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The unprecedented resignation of Benedict

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 11, 2013 Distinctly Catholic
Benedict Resigns

Last night, of course, I anticipated writing an update about the U.S. bishops' response to the HHS mandate revisions. And in search of information about Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, the greatest Secretary of State in the history of the Holy See, I was reminded about the circumstances of the election of Pope Pius VII. His predecessor, Pius VI, had died in August 1799, a prisoner of Napoleon. The City of Rome had been proclaimed a republic, forcing the conclave to meet in Venice under the protection of the Austrian emperor. The conclave began its deliberation Nov. 30, 1799, and, given the high stakes, political and ecclesiastical, the cardinals deadlocked. It was not until March 14 that Barnaba Chiaramonti was elected the new pope.

The news of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation may lead the church to the most interesting conclave since that conclave of 1799-1800. There will not be the political pressures from the crowned heads of Europe as existed then -- after the 1903 conclave that elected Pope Pius X, the right of certain monarchs to veto a candidate was brought to an end. But the ecclesiastical situation is sure to be just as contentious as many prior conclaves and, given the virtually unprecedented quality of Pope Benedict's decision to resign, those tensions will include some new dynamics.

What are the key dynamics, both immediate and long-term? The most obvious is that the decision to resign may be the most modernizing decision Pope Benedict has taken. (Quick question: Who is the person most upset with the decision? Queen Elizabeth II. You can bet that she took a call from Prince Charles this morning asking if she was watching the telly!) In a single moment, the pope has removed some of the aura of the papacy, the idea that it was a vocation rather than a ministry, something that cannot be abandoned without somehow affronting the Holy Spirit. Today, the pope indicated that the Petrine ministry is a ministry, a very specific ministry to be sure, but more of a job than a vow.

The second immediate take-away is that Pope Benedict needs to take every step very carefully in the next few days and weeks. Each step will be a precedent. And the cardinals are very jealous of their prerogative in selecting a new pope. The announcement did not detail what the Holy Father will do between now and the selection of his successor, but he is well advised to immediately go to Castel Gandolfo (does it have heating?) or some other location away from the Vatican and let the cardinals assume their traditional role. Any hint of papal meddling in the selection of a successor will be viewed with deep suspicion. You might analogize the situation when you consider the way presidents, no matter what their party, are keen to protect executive privilege in their dealings with Congress. Some things transcend the normal alignments of ideological attitude and familial bonds, and the right of the College of Cardinals to select a new pope is one of those things.

The key consideration in every conclave is whether to select a cardinal whose candidacy suggests continuity or one who might lead the church in a new and different direction. The Italians have a saying for this: After a fat pope, a thin pope. In 1800, Pius VII was chosen and, under the most difficult circumstances, showed himself to be a moderate, a diplomat, someone who always kept his eyes on the good of the church and was willing to do anything except violate his conscience to promote the good of the church. His successor, Cardinal Gabriel della

Genga, who took the name Leo XII, was the candidate of the zelanti, those who wanted less accommodation with newer realities and a return to the alliance of throne and altar. After the long reign of Pius IX, who embodied the zelanti stance after flirting with modernity in the first two years of his reign, the cardinals turned to Cardinal Giuseppe Pecci in 1878, who took the name Leo XIII, and Leo was seen as a leader of the diplomatic wing of the church. Leo was succeeded by Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto, Pius X, who proved himself a zelanti, but was elected for other reasons. Nonetheless, once he showed himself to be very opposed to all attempts at modernization, the new cardinals turned to the Cardinal della Chiesa, who had been in the bad graces of Pius X, producing my all-time favorite moment in papal history. Pius X's Secretary of State, Cardinal Merry del Val, had exiled della Chiesa to Bologna and passed him over for a red heat in three consecutive consistories. Della Chiesa only received his cardinal's hat only three months before his election. When Cardinal Merry del Val approached the new pope to make his vow of obedience, Benedict XV leaned forward and said, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Cardinal Merry del Val replied, "It is marvelous in our eyes."

Usually, the funeral rites for a deceased pope allow the cardinals a time when the cardinals can assess the previous reign and what the church needs. Publicly, this assessment is dominated by a fair amount of hagiography, but privately, the cardinals consider the limitations of the recently deceased pontiff. It is unclear how that assessment will happen when the Holy Father is still around. Again, this is why the Holy Father must absent himself from all proceedings and allow the cardinals to speak freely and candidly about what the church needs. We all know that for some time, high-ranking members of the Vatican have been distressed at the lack of effective management under Benedict. It is a safe bet that Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, will not receive many votes.

It is too soon to write an appreciation of Benedict XVI. Better to say: This fascinating man who might well be the most thoughtful, cultured, deeply read public figure of our time deserves more than a quick blog post, written hurriedly. It is also a bit soon to consider the leading candidates among the cardinals. As always, the archbishop of Milan is, de facto, a candidate, and Cardinal Angelo Scola is certainly the most commonly mentioned name among the cardinals. But Scola will face opposition, too. And as in the conclave of 1922, the cardinals are deeply divided and turn to a candidate who is little known and, therefore, without enemies: Cardinal Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti went from being the head of the Ambrosian Library to cardinal-archbishop of Milan to pope in less than a year.

Stay tuned to *NCR* for more news in the hours and days ahead.

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