

Why resignation may mean a conclave open to change

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 13, 2013 NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

Rome

For some time to come, people will ponder the significance of Pope Benedict XVI's stunning decision Monday to renounce his papacy. Ecclesiologists will debate its meaning for understanding the papal office, while spiritual writers may explore its potential as a case study in graceful withdrawal and letting go.

In the here and now, however, the most burning question is what it means for the politics of electing the next pope.

At first blush, the tendency was to think that staging a conclave while the previous pope was still alive might make it less likely that the cardinals would vote for change. The logic was that they would be hesitant to do anything perceived as disrespectful while the old pope was still around.

Even if one takes the Vatican at its word that Benedict will have no role in the process, it's hard to imagine that every syllable he utters for the next 15 days and every gesture he performs won't be dissected as possible signals to the cardinals who will gather in mid-March to cast their ballots. (In his general audience today, Benedict talked about the importance of opposing abortion, euthanasia and destroying embryos for medical purposes. It's a good bet that in Thursday's Italian papers, somebody will read that as putting pressure on the cardinals to elect a pope who will hold the line in the culture wars.)

As the dust has settled, however, a different consensus has begun to emerge. The new conventional wisdom holds that Benedict's resignation may actually set the stage for a conclave more inclined to take the church in a different direction for at least three reasons.

First and most basically, Benedict's decision amounts to a dramatic departure from business as usual. It's a reminder that even a hidebound institution devoted to tradition is occasionally capable of surprises. In that sense, Benedict's example may inspire some cardinals to think outside the box, to be willing to risk taking a new step.

Second, the resignation carries within itself the logic that the church needs a new start. After all, there is no immediate health crisis around Benedict, and by all accounts he could have carried on for a while. If the diagnosis had been that all is well, perhaps that would have been enough.

However, by saying he lacks the necessary strength to grapple with "questions of deep relevance for the life of faith" posed by a rapidly changing world, Benedict in effect has signaled that a new direction is needed.

Third, Benedict's decision to separate the end of his papacy from the end of his life means that the run-up to the conclave will not be dominated by the elegiac tributes that always flow when any major global celebrity dies, which tend to exaggerate that person's virtues and play down their defects.

In other words, this will be a conclave free from the "funeral effect" that loomed so large in April 2005.

Back then, a tidal wave of mourners, collectively estimated by the city of Rome at 5 million to 10 million people, turned the area in and around St. Peter's Square into a vast sea of humanity. Tributes to John Paul II dominated the global airwaves, and his funeral Mass is believed to have been the most-watched event in the history of television.

During the days before the conclave, when members of the College of Cardinals gathered each morning for their General Congregation meetings, they had to make their ways through the vast crowds around the Vatican, witnessing firsthand the emotion unleashed by John Paul's death. Love for the late pope was literally in their face.

Taken together, these experiences created a sense that John Paul II had been a massive triumph and propelled many cardinals into the conclave seeking continuity above all.

To be sure, there will be outpourings of affection for Benedict XVI too before he steps off the stage. This morning in the Paul VI audience hall, for instance, a large crowd greeted Benedict with cries of "Viva il papa!" and sustained applause. When he said he felt supported "almost physically," they burst into cheers again. Benedict's final general audience on Wednesday, Feb. 27, likely will have the feel of a massive pep rally and farewell.

You can already feel an appreciative tone beginning to build. After the audience this morning, a large brass band from Germany processed down the Via della Conciliazione away from St. Peter's Square, pounding out a rousing march number and carrying a banner expressing pride in "our pope."

None of that, however, will come close to the triumphant vibe in Rome eight years ago. Without those dynamics, many cardinals may be more inclined to a balanced assessment of the papacy that has just ended -- acknowledging its strengths, but also taking stock of its weaknesses.

(There are already hints of a more critical tone. On background, one Vatican prelate said today that some cardinals are concerned about Benedict's decision to live on Vatican grounds after his retirement, fearing it might cast a shadow over the new pope. Perhaps it would be better, he said, for Benedict to find a monastery in Germany to call home.)

Granted, all the cardinals who will cast ballots in March were appointed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, so on most things they're of like mind. In general, papal transitions are about shifts in tone, not substance. Radical change as it's usually defined in secular circles -- a more liberal position on abortion or gay marriage, for instance -- is deeply improbable, no matter who takes over.

Yet there are many areas where new directions are plausible. One could imagine a non-Western pope, for instance, or a pope more attuned to the argot of popular culture, or a pope less inclined to have secularism as his *idée fixe*, or a pope with a good head for business management who can finally implement a serious reform of the Vatican itself (or, at a minimum, to curtail the Vatican's occasional genius for stepping on its own story).

All those possibilities and others would represent real departures. The more Benedict's resignation sinks in, the more plausible some of those scenarios begin to seem.

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