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Why Francis may like having Benedict around

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It?s not often on the Vatican beat that one has the opportunity to use a word such as ?unprecedented,? but what we?ll see today truly qualifies: A pope traveling by helicopter to his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo to visit his still-living predecessor, who before long will be moving in just around the corner on Vatican grounds.

In the beginning, the consensus was that having a retired pope lurking in the background would be problematic, potentially dividing the loyalties of the church and inviting speculation about whether the pope emeritus was still pulling strings as a sort of *éminence grise* (or, to use the more appropriate expression for a pope, *éminence blanc*.)

In honor of today?s historic occasion, here are three reasons why having a retired pope close by may be no bad thing after all.

First, Pope Francis is arguably the luckiest pope in history, because none of his 265 predecessors has ever had access to another living figure who could truly understand the burden they carried.

That may be especially important for Francis, who was known in Argentina for not having an inner circle of confidantes, preferring to play his cards close to the vest and to make decisions for himself. For that reason, he doesn?t bring into the papacy a ready-made team of close advisors.

It might be especially useful to be able to turn to Benedict for a read on thorny situations, though everything we?ve seen about Francis suggests he?ll end up making his own calls.

Second, having a retired pope around is likely to seem odd only the first time it happens, and after that people will get used to it. There?s little evidence that having retired bishops has split dioceses in half, and similarly the Catholic church will almost certainly survive having a retired pope.

In the meantime, Benedict?s presence may be a reminder to Francis that at least in theory, there?s life after the papacy. Being pope in many ways is an impossible job, as people expect popes to be intellectual giants, political heavyweights, Fortune 500 CEOs, media celebrities and living saints. Trying to shoulder all that is tough for anyone.

From time to time, being able to gaze wistfully out the window at Benedict?s quiet monastery may offer Francis, and whoever follows him, a bit of solace.

Third, having Benedict on Vatican grounds may also be advantageous for Francis because it means that access to the retired pope will be limited, preventing him from becoming, even if unintentionally, a point of reference for anyone disenchanted with the new regime.

Based on reporting when Benedict?s resignation was first announced, it seems that his original thought was to return to Bavaria to be closer to his home and his brother. In the end, however, the decision was made to remain within the walls of the Vatican, precisely so that access to him could be limited and controlled.

As one senior prelate put it, ?No one can get to him there, unless he wants to be gotten to.?

In other words, Francis can see Benedict whenever he finds it useful, but anyone else will have to wade through the system. That probably makes it especially vexing for anyone wanting to enlist Benedict in a back-door maneuver against Francis, since the powers that be in the papal apartment would know who?s coming in and out.

The sight of the two popes together today may be stunning in its originality, but there?s little to reason to think it augurs any deep instability for the papacy. Actually, the second most satisfied person about the situation, after Benedict himself, may well be Pope Francis.

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