

## A POPE ABDICATES



“Peter has no need of our lies or flattery. Those who blindly and indiscriminately defend every decision of the supreme Pontiff are the very ones who do most to undermine the authority of the Holy See—they destroy instead of strengthening its foundations.”

Melchior Cano O.P., theologian to the Council of Trent<sup>1</sup>

Lightning struck the dome of St Peter's on the evening of Sunday, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2013, the day Pope Benedict XVI announced that, lacking the strength of mind and body necessary to govern the Church, he would abdicate on 28<sup>th</sup> February.<sup>2</sup> What might we gather from this omen? In chapter 5 of his Letter to the Ephesians, St Paul lays out the duty of a father towards his wife and family. He must be prepared to lay down his life for them. Now, the pope is *par excellence* a father; his very title derives from the Italian, ultimately from the Latin, for the word.

Pope Benedict XVI's decision to breach the 2,000 year tradition of non-abrogation of the Petrine Office, except in the case of necessity, for the good of the Church recalls the decision made by another pope, also allegedly for the good of the Church, some fifty four years earlier<sup>3</sup> which was quite as much a surprise to the members of the Curia as the present one. In the Council that followed *that* decision, a convocation which exposed the Church unashamedly to the influence of the secular, the young Fr Joseph Ratzinger was a *peritus*. It is significant, then, that *Papa Ratzinger* should cite the demands of the modern world—the secular—as influencing his decision.

He has been praised almost universally. So many of the Church's bishops and clergy have embraced secular views that many, perhaps a majority, think it appropriate for a pope to follow the secular course of retirement. Yet the Petrine

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in George Weigel, *Witness To Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, London, 2005, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> The formal announcement is set forth in the Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> John XXIII on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1959, on the grounds 'that it was time to open the windows of the Church to let in some fresh air'.

Office has no parallel in the secular world. It is not a human institution but a Divine one. A pope ought not trust in his own strength to endure in office, but in the Holy Spirit Who is the Soul of the Church.

The end, the *final cause*, of every Catholic life is personal sanctity. This is achieved through living out one's vocation and its great exemplars are the saints. St John Vianney, patron saint of priests (of bishops, of popes) was frequently tempted to abandon his parish and its burdens and to take himself off to a convent where he could be at peace.<sup>4</sup> Whenever he thought to submit to that temptation he was repulsed and, on every occasion, he accepted he must continue as a parish priest. Mother Teresa of Calcutta did not look for retirement when, after a second heart attack in 1989, she was fitted with a 'pacemaker' to regularise her heartbeat. She continued to care for the poorest of the poor and, until shortly prior to her death, to head the immense congregation she had founded.

The recollection of another image filled the mind of this commentator when he heard, early on the morning of Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> February (Australian Eastern Daylight Saving Time), of the Pope's decision, the iconic photograph of AFP photographer, Gabriel Bouys, taken on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1999 in Maribor, Slovenia, of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the beatification of Anton Martin Slomšek. Here an old man, exhausted by his duty and ill health, was seen as enduring—*Johannes Paulus contra mundum*.



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There is a sense, however, in which it is for the welfare of the Church that Pope Benedict has chosen to leave office before his death. His adherence to the mind of Vatican II is unremitting, as demonstrated by his words a few days ago—

“We went to the Council not only with joy, but with enthusiasm. The expectation was incredible. We hoped that everything would be renewed, that a new Pentecost really would come, a new era of the Church, because the Church was not robust enough at that time...

“The Sunday practice was still good, even vocations to the priesthood and religious life were already somewhat fewer, but still sufficient. But nevertheless, there was the feeling that the Church was going on, but getting smaller, that somehow it seemed like a reality of the past and not the bearer of the future. And now, we hoped that

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *The Curé d'Ars*, Abbe François Trochu, Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1927. Now available in a reprint through Tan Books.

this relationship would be renewed, changed, that the Church would once again [be a] source of strength for today and tomorrow..."<sup>5</sup>

He did not go on to say that what transpired was the reverse of that expectation.

The root problem with *Papa Ratzinger*, as was the case with his predecessor *Papa Wojtyla*, is that his philosophical formation was grounded in the subjective. Truth—with the one as with the other—was not necessarily absolute; it could be affected by the opinion of a majority. In 1982 in his *Les Principes de la Théologie Catholique—Esquisse et Materiaux* (Paris, Tequi, pp. 426-7), the then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote—

“If one is looking for a global diagnosis of the text [of *Gaudium et spes*], one could say that it (along with the texts on religious liberty and on the religions of the world) is a revision of the *Syllabus* of Pius IX, a kind of counter-syllabus...”<sup>6</sup>

The text makes plain that he regards the *Syllabus of Errors* annexed to the *Bull, Quanta cura*, of 8<sup>th</sup> December 1864 as no longer binding on the faithful. Pius IX had there set out for the instruction of the faithful a list of particular errors to be avoided. He did so in a form which complied with the four conditions laid down six years later (in *Pastor Aeternus*) by the [First] Vatican Council for a papal utterance to be infallible. Those errors included the assertion of a right to religious freedom adopted, as if it were Catholic doctrine, in the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*. What was true once was true no longer. Or, to put it in the obverse, what was once false had now become true!

Consistent with this mindset, Pope Benedict is known to be opposed to various decrees of the *Pontifical Biblical Commission* established by Pope Leo XIII submission to whose terms was declared by his successor, Pope Pius X, to bind the consciences of the faithful.<sup>7</sup>

He had demonstrated his limitations as a theologian while head of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* in the eighteen month delay in giving formal confirmation to what was clearly the case, that the teaching of Pope John Paul II in the *Motu proprio Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* excluding women from the priesthood met the four conditions laid down in *Pastor Aeternus* and so rendered it infallible.<sup>8</sup> But more defective was the error he committed as Pope when, in the course of an interview with the journalist Peter Seewald in 2010 (published as *Luce del Mondo*), he gave it as his opinion that it might be possible for one to do evil that good may come of it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Address to the Clergy of Rome, Paul VI Hall, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2013. Source, zenit.org

<sup>6</sup> “Si l’on cherche un diagnostic global du texte, on pourrait dire qu’il est (en liaison avec les textes sur la liberté religieuse et sur les religions du monde) une révision du *Syllabus* de Pie IX, une sorte de contre-syllabus.”

<sup>7</sup> Established by Pope Leo XIII following the encyclical on Sacred Scripture, *Providentissimus Deus* (18.11.1893) on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1902 in the Apostolic Letter, *Vigilantiae Studii*. The authority of its pronouncements was asserted by Pope Pius X in the *Motu proprio, Praestantia Scripturae* (18.11.1907) ASS 40 (1907), 724 ff.

<sup>8</sup> This was preceded by a period of ambivalence about the authority of the teaching which gave scope to the disobedient to persist with their objections.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the author’s two papers *The Pope and the Question of Condoms* on this website under ‘Moral Issues’.

The Church is, fortunately, running out of bishops who attended the Second Vatican Council and the number of bishops who feel committed to that Council's attitudes and reforms is diminishing. The challenges to the licitness of the Council's standing increase as time goes on.

In a recent report on the *chiesa* website, Italian commentator, Sandro Magister, quotes a new book by Professor Enrico Radaelli in which the author cites the late and respected Fr Divo Barsotti's criticisms of the Council from unpublished diaries which include the following (as translated from the Italian)<sup>10</sup>—

"[A] Council is the supreme exercise of the magisterium, and is justified only by a supreme necessity. Could not the fearful gravity of the present situation of the Church stem precisely from the foolishness of having wanted to provoke and tempt the Lord? Was there the desire, perhaps, to constrain God to speak when there was not this supreme necessity? Is that the way it is? In order to justify a Council that presumed to renew all things, it had to be affirmed that everything was going poorly, something that is done constantly, if not by the episcopate then by the theologians.

"Nothing seems to me more grave, contrary to the holiness of God, than the presumption of clerics who believe, with a pride that is purely diabolical, that they can manipulate the truth, who presume to renew the Church and to save the world without renewing themselves. In all the history of the Church nothing is comparable to the latest Council, at which the Catholic episcopate believed that it could renew all things by obeying nothing other than its own pride, without the effort of holiness, in such open opposition to the law of the gospel that... requires us to believe how the humanity of Christ was the instrument of the omnipotence of the love that saves... in his death."

Strong words! Stronger than any yet uttered on this website where we have been critical of certain of the documents of the Council and of its nomination by the popes as 'ecumenical' in the absence of a finality which would justify the title.

The popes since 1962 have been largely ineffectual, the *fons et origo* of their ineffectuality Pope John XXIII's Opening Address which abandoned the exercise of the Church's authority. How little has been done to curb the heretics within the Church. Hans Küng ought to have been excommunicated twenty years ago: Pope Benedict chose to have a meal with him! No pope since 1962 has been prepared to emulate Pius IX's reaction to advice from one of his cardinals that he could not take a certain course: "Am I not the Pope in Rome? It shall be done!"

So, what of the future? Will it be Pope Benedict's successor, or his successor's successor, or his successor's successor's successor, who breaks the mould? Let us pray that, as the earlier papal decision marked the opening of the period of strife and disorder for Christ's Church we currently suffer, the later papal decision may signal the beginning of its closure.

Michael Baker

17<sup>th</sup> February 2013—*First Sunday of Lent*

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<sup>10</sup> *The Impossible 'Road Map' of Peace with the Lefebvrists* at <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350426?eng=y>

## APPENDIX

Dear Brothers,

I have convoked you to this Consistory, not only for the three canonisations, but also to communicate to you a decision of great importance for the life of the Church.

After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry. I am well aware that this ministry, due to its essential spiritual nature, must be carried out not only with words and deeds, but no less with prayer and suffering.

However, in today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the bark of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognise my incapacity to adequately fulfil the ministry entrusted to me.

For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005, in such a way, that as from 28 February 2013, at 20:00 hours, the See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant and a Conclave to elect the new Supreme Pontiff will have to be convoked by those whose competence it is.

Dear Brothers, I thank you most sincerely for all the love and work with which you have supported me in my ministry and I ask pardon for all my defects. And now, let us entrust the Holy Church to the care of Our Supreme Pastor, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and implore his holy Mother Mary, so that she may assist the Cardinal Fathers with her maternal solicitude, in electing a new Supreme Pontiff.

With regard to myself, I wish to also devotedly serve the Holy Church of God in the future through a life dedicated to prayer.

From the Vatican, 10 February 2013

BENEDICTUS PP XVI