Spirit. Unfortunately, the Vatican bureaucracy, under the leadership of John Paul II and continued under Benedict XVI, has attempted to subvert this event by burying it in the normality of the post-Tridentine period.[11] In order to do so it interprets this period by means of a triumphalist reading of history whereby Vatican II is reduced to a simple continuation of the Church’s proclamation of the march of God’s plan in the world.[12]

Many Catholic intellectuals have challenged the problematic character of this restorationist effort by the Vatican. Beyond its distortion of the historical reality of the Catholic tradition itself, it poses significant problems for the Church in the context of the pluralism assumed by secular democratic societies. As I noted above, this absolutist interpretation of the Catholic Church is commonly viewed by secular political theorists as incompatible with political democracy.[13] Even so, some political philosophers are beginning to acknowledge the importance of taking

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fundamental viewpoints into account in the formulation of public policy. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has acknowledged that once religions renounce the exclusivity of their world views, they may enter into rational discussion with alternative perspectives to formulate public policy.[14] If one were to judge the likelihood for such a self-transformation solely by the rhetoric of Vatican officials, such a dialogue may appear impossible.

But if one were to consider the *sensus fidelium* of the Catholic community, including the reflections of important intellectual representatives, such a transformation is already well under way. Gianni Vattimo, for example, challenges the a-historical illusions of papal doctrines that appeal to unchangeable “natures” beyond the empirical realm[15] and instead encourages leaders to rely on more hermeneutically nuanced language with its attendant degree of contingency. Even more capacious is the thought of Charles Taylor, who asks Catholics to embrace the advances of secular society with a renewed sense of possibility by reframing what the secular means.[16] The secular state upholds at least three human goods: (1) liberty insofar as no one should be forced in the realm of religion or basic belief (or unbelief); (2) equality in the sense that no fundamental world view may enjoy a privileged status in the state; and (3) fraternity (in a capacious sense) which entails that all fundamental traditions be included and heard in the ongoing process of determining the identity of a society and how to realize its goals.[17] These are not easily reconciled, but the Catholic tradition should accommodate its self-understanding to incorporate these values. To be sure, such an accommodation presumes a corresponding recognition by the secular state that a variety of comprehensive views – including religious views – may contribute to the ongoing process of maximizing these human goods.

These reflections illuminate issues facing the entire Catholic community. Consequently, Catholics should continue to expect the Vatican to teach its understanding of what is proper for Catholics to believe. Their current preoccupation with upholding their authority within a rather limited and – one would hope – passing set of assumptions unfortunately will lead them to affirm teachings that many of the faithful will find irrelevant to or incompatible with their experience of the faith. Sadly, this narrow focus only points to a defect in their institutional teachers with which they have learned to live. This tension does not invalidate their continuing practice of the meanings disclosed in their way of life. Implicitly, though, what it points to is a recognition that participation in the sacramental life of the Church is the defining characteristic of Catholic life sustaining its continuing dialogue in search of a *consensus fidelium*. Until a transformation in self-understanding analogous to that which most Catholics have undergone becomes a reality for the hierarchical leadership, Catholics will continue to expect the Vatican to attempt to teach its flawed understanding of what constitutes authentic belief for Catholics. Catholics have already determined that rejecting some of these teachings is not considered a condition for being a Catholic in good standing. Rather, the point of being a Catholic today is “taking our modern civilization for another of those great cultural forms that have come and gone in human history, to see what it means to be a Christian here, to find our authentic voice in the eventual Catholic chorus . . .”[18]

Here is the point at which the resignation of Benedict may be fully appreciated. Given the restorationist framework within which it was announced, his act was simultaneously courageous and humble. Perhaps because he witnessed first-hand the sad decline of his predecessor’s final years along with its attendant failure to address pressing needs within the institutional church, Benedict had to break the stranglehold of the inviolable papacy presumed by the juridical view of the church. His final act of humbly acknowledging his limits may provide the necessary breach to reclaim a more comprehensive view of the papacy as servant to the “people of God.” The selection of the Argentine Jesuit, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, to be his successor raises hopes that this may be so. His choice of the papal name, Francis, reflects his already well-established dedication to serving those in need. One may hope that this will become something more than a symbol, but in addition will mark the beginnings of an institutional transformation that comes to reflect that of many of the faithful.

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^[1] See, for example, the report of a recent New York Times/CBS poll that indicated that a majority of American Catholics considered the hierarchy out of touch and irrelevant to their ordinary lives: Laurie Goodstein and Megan Thee-Brenan, "U.S. Catholics in Poll see a Church out of Touch," *The New York Times* (Wednesday, March 6, 2013), A1 and A3.

^[2] See Andrew Greely, *The Catholic Revolution: New wine, old wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, especially 99-119 concerning his rationale for why Catholics remain in the Church while ignoring much of what the hierarchy affirms regarding moral prohibitions and political exhortations.

^[3] See William V. D'Antonio *et al.* *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.; A Sheed & Ward Book, 2007) for a comprehensive survey documenting this tendency of Roman Catholic practice and attitudes in the US.

^[4] For a descriptive analysis of such groups espousing these contrarian positions within Catholicism, see Michele Dillon, *Catholic identity: balancing reason, faith, and power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 77-114.

^[5] See, for example, Ian Buruma, *Taming the Gods: religion and democracy on three continents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 116-17. Here he declares that the modern secular state ought not enter into discussion of fundamental values, but only expect its citizens to abide by its laws. He pointedly refers to Joseph Ratzinger's insistence that the Catholic Church possesses absolute truth which must be upheld so that abortion may not become legalized.

^[6] See Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300-1870*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008 [2003]) for the prominence of this heritage in the Catholic tradition and its surprising demise in the post-revolutionary era of Europe.

^[7] This summary is dependent on Michael J. Lacey, "Leo's Church and Our Own," *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. by Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.57-92.

^[8] Lacey notes how this mindset is analogous to the position of many contemporary Muslim societies where freedom means obedience to the authority of God – in this case, though, by accepting Shari'ah (p. 76).

^[9] Nicholas Lash, "The Impossibility of Atheism" in *Theology for Pilgrims* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 19-35, here p. 32.

^[10] See William V. D'Antonio *et al.* (note 3 above) and Jerome P. Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful. How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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^[11] Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II* (vol. v, p. 643) as quoted in Lash, "In the Spirit of Vatican II?" *Theology for Pilgrims*, p. 283.

^[12] For a defense of such views, see Richard John Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 65-110.

^[13] See, for example, John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. (Ed. Erin Kelly. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 183-84.

^[14] See his "Prepolitical Foundations of the Constitutional State?" in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. (Trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 111-13. Habermas prepared this essay for a public discussion with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 2004 in Munich wherein he attempted to affirm a mutual enrichment through such dialogues where both sides take the secular society as an occasion for a complementary learning process.

^[15] Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*. (Trans. William McCuaig. Foreward by Robert T. Valgenti. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 30.

^[16] These reflections are adapted from Charles Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism" from *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. Ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 34-59.

^[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

^[18] Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.), p. 169.