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Pope treats tradition with double standard (again)

Jamie Manson | Feb. 20, 2013 Grace on the Margins
Benedict Resigns

"A centuries-old tradition has been shattered by a surprise," intoned Diane Sawyer at the opening of Feb. 11's episode of ABC's "World News." "Pope Benedict," she continued, "chosen to be pope for life, today announced he will resign."

I grabbed my remote and, through the magic of DVR, rewound back to the beginning of Sawyer's sentence and listened again. "A centuries-old tradition has been shattered by a surprise. Pope Benedict ... " I hit the pause button right there.

And I sat and fantasized about the ways Sawyer's sentence could have ended. "A centuries-old tradition has been shattered by a surprise. Pope Benedict today announced that he would allow priests to marry." Or, "Pope Benedict today announced he would admit women to be ordained." The possibilities were inspiring.

But I had to stop dreaming. Because Benedict XVI, high priest of maintaining tradition at all costs, had determined that the tradition of staying pope until one dies was a cost too great to bear. Benedict, who revived clerical dress from the Middle Ages and reinstituted the 16th-century old Latin Mass, decided that the traditional belief that a pope should never retire was, well, just too medieval.

Many argue that a 1917 code of canon law that allows popes to retire supports Benedict's choice. But as Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese commented after Benedict's announcement, typically "an extreme health issue is the basis for the move." Documents from the previous papacy show John Paul II interpreted this to mean an incurable disease or other severe impediment to performing his ministry. (Whether he followed his own advice, of course, is another question.)

While we have learned since Feb. 11 that Benedict had a new pacemaker battery installed, has increased difficulty walking long distances, and sustained a bump on the head last year during a nighttime run-in with a bathroom sink, none of this amounts to a grave condition. As octogenarians go, most would say Benedict is in pretty good shape. Yet, the pontiff will go ahead and break almost 600 years of tradition, launching the church into uncharted waters and giving the hierarchy less than three weeks to plot a course.

This will not be the first time Benedict has broken tradition. He did it barely a year ago when he oversaw the development of the new ordinariate for Anglicans seeking refuge in the Roman Catholic church. Facing dwindling numbers of priests and laypeople in the United States and England, Benedict extended an invitation to Anglicans aggrieved at their own church's decision to ordain women and expand its inclusion of gays and lesbians.

To smooth the transition, the hierarchy put time, money and effort to develop an alternative system where entire Episcopal communities could enter into communion with Rome en masse. The most crucial part of the deal was that the Vatican would also welcome married, ordained Anglican priests (many of them with children) into the Roman Catholic priesthood.

How stunning that this whole affair was orchestrated by a pope who continues to insist firmly and repeatedly that the nature of the priesthood is unchangeable and that tradition of mandatory celibacy cannot yield to the wiles of secular culture.

Those who plead for priestly ordination to open up to married men and women, arguing that is the only way to sustain the church's vanishing priesthood, are told repeatedly that these traditions cannot change. Members of the hierarchy practically throw their hands up and lament how powerless they are against the impenetrable, immutable force field surrounding tradition.

We all know that, like papal retirement, a married clergy was once very much part of the tradition. And ample scholarship has demonstrated that women held a priestly role in the early church and that the tradition offers no obstacles to welcoming women to the diaconate. It's remarkable how flexible the hierarchy can be with tradition when flexibility is expedient and how rigidly they will maintain the status quo to avoid reviving traditions they perceive as threatening.

I agree with many commentators that Benedict's decision to retire is beneficial in that it puts the papacy into the more human, realistic category of an office. For too long, Catholics have been told to revere the pontificate as an ontological state and to see the pope as the vicar of Christ on Earth, the only human being with a direct line to God. But I can't help but come away from this latest episode convinced that, yet again, those inside the Vatican have treated tradition with a double standard.

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