

# Commonweal

***Commonweal Readers'  
Communities (CRC)  
Discussion Topic Packet***

**The Papal  
Transition:  
Benedict to Francis**

# Commonweal

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# Regime Change

## *Benedict & His Successor*

Peter Jeffery, John Wilson, Mary C. Boys,  
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### *Peter Jeffery*

**I**t may be the last time a surprise is announced in Latin. But as soon as I heard about the pope's unexpected retirement, the conspiracy theories were not far behind. Was he bailing out one step ahead of a whole new scandal? Was this some sinister plot to appoint his own successor? Scarier still were reports that canon law requires a resigning pope to be of sound mind and acting freely. So a pope of unsound mind can't resign or be forced out? Then lightning struck St. Peter's.

Doubtless there have been medical issues we hadn't heard about, but I think it's obvious why Benedict XVI is retiring. It was he, as Cardinal Ratzinger, who labored to hold

the Vatican together during the long, slow decline of John Paul II, so differently chronicled in Stanislaw Dziwisz's *Let Me Go to the Father's House* and John Cornwell's *The Pontiff in Winter*. Back then, rumors were rife about Vatican factions pushing pet causes and jockeying for advantage in the next papal election. It was said that John Paul had met with the archbishop of Canterbury without knowing who he was. It was rumored that a secret cabal of curial cardinals was planning to keep John Paul in a permanent vegetative state, so they could indefinitely issue encyclicals in his name—brain-dead but still infallible. There were jokes about John Paul's successor taking the name George Ringo, in a dramatic gesture to world youth. Even Ratzinger's election failed to stop it all: the secrets his butler got in trou-

ble for revealing were partly about people positioning their cronies for the conclave that is now upon us. Clearly our Holy Father was right to spare the church another long decline. Better to get out of the way so a younger pope can fully take charge.

But what sort of pope will we get? The American liberal media thinks it has already figured that one out. Coverage on CNN and the in *New York Times* tends to strike a note of pessimism: Don't get your hopes up for a pope who will endorse the Democratic Party's social platform—all the cardinal electors were appointed by the last two popes, and will surely continue the same old tired agendas. For once, the folks at Fox News hope the *Times* is right.

I don't believe that terms derived from politics, like "liberal" and "conservative," offer the best vocabulary for talking about tensions in the church. And I don't believe we can predict the new pope's policies on such issues as Vatican finances, women in the church, the pedophilia cover-up. Half the popes I lived through were surprises: John XXIII, John Paul I and II. When the man some people had called "God's Rottweiler" was elected Benedict XVI, lots of Catholics on both sides thought they could hear the knives being sharpened for a long-anticipated bloodbath. What we got instead was an encyclical called "God Is Love." I am eager to be surprised again.

Still there are some things I think we can safely predict about the next pope. First, he will probably be the first pope ordained as a priest in the Vatican II era. He won't remember the preconciliar church, and may not even know Latin. That, frankly, worries me. There's way too much amnesia already. Our disputes about liturgy, models of leadership, the church's role in society would be far less painful if the most vocal partisans on every side knew more history. We need a "hermeneutic of continuity" now more than ever before. You can't know who you are if you don't know who you were.

On the other hand, the new pope will have grown up in a church that has always wrestled with the challenges of ecumenism, modern culture, liturgical renewal, the vocation shortage. He will know that these things are not temporary detours on our way home to the golden age: they are where we live now, and where he has lived all along. I don't know what vision he will offer of where we need to go, but I am hopeful he will recognize that we need to do some regrouping and reshuffling to face our challenges head on.

The next pope will take office in the middle of the Year of Faith, which is dedicated to promoting the New Evangelization. Despite some reported wistfulness about a smaller and purer church, Pope Benedict recognizes that, by definition, no church-of-the-few could ever be the Catholic Church. Smaller and fewer is what we're getting, though, as historic European edifices empty out, ancient communities flee the Middle East, Latin America goes Pentecostal. Rather than accept this shrinkage with relief or resignation, the pope's response has been to call back the lost sheep with a New Evangelization.

What exactly is a "New Evangelization"? Probably the best guide would be the documents generated by the Synod of Bishops that opened the Year of Faith. Unfortunately the most important of them are available only in unofficial translations, since the official Latin texts are confidential. That is because the synod since its inception has had only "the function of providing information and offering advice" to the pope, who may or may not use the synod's report to compose an Apostolic Exhortation. Benedict himself, in the homily at the opening Eucharist, said the New Evangelization was aimed "principally at those who, though baptized, have drifted away from the church and live without reference to the Christian life." One could see this as an unrealistic, even reactionary desire to somehow reverse the recent history of formerly Catholic countries. But rather than giving him a political label, I would say Pope Benedict is the kind of Catholic who sees particularly clearly the immutable, transcendent Truth to which all of us need to conform ourselves—the Christ who, when lifted up, draws all people to himself. The Catholics who don't feel drawn to his kind of leadership tend to be those who see more clearly the immanent truth hidden in creation, the Spirit who blows like the wind, the Son of Man who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. The New Evangelization should draw these perspectives back together in a kind of binocular vision, revealing the one Truth as a unity of wholeness, not a unity of exclusion.

Indeed, the unofficial "Final List of Propositions" published on the Vatican website is no jeremiad about rescuing a sinking Europe. Inculturation is one of the first things they mention. Globalization is paired with secularism as "challenges of our time." The church should "welcome migrants and promote their human dignity," recognize the charisms and "dynamism of the new ecclesiastical movements and new communities," "be present in all fields of art." The bishops also recommend "greater attention to the church's social doctrine," rendering liturgical celebrations "relevant to the urban context" of city life, "changes in the dynamics of pastoral structures which no longer respond to the evangelical demands of the current time." "The preferential option for the poor" means that "they are both recipients and actors in the New Evangelization." And "the synod acknowledges that today, women (lay and religious) together with men contribute to theological reflection at all levels and share pastoral responsibilities in new ways."

One of the next pope's responsibilities will be to decide what to do with the synod's propositions; he could do a lot more than write another Apostolic Exhortation. And, given the challenges of evangelizing a world that is more interconnected and complicated than ever, he will need all the help he can get. We should take seriously what Benedict's resignation statement had to say about the burdens of being pope "in today's world."

This brings me to the last prediction I feel I can make



with certainty: The next pope won't be me. But, just for the sake of discussion, I'll tell you what I would do. The first thing I would do is deliver the traditional blessing of the crowd assembled in St. Peter's Square. The second thing I would do is announce the theme for the next Synod of Bishops. They are to begin discussing how to shape a transitional process for making the synod itself a more deliberative and legislative body, which will operate in union with the national episcopal conferences and St. Peter's successor. This would help fulfill the desire Pope Paul VI expressed in the synod's founding document, "for a continuance after the council of the great abundance of benefits that We have been so happy to see flow to the Christian people...as a result of Our close collaboration with the bishops." And it would confirm his observation that "This synod...like all human institutions, can be improved upon with the passing of time." John Paul's and Benedict's appointees do not all think alike, and the worldwide pastoral experience of all the bishops will be crucial in addressing every problem we face now. When the Spirit speaks to the church, we should listen with all ears.

**Peter Jeffery** is the Michael P. Grace Chair in Music at the University of Notre Dame.

## John Wilson

**M**y mother was still very much herself when she turned eighty-five—in possession of her "faculties," as the characters in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* say. Within a few months, though, that began to change, and month by month dementia tightened its grip on her.

When I heard the news about Benedict, I was finishing a book by J. I. Packer (whom I greatly admire), *Puritan Portraits*. I had been reading about Richard Baxter and the "good death": the notion that, in dying, a faithful Christian should demonstrate the authenticity of his faith. I thought about my mother—who was ninety years old last December—and other faithful Christians I have known whose minds have been broken long before they died. God has promised that he will never abandon his children, and I believe him. But he has not promised us a "good death."

In stepping down from the papacy, Benedict acknowledged his frailty. He did not elaborate, and there was no need for him to do so—nor for us to speculate. The church he has served with great devotion will elect a new pope. As with his predecessor, John Paul II, there has been a tendency, both among Benedict's hagiographers and among the church's fiercest critics, to credit him with an influence far exceeding what he has done or could possibly have done. Benedict himself knows better.

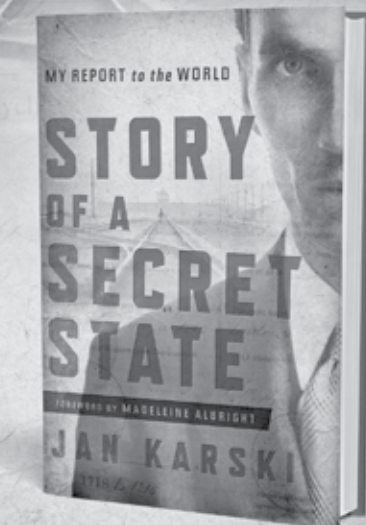
From my standpoint as an evangelical Protestant who has gained much from the Catholic tradition, and from

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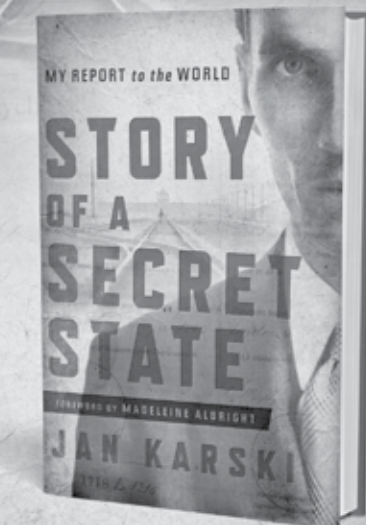
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Benedict in particular, I am baffled by the criticism of his decision from writers I respect (including, not least, my dear friend Jody Bottum in the *Weekly Standard*). The notion, for example, that the existence of a former pope (devoting himself to prayer and reflection) might well pose a serious threat to the administration of his successor sounds like something from *The Daily Show*.

Before long, of course, attention will shift from Benedict to the upcoming papal conclave. I have no idea who the next pope will be. He will inherit a terrible mess—and a powerful witness to the God who created the universe and sustains it, the God who promises the restoration of all things: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Roman Catholic Church is in desperate need of reform. So too the Orthodox Church, and evangelicalism, and what used to be called “the mainline,” and Pentecostalism...and so it has always been, from the first century on.

I don’t write that blithely, as if (for instance) the scandal of abuse perpetrated by priests and covered up by their superiors is to be waved away or somehow cancelled out by reference to the long history of egregious wrongdoing that all honest Christians must own up to. But if what we say when we join our voices in the Apostles’ Creed is anything like the truth, there is a lot more to the story.

**John Wilson** is editor of Books and Culture.

## Mary C. Boys

**I**n early January a beloved friend of mine died. A serious student of Vatican II, she was a passionate advocate for women’s voices in the church. The night I received word of her death, a phrase came to me in a dream: “strategic perseverance.” When I awoke, those two words, which I had never before juxtaposed, stayed with me. I regard them as my friend’s wise counsel, particularly with regard to living in the Roman Catholic Church today.

For my part I persevere in the Catholic tradition because that tradition is rich, deep, and broad; I am edified by its spirituality and sacramental life, including the witness of so many who walk the Way of Jesus. I persevere, because the Petrine ministry is vital for the unity of the church. Yet one must be strategic in dealing with a ministry exercised as an absolute monarchy governed exclusively by men—one moreover, that, in too often exercising its authority in a punitive manner, alienates those it judges. Strategic, because working in the interreligious realm and belonging to a woman’s religious community in the United States today requires us to be, in the words of Matthew 10:6, “wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

That “strategic perseverance” has become my watchword offers a hint of my mixed feelings about Pope Benedict XVI. The promulgation of *Dominus Iesus* in 2000, when the future Benedict was the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for

the Doctrine of the Faith, foreshadowed his complicated legacy in ecumenical and interreligious relations. Authoritarian in tone, that declaration surveyed the religious landscape from a position of omniscience. Subsequently, as pope, Benedict ignited controversy with a poorly articulated claim about Islam in a lecture at the University of Regensburg in September 2006. A month later, when thirty-eight Muslim religious authorities and scholars issued an “Open Letter to the Pope,” Benedict showed openness to their response, and his visit to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul in November 2006 partly quelled the protest. On the first anniversary of the open letter, 138 Muslim religious leaders published *A Common Word between Us and You*, and the numerous conferences that followed in its wake have included Vatican involvement.

In the sphere of Catholic-Jewish relations, Benedict committed himself to honoring the remarkable legacy of his predecessor, indicating in an address in June 2005 his resolve to “continue on the path of improving relations” with Jews. Yet he has been less successful in striking the right dialogical tone. His May 2009 visit to Israel notably failed to escape the shadow of John Paul II’s memorable visit there in 2003. Like John Paul before him, Benedict gave an address in the Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem, Israel’s memorial to victims of the Holocaust—a speech that was dispassionate and detached, in stark contrast to his predecessor’s personal, even visceral address.

More unsettling was Benedict’s lack of candor with regard to the church’s role in the Holocaust. In Israel, he spoke of the brutal extermination of Jews “by a godless regime that propagated an ideology of antisemitism and hatred.” Such phrases—“the Nazi reign of terror,” an “insane racist ideology, born of neo-paganism”—typify Benedict’s characterization of the Holocaust. Rarely does he admit to any degree of ecclesial complicity; and when he does, he seriously understates it, via such contorted formulations as “it cannot be denied that a certain insufficient resistance to this atrocity on the part of Christians can be explained by the inherited anti-Judaism in the hearts of not a few Christians.” The failure to grapple with disturbing truths about the church in relation to the Holocaust, together with his pursuing the canonization of Pope Pius XII, suggest a reluctance to gaze into the tarnished mirror of history.

Benedict’s patient pursuit of reconciliation with the Society of St. Pius X and other traditionalist groups has also complicated relations with Jews—most notoriously in his removal of the ban of excommunication from the Lefebvrist Bishop Richard Williamson, whose denial of the Holocaust (and misogynistic social views) were apparently unknown to the pope. More consequential was the prayer for Jews Benedict composed for the Good Friday liturgy in the Tridentine Rite. Released in February 2008 under the title “*Pro Conversione Iudaeorum*,” it petitioned Jews to acknowledge Jesus as the savior of all. Given the church’s long history of denigrating Judaism, particularly

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the Good Friday prayer for the “perfidious” Jews from the Roman Missal of 1570 that prevailed until 1960, the pope’s formulation was seen as contentious. Cardinal Walter Kasper, then President of the Pontifical Council for Religious Relations with the Jews, intervened in the ensuing controversy to argue for an eschatological interpretation. While Kasper’s intervention alleviated some of the tension, the reality remains that the Catholic Church now sanctions two versions—the 1970 prayer in the Roman Missal and the pope’s composition for the Tridentine Rite—that are at theological odds.

If Benedict’s papacy is ambiguous in its relations with Jews, its treatment of American women’s religious congregations reflects a more coherent—and hostile—posture. Two investigations were initiated under Benedict’s watch: the “Apostolic Visitation” of religious institutes in the United States, launched in 2008 under the auspices of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life with the stated purpose of assessing the “quality of life” in these congregations; and the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The result of the visitation, although completed in January 2012, has yet to be announced. The outcome of the doctrinal assessment, meanwhile, was announced last April. In it the CDF accused the LCWR of advocating “radical theses incompatible with the Catholic faith,” and of advocating for economic justice, while insufficiently supporting magisterial teaching against homosexuality and abortion. The CDF appointed Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain to supervise changes in the LCWR’s statutes, programs, and affiliations in order to align them more closely with the church’s “teachings and discipline.”

Personally, I view these investigations as disturbing and deeply ironic symbols of a dysfunctional church. It should be noted that some of the Vatican officials who championed the investigations are among those most complicit in the sexual-abuse scandal. But more fundamentally disheartening is the revelation that the church that champions human rights across the globe denies them to those members it deems deviant. Externally, the church expresses a commitment to dialogue with the religious other. Internally, how-



A flash of lightning over St. Peter's Basilica on February 11, 2013

ever, no such commitment is evident. In Benedict’s eyes women religious apparently are not capable of being dialogue partners; rather, we are treated like children, told what to think and how to behave.

The bitter irony is that in diversifying their programs, mission, and way of living in the world, women have merely obeyed what was asked of us. In the early 1960s the Belgian Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens urged that women’s religious congregations utilize their “latent capacities” and enlarge their vocation by opening new dimensions. In his influential 1963 book *The Nun in the Modern World*, Suenens

observed that women religious “[appear] to the faithful to be out of touch with the world as it is, an anachronism.” Women religious, he recommended, must jettison outdated customs and costumes and “continually adapt to the demands of the moment.” In October 1965 Vatican II issued *Perfectae caritatis*, the Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life, recommending that religious communities examine the “manner of life, of prayer, and of work” and see to it that “their members have a proper understanding of the conditions of the times and the needs of the church” in order to “help humanity more effectively.”

And so we did. Contrary to hierarchs who charge that we have been misled by “radical feminism,” we have in fact been led by our experiences among those with whom we live and work—people whose lives may be at variance with official teachings, yet who nonetheless strive to live with integrity and love of neighbor. As Sr. Margaret A. Farley said in regard to her book *Just Love*—a book harshly denounced by the CDF—“I wrote it because people are suffering.” It is dismaying to have to point out to those hierarchs (or to any alert Christian) that the process of entering into the experience of suffering people opens new perspectives. The truth is that women religious did not set out to challenge church doctrine or governance; much more simply, our experiences have affected us, giving us new lenses on the world. We have learned more than we can bear about the unspeakable violence done to women worldwide through rape, sex trafficking, “honor” killings, and acid attacks. And we are faulted for not being more outspoken against contraception?

When the cardinal electors meet in the Sistine Chapel next month, will they elect a pope with sympathy for women’s

experiences in and outside the church? Likely not. That is why I'm keeping in mind the counsel that St. Vincent de Paul gave to his Daughters of Charity: to act in the church with "holy cunning." And to that I will add, thanks to my late friend, that we must act with "strategic perseverance" as well. ■

**Mary Boys** is the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and author of the forthcoming *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* (Paulist Press).

## William L. Portier

On Monday, February 11, my wife called me at 7:30 in the morning. "The pope resigned," she said. "Who?" I replied.

Pope Benedict XVI surprised the whole world by announcing his resignation. As it turns out, he had been thinking about it for some time. Since the announcement, we have been reminded that, in a 2010 interview with the journalist Peter Seewald, Benedict mentioned the possibility of a papal resignation. And we've been reminded that he prayed at the tomb of Pope Celestine V, who resigned amid great turmoil in 1294. Benedict had witnessed the long decline of Pope John Paul II. By resigning, Benedict leaves to his successors an alternative to the example set by John Paul II, whose conscience did not permit him to leave the office to which he had been called by God. Benedict's conscience led him in a different direction, and his decision will have increasing significance in the future, as further medical advances increase the likelihood of a pope living beyond the time when he can fulfill his duties. Theologians who lament the lack of constitutional checks on the papacy will welcome this more recent precedent. Whatever one thinks of Benedict's papacy, his resignation is clearly an act of courage and humility—a gift of hope to the whole church. He reminded us that the papacy was about the church and not about him.

He leaves behind a mixed legacy. No pope in history—not even Leo the Great or Gregory the Great—was a better theologian in terms of breadth of knowledge and professional training, or according to the classic definition of the theologian as one who prays. Benedict's encyclicals on love and hope strike the reader with their clarity and depth. Apparently we will not have an encyclical on faith to complete the triad of the theological virtues. In his February 11 statement, the sentence in which he admits that he no longer has the strength to fulfill his office begins with an observation about the prospects for faith in a world "shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith." We are left to wonder what more he might have said about these questions.

We do have *Caritas in veritate*. Written in the wake of 2008's worldwide economic collapse, this encyclical is simply brilliant in bringing the resources of the tradition to bear on that crisis. It should be required reading for those who make economic-policy decisions that affect human well-being. Benedict writes in this encyclical of the "grammar of creation," a phrase he applies to both natural law and the environment. His many interventions on environmental questions, especially climate change, and even the solar equipment he has had installed in the Vatican surely distinguish him as a "green pope."

Pope Benedict's three *Jesus of Nazareth* books, two of which I have used in graduate classes, grapple seriously with the present impasse between theology and exegesis, and offer signs of an approach to Scripture that is both theological and historical-critical. His Wednesday addresses on the saints and fathers of the church now run to three volumes and will be a lasting literary legacy.

For the foreseeable future, Benedict's 2005 interpretation of the Second Vatican Council, as neither rupture nor simple continuity but rather reform in continuity, remains the framework within which the council will be discussed and assessed. It also signals his passion for the unity of the church. On this front, he has made two controversial moves. First, his long-standing efforts to reconcile schismatic traditionalists to the church have included the introduction of the Extraordinary Rite of the Roman Liturgy. It is not clear whether this will have the effect he desired of leavening current liturgical practice with greater reverence and solemnity, or will instead just further polarize the church.

His creation of quasi-dioceses (ordinariates) for traditionalist Anglicans who wish to be in full communion with the church is another gamble whose long-term effects are not yet clear. The way this was carried out, through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith rather than the curial office for ecumenism, makes clear how dysfunctional the Roman curia has become—or at least how unresponsive to the pope's wishes.

Sadly, we are still waiting for a pope who will publicly discipline the bishops complicit in the sexual abuse of children by priests.

Benedict chose as his own papal name that of the founder of Western monasticism. That choice reflects his preoccupation with Europe's Christian roots and his concern for its re-evangelization. His successor will have to steer the church through the demographic transition of decline in Europe and North America and growth in the global South. The next pope could well be African or Latin American. The Irish bookmaker Paddy Power has already laid down odds for the various *papabili*, but the Spirit blows where it will.

**William L. Portier** is the Mary Ann Spear Chair of Catholic Theology at the University of Dayton.

experiences in and outside the church? Likely not. That is why I'm keeping in mind the counsel that St. Vincent de Paul gave to his Daughters of Charity: to act in the church with "holy cunning." And to that I will add, thanks to my late friend, that we must act with "strategic perseverance" as well. ■

**Mary Boys** is the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and author of the forthcoming *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* (Paulist Press).

## William L. Portier

On Monday, February 11, my wife called me at 7:30 in the morning. "The pope resigned," she said. "Who?" I replied.

Pope Benedict XVI surprised the whole world by announcing his resignation. As it turns out, he had been thinking about it for some time. Since the announcement, we have been reminded that, in a 2010 interview with the journalist Peter Seewald, Benedict mentioned the possibility of a papal resignation. And we've been reminded that he prayed at the tomb of Pope Celestine V, who resigned amid great turmoil in 1294. Benedict had witnessed the long decline of Pope John Paul II. By resigning, Benedict leaves to his successors an alternative to the example set by John Paul II, whose conscience did not permit him to leave the office to which he had been called by God. Benedict's conscience led him in a different direction, and his decision will have increasing significance in the future, as further medical advances increase the likelihood of a pope living beyond the time when he can fulfill his duties. Theologians who lament the lack of constitutional checks on the papacy will welcome this more recent precedent. Whatever one thinks of Benedict's papacy, his resignation is clearly an act of courage and humility—a gift of hope to the whole church. He reminded us that the papacy was about the church and not about him.

He leaves behind a mixed legacy. No pope in history—not even Leo the Great or Gregory the Great—was a better theologian in terms of breadth of knowledge and professional training, or according to the classic definition of the theologian as one who prays. Benedict's encyclicals on love and hope strike the reader with their clarity and depth. Apparently we will not have an encyclical on faith to complete the triad of the theological virtues. In his February 11 statement, the sentence in which he admits that he no longer has the strength to fulfill his office begins with an observation about the prospects for faith in a world "shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith." We are left to wonder what more he might have said about these questions.

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## Richard R. Gaillardetz

**A**s the Catholic Church awaits the election of a new pope, we might pause to consider the ecclesiological significance of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation. As many have already suggested, the resignation itself is likely to constitute Benedict's greatest legacy, at least as pope.

When Benedict became pope in 2005, it was commonly assumed that his would be a pontificate in substantial continuity with that of his predecessor. The assumption was understandable given the dominant role Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had played as prefect of the CDF throughout much of John Paul II's pontificate. Any difference between the two pontificates, it was thought, would be subtle—more a matter of style than of substance. And certainly Benedict's style and taste were different from those of his predecessor. When it came to the liturgy, for example, John Paul was far more open to inculturation, while Benedict preferred a more somber and traditional approach, one deeply influenced by his Bavarian piety. In retrospect, however, it was Benedict's vision of the papacy itself that marked his most profound departure from his predecessor.

A charismatic figure comfortable on the public stage, John Paul II took full advantage of the symbolic power of the papacy in a media age. Even though he wrote more pages of ecclesiastical text than any pope in history, for many of us his pontificate was reflected less in his papal teaching than in a series of symbolic events: his meeting with leaders of world religions to pray for peace in Assisi, his prayer with the chief rabbi at the synagogue in Rome, the joint recitation with the ecumenical patriarch of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed in Greek (excluding the *filioque!*). All of us can call to mind photos of John Paul II praying in a room with his would-be assassin, kissing the ground of a country he was visiting for the first time, wagging his finger at Ernesto Cardenal during a visit to Nicaragua, and, finally, hunched over in a tableau of pain and physical incapacity during his final days.

Pope Benedict, the introverted theologian-pope, demonstrated little of his predecessor's aptitude for the compelling image. This was more than a difference in personality; Benedict had a more circumscribed view of the papacy from the very beginning. John Paul II saw his papacy as providential, even more so after the attempted assassination: he was convinced that the Blessed Mother had averted his death. He explicitly rejected the possibility of resignation as an unconscionable repudiation of his divine calling. By contrast, long before his election Ratzinger had frankly admitted that the Holy Spirit could be said to have only a limited and indirect role in the choice of a pope. He wryly noted that there had been too many popes who clearly were *not* the choice of the Spirit.

Benedict's resignation is consistent with this more modest view of the papacy. He understands well what was too

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often forgotten over the course of the second millennium—namely, that a pope is pope only because he is bishop of the local church of Rome. Consequently, a papal resignation is, in principal, no different from any bishop's resignation or retirement from office. Benedict's resignation can be understood as a salutary reminder that the papacy is essentially an episcopal office, not a personal apotheosis.

But there is more that can be gleaned from his decision. Benedict resigned because his declining health meant that he could no longer fulfill the obligations of his office. Catholic teaching holds that all bishops—and in a preeminent way the bishop of Rome—are given the assistance of the Holy Spirit for the exercise of their office. Benedict's decision reflects a healthy theological anthropology, one according to which the assistance of the Holy Spirit is mediated in and through our human capabilities. As such, it is also inhibited by our human frailties and failings. The Holy Spirit's assistance does not simply override the diminishment of our created human capacities. Of course the applicability of this insight can be extended beyond the question of physical infirmity. The assistance of the Holy Spirit also does not magically overcome ignorance, an obstinate refusal to give proper attention to a difficult pastoral or doctrinal issue, or a failure to consult the wisdom of others.

Finally, Benedict's resignation invites a further question. Is the papacy, as currently configured, simply more than one person can handle? Even many who have been ideologically disposed to both Benedict and his predecessor have acknowledged dangerous blind spots in their administration of the church. John Paul II could not accept the obvious culpability of Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, who had been credibly accused of sexually abusing young boys and apparently fathered several children. Indeed, John Paul II harbored an uncritical enthusiasm for a wide array of new lay movements such as Opus Dei, the Neocatechumenal Way, Focolare, and Communion and Liberation. For his part, Benedict XVI made a series of blunders in public statements on Islam, condoms, clerical sexual abuse, and other topics. Eager to heal the schism with the Society of Pius X, Benedict prematurely removed the excommunications of four schismatic bishops, including one who had made outrageous anti-Semitic statements. Neither pope was known for particularly shrewd episcopal appointments, and many of those made by John Paul II were simply abysmal. Neither showed any interest in, or aptitude for, the administration or reform of the Vatican's bureaucracy.

Given the character of a global church with well over a billion members, Benedict's resignation invites us to consider whether it is time to reverse the centralization of papal authority that began in the early nineteenth century. At Vatican II, the church made a substantial effort to reverse the universalist ecclesiology of the preconciliar period and to recover an ancient understanding of the church as a *commu-*

*nio ecclesiarum*—a communion of churches. Local churches were no longer to be viewed as mere branch offices of a transnational organization; they were the church of Jesus Christ *in that place*. Bishops, it followed, were not vicars of the pope but the ordinary pastors of those churches. The council further recognized that all the bishops, as members of a college of which the bishop of Rome is both head and member, shared leadership responsibility for the universal church.

At the council, many bishops had discovered the value of meeting with brother bishops from the same region, and this sparked new interest in episcopal conferences as real, if only partial, expressions of episcopal collegiality. A number of council fathers enthusiastically supported the creation of a standing synod of bishops, of the kind common in Eastern Christianity, as a means of allowing bishops to share with the pope the exercise of universal pastoral leadership. But in a markedly uncollegial move, Pope Paul VI acted on his own authority, while the council was still in session, to create a synod of bishops that was a cheap facsimile of what the council fathers had envisioned. Instead of a standing synod exercising deliberative authority, the synod Pope Paul created was merely consultative and would meet only occasionally.

In the first decades after the council, episcopal conferences bore much fruit as an expression of collegiality. However, leading figures in the Roman Curia, including Cardinal Ratzinger, would soon challenge their status, leading eventually to the apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II, *Apostolos suos*, which dramatically restricted the conferences' authority.

Is it time to unburden the papacy by applying the principle of subsidiarity to the church? If so, then we might consider revivifying intermediate structures of authority, including those of metropolitans, new patriarchates (a possibility once championed by Ratzinger himself), and episcopal conferences, all functioning at levels between the papacy and the local diocese. Do we need to admit that the current authority granted to the curia is inherently dysfunctional and fundamentally at odds with the council's teaching on episcopal collegiality? If so, would we do better to redirect much of the authority currently residing in the curia toward a properly episcopal structure such as a standing synod? Finally, in light of Pope Benedict's honest and courageous action, we must ask ourselves whether there is something to learn from a more ancient time in the church when the pope was not so much the vicar of Christ as the vicar of Peter; not chief theologian, but court of final appeal; not monarch, but *pontifex*—literally, bridge-builder. ■

**Richard R. Gaillardetz** is the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College. His most recent book, co-authored with Catherine Clifford, is *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II* (Liturgical Press, 2012).

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Julia Young

# The Church in Latin America

## CAN FRANCIS MEET THE CHALLENGE?

A Latin-American pope! From Chile to Mexico—and among U.S. Latinos—there was a collective gasp of surprise and excitement over the news of the conclave's election of Argentina's Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis.

In Buenos Aires, ecstatic worshipers waving Argentine and Vatican flags packed the Metropolitan Cathedral. In Mexico City's main plaza, the Zócalo, cathedral bells rang. Even Venezuela's new president, Nicolás Maduro, got in on the action, happily speculating that recently deceased Hugo Chávez must have pulled strings in heaven so that Jesus would appoint a South American to the job. In the United States, Latino immigrants from Los Angeles to Wilmington, North Carolina, expressed joy and thanksgiving at the selection of a pope who shares their language, culture, and heritage.

Some pundits speculated that the enthusiasm over the selection of Bergoglio may strengthen the political position of the Latin-American church. In the *New York Times*, novelist Martín Caparrós proposed that an Argentine pope would raise the power of conservative groups in that country to "uncharted heights." Other commentators focused on the potential for Pope Francis to revitalize and reenergize the Latin-American faithful.

In order to assess the possible impact of the new pope on Latin-American Catholicism, however, it is necessary to understand several highly complex and deeply entrenched challenges. Although Latin America remains predominantly Catholic, its various national societies are changing in ways that will affect both institutional Catholicism and the life of the Catholic masses.

The first of these challenges is demographic. Today, Latin America and the Caribbean are home to about 40 percent of the world's Catholics. Across the region, however, Catholics have been leaving the faith in droves. Most of those who have left converted to various strains of evangelical Protestantism, but many are also simply becoming secularized. According to the Pew Research Center, the share of the region's population that is Catholic has decreased from about 90 percent at the beginning of the twentieth century to 72 percent in 2010.

The most striking fact about this attrition is how recently and rapidly it has occurred. According to scholar Virginia Garrard-Burnett, the Catholic population in Brazil—Latin America's most populous country—has declined by 20 percent over the past thirteen years. In Guatemala over the past several decades, almost one-third of the country's Catholics have left the church. Sociologist Roberto Blancarte estimates

that the Catholic population in Mexico has declined by 4 million (from 89 to 82 percent) since 2000.

The picture is similar among Latinos in the United States, who today make up about one-third of U.S. Catholics. A January 2013 Gallup poll determined that the percentage of Latino Catholics is decreasing relative to Latino Protestants in the United States, and that religious enthusiasm is significantly higher among Protestants than among Catholics. Even more notable are the changes within the younger generation of Latinos: the same poll found young Latino Catholics (between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine) are much less likely to identify as "very religious," while 24 percent did not consider themselves religious at all.

At the same time that Catholics are leaving the faith, the institutional Catholic Church in Latin America has faced a second, more enduring challenge: a long decline in its historical position of privilege, power, and political relevance—and a concurrent decline in its public image.

Ever since the region's nations gained independence from Spain, governments have struggled with the Catholic hierarchy over the role of the church relative to the state. Throughout the nineteenth century, liberal politicians and intellectuals—emboldened by Enlightenment ideas about the separation of church and state—sought to restrict the powers, property, and privileges that the clergy had held since the colonial period. Conservatives, by contrast, tried to preserve a central role for the church in the public sphere, especially in education. As a result, the institutional church tended to support conservative governments in the nineteenth century, even though the Catholic masses—and often, the lower-level Catholic clergy—were more ideologically diverse.

This alliance between the hierarchy and conservative governments was complicated somewhat during the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, the church seemed poised to head to the left: in the wake of the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum novarum*, the church had entered a period of heightened concern for the welfare of the working classes, and increased its involvement in and support for social action. As ideological conflicts in Latin America became increasingly polarized between conservative military dictatorships and leftist and populist regimes, however, new political divisions arose.

As historian John Schwaller describes (see "A Transplanted Faith," December 21, 2012), by the mid-twentieth century the church was divided between a highly conservative political and cultural right wing opposed to social change; a radical left (primarily among the lower clergy) that sympathized with revolutionary armed struggles; and a large and moderate center that sought to work within existing





*Celebrating the election of Pope Francis outside the Metropolitan Cathedral in Buenos Aires March 13*

political structures to bring about social justice, economic equality, and human rights. Thus, the church's response to political developments in twentieth-century Latin America depended upon the relative strength of each wing within any a particular country.

In the case of Argentina, the conservative hierarchy remained largely silent during the country's "dirty war" (1976–83), in which the military government was brutally repressive toward people accused of being leftists. (Hence the barrage of questions and accusations about Bergoglio's actions and involvement with the government during that period.)

In other countries, however, the Catholic Church actually stood up to right-wing dictators. In the Dominican Republic, a new generation of liberal bishops broke with dictator Rafael Trujillo in the early 1960s; in Brazil at the same time, the progressive bishops took a public stand against the military dictatorship and defended victims of torture and repression. In Central America during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, members of the hierarchy were persecuted and killed for expressing sympathy for the poor and for actively and publicly opposing military governments. Most famously,

numerous prominent clergy supported Catholic liberation theology, which emphasized the need to redress economic and social inequality and give special attention to the poor (the Vatican has strongly critiqued these teachings, but both John Paul II and Benedict XVI spoke in Latin America about the problem of economic inequality).

These human-rights accomplishments should have helped burnish the image of the Latin-American church. Yet, in recent years, the church has struggled to respond to a new wave of leftist regimes, often taking a critical stance toward populist leaders such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales. For their part, these politicians have reminded their supporters of the historical association between the Catholic Church and reactionaries, wealthy elites, and the military. Thanks in part to those ties (and thanks also to a growing scandal over the sexual abuse of minors by priests in Latin America), the hierarchy in Latin America today has something of an image problem.

There is a third and final challenge that Pope Francis will confront in Latin America, and this may be the most daunting of all: the newest wave of social and cultural change that is occurring across the region, particularly in urban areas.

Since the 1990s, Latin Americans have become more socially liberal on issues such as same-sex marriage, contraception, and abortion. Argentina legalized same-sex marriage in 2010, and Uruguay in 2013. Mexico City, which hosts an enormous gay-pride parade every year, legalized same-sex marriage in 2010 (though it is not legal nationwide).

Although abortion is still widely restricted across the region (and is completely banned in five countries), Mexico City legalized first-trimester abortion in 2007, and Uruguay voted to legalize it in 2012. Finally, the church's position on contraception is widely ignored in most countries, some of which have initiated state-sponsored programs that distribute contraceptives. Bergoglio was an outspoken opponent of such initiatives. Some new sociological and anthropological studies, such as one by anthropologist Lara Braff, demonstrate that women are increasingly unlikely to take Catholic doctrine into account when deciding how many children to have.

While Latin-American Catholics are still more socially conservative than those in the United States and Europe, there's still an important gap between popular religiosity and doctrinal adherence. Popular Catholicism across the region is a syncretic mix of precolonial beliefs, African-influenced religious practices, rural and popular folkways (such as shamanism and *curanderismo*), and personal and regional devotion to individual saints. To the persistent frustration of the Catholic hierarchy from colonial times to the present, Latin-American Catholics have had historically low rates of sacramental participation, especially among the poor. Relatively few nonelite couples, for instance, chose to participate in the sacrament of marriage. This practice goes back to the colonial period. Historically, Latin Americans have had markedly lower levels of Mass attendance than those in the United States.

The three challenges that Pope Francis must confront in Latin America—attrition, a growing image problem, and sociocultural change—are deep and historical, but they may not be intractable. After all, the Latin-American church is still enormous, with an active and dynamic laity who have deep devotion and a strong sense of cultural Catholicism.

Perhaps Francis, who has named himself after a saint well known for his devotion to the poor, will turn the church's attention squarely back to issues of social justice and inequality. This would certainly be welcomed by Latin-American Catholics, as well as by Latinos in the United States. Patriotic excitement and enthusiasm over his appointment may even help to stem the tide of converts to evangelical Protestantism. And although it is hard to imagine that Latin Americans will become more socially conservative, especially on questions of sexual morality, perhaps this will not be Francis's principal focus in the region. However he proceeds, the new pope will have his work cut out for him. ■

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Tom Quigley

## Complicit?

### BERGOGLIO & THE DIRTY WAR

Virtually everyone in Latin America (and North America as well) had reason to be thrilled with the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ, cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires, to the papacy. Still, there were some who have raised questions based on their views of what Bergoglio, as Jesuit provincial, did or did not do during Argentina's *guerra sucia*. The main sources for Bergoglio's critics are articles published in the Buenos Aires paper *Página 12* by veteran journalist Horacio Verbitsky concerning the abduction of two Jesuit activists, Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jalics.

The era of the "dirty war" extended from the time of the military coup of 1976 to the junta's end in 1983. The first years were the worst, and 1976 is remembered as an *annus horribilis*, beginning with the Videla military coup on March 24. In that one year, Monica Mignone, daughter of famed human-rights lawyer Emilio Mignone, was abducted from her family's home on May 14 and never seen again. Three Pallottine priests and two seminarians were murdered in the rectory of the San Patricio parish on Sunday, July 4. Bishop Enrique Angelini of La Rioja was killed when his automobile was forced off the road on August 4. That same month American La Salette missionary Fr. James Weeks was arrested and tortured but released through the intervention of the U.S. ambassador. The following month, Irish national Fr. Patrick Rice of the Little Brothers of the Gospel was similarly arrested, tortured, and released through his government's intercession.

During that period, according to Emilio Mignone's *Witness to the Truth: The Complicity of Church and Dictatorship in Argentina*, some sixteen priests were murdered or disappeared, nine of them in 1976 alone. And on May 23, the two Jesuits, Jalics and Yorio, residents of the Bajo Flores shantytown, were arrested. Five months later, they showed up, drugged and beaten, in a swamp, apparently deposited there from a helicopter.

Convinced that their superior, Fr. Bergoglio, had not only not gone to bat for them but may even have facilitated their arrest, Yorio left the Jesuits and incardinated in Argentina's diocese of Viedma. He has since died. Jalics, a Hungarian, left Argentina to join his fellow Jesuits in Germany. In 2000 he and Bergoglio (by then a cardinal) met, celebrated Mass together, and proclaimed their reconciliation. And in March, Jalics released a statement explaining that it is "wrong to assert that our capture took place at the initiative of Fr. Bergoglio."

It is the brother and sister of the late Fr. Yorio who seem determined to revisit the question of Bergoglio's alleged complicity in the kidnappings, with Verbitsky as chronicler.

# A New Center of Gravity

## First Jesuit, Theological Continuity

E. J. Dionne Jr.  
March 13, 2013



In winning election as Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio defied the papal pundits, even though they should have seen him coming. His rise marks the decisive shift within Roman Catholicism toward Latin America and the developing world. In theological terms, he represents continuity, yet he is the first non-European pope in more than 1,000 years, and also the first Jesuit.

He is a doctrinal conservative who battled gay marriage in Argentina and fellow Jesuits who were more liberal. But he also rebuked priests who denied baptism to children born out of wedlock and has spoken strongly

for social justice. He is the first pope to take the name of the saint known for his devotion to humility and to the poor. He is likely to weigh in often on behalf of the world's poorest regions.

"We live in the most unequal part of the world, which has grown the most yet reduced misery the least," Bergoglio told Latin American bishops in 2007. "The unjust distribution of goods persists, creating a situation of social sin that cries out to Heaven and limits the possibilities of a fuller life for so many of our brothers."

That his election was a surprise is, in itself, surprising. It was widely reported that he came in second to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger -- Pope Benedict XVI -- in the 2005 conclave. John Allen, the well-sourced Rome correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, cited a prelate who said that Bergoglio had given Ratzinger "something of a horse race."

Bergoglio's support stayed intact in the ensuing eight years, and one church official said that he received roughly 30 votes on the first ballot on Tuesday, a strong showing in the 115-member conclave that placed him in a commanding position to win early after only five rounds of voting.

In the run-up to the conclave, however, he was pushed down the list of probable victors, partly because of his age -- he is 76 -- and partly because some cardinals wondered whether he had the toughness to take on a Vatican bureaucracy in desperate need for reform. This will now be tested.

More liberal American Catholics seeking change in the church's stance on the role of women and sexuality cannot expect much movement from Pope Francis. He is a traditionalist, although the



same could be said of all other potential winners. Francis was an early critic of liberation theology, which united Catholics and movements on the political left in Latin America.

Yet an American bishop noted that the choice of Francis would not be greeted as a clear victory by conservatives, either. On liturgical issues, he has opposed those who seek to roll back changes instituted by the Second Vatican Council.

This bishop also noted that in his first speech as pope to the crowd in St. Peter's Square, Francis laid heavy stress on his role as the "Bishop of Rome," rather than emphasizing his standing as the leader of the church. This could, the American bishop said, be a signal that Bergoglio is sympathetic to forces in the church unhappy with the concentration of power in the papacy who have called for a decentralization of authority away from the Vatican.

The conclave also pointedly stepped away from cardinals with close ties to the Curia, as the Vatican bureaucracy is known, and also from the early Italian favorite, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan.

In the end, it is Pope Francis' standing as a Latin American and as an advocate of the poor that may well define him.

His connection to Argentina is not without ambiguity. He has come under criticism for not speaking up strongly against the brutal Argentine junta that ruled the country from 1976 to 1983. Yet he is unlike some past leaders in the Latin Church who allied themselves with privilege.

He gave up the archbishop's mansion in favor of a small apartment, and used public transit. He's worked in his nation's slums and asked his priests to do the same. He has outlined the shortcomings of unregulated capitalism, and of the International Monetary Fund.

For many Catholics, a great deal of hope rests on the new pontiff's choice of the name Francis, the saint who disdained formal authority, devoted himself to a simple life, cared passionately about the marginalized, and saw actions as counting far more than proclamations.

It is said that St. Francis once declared, "Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words." For a pope, it's a challenging approach.

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*Paul Moses*

## Why 'Francis'?

WHAT THE POPE'S NAME SIGNALS

**O**f the many virtues associated with St. Francis of Assisi, humility was the first to occur to me as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio stood before the multitude for the first time as Pope Francis. Popes are expected to be larger-than-life figures, but the new pope had chosen the name of a man who always diminished himself. That's one reason that, nearly eight hundred years after his death, the saint still looms so large as a model of the Christian faith.

Perhaps the reason no pope had decided sooner to take the name of the great saint from Assisi is that he humbly avoided all church honors and instructed his friars to do the same. It's one of the points Francis emphasized in his dying days in a document called his Testament. "I strictly forbid the friars, wherever they may be, to petition the Roman Curia, either personally or through an intermediary," he wrote, insisting that his order not become entangled in the messy politics of the church. In the same document, St. Francis also described the turning point in his life, which came when he worked up the courage to embrace and kiss a leper, completing his conversion from spoiled rich kid to herald of penance and peace. "What had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of body and soul," he wrote.

Pope Francis's choice of title and his actions in his first days as pope indicate that he places humility and compassion for the marginalized at the heart of his ministry—"servant leadership," in today's church parlance. Francis of Assisi "gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man who wanted a poor church," the pope told an audience of journalists. "How I would love a church that is poor and for the poor."

No one could administer the church in the way St. Francis tried to lead his movement, forbidding friars to touch money and barring any ownership of property, even by the order. But the choice of Francis's name sets a tone for reform of the church, based on the famous story of the cross of San Damiano and the call from Jesus to "repair my church." Pope Benedict XVI picked up on this theme in an audience on January 27, 2010. "At that time the church had a superficial faith which did not shape or transform life, a scarcely zealous clergy, and a chilling of love," he said. "It was an interior destruction of the church."

The contrast between Franciscan holiness and the decadence of the papal court was noted as early as 1216 by Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre and a future cardinal. Arriving in the papal court just after Pope Innocent III died, he wrote a letter expressing disgust that thieves had stripped away the expensive vestments the pope was to be buried in and left his corpse unclothed. The curia was awash in worldly intrigues, the bishop complained, adding that hardly anyone



*Pope Francis after celebrating Mass in Vatican City on March 17*

there was concerned with spiritual matters. In contrast, he found hope in the "Lesser Brothers" and "Lesser Sisters," whom he described as "secular people of both sexes" who "left all things for Christ," evangelized vigorously, and lived in the way of the primitive church.

There is ample evidence that St. Francis hoped his example of poverty, penance, and peacemaking would help purify a church that suffered from greed, pride, and a penchant for warfare. He avoided speaking out against church authorities or miscreant clergymen, and instead made his point through example: the extremes of his poverty and penance, his shocking acts of compassion for all creatures, his constant efforts at peacemaking. Pope Francis also seems to be speaking to church leaders through example—taking the bus instead of a Mercedes, for starters.

It should be said that St. Francis's ministry was carried out within a framework of obedience to church authorities, a point he himself stressed. Benedict made the same point. He said it was St. Francis, not the very powerful Pope Innocent, who was called by God to save the church. "On the other hand, however, it is important to note that St. Francis does not renew the church without or in opposition to the pope, but only in communion with him," he said. "The two realities go together." I suspect that Pope Francis would agree. ■

**Paul Moses** is the author of *The Saint and the Sultan: the Crusades, Islam, and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace (Doubleday)*.

# Saintly Politics

## Francis & His Formula for Harmony

E. J. Dionne Jr.  
July 5, 2013



Pope Francis is proving himself to be a genuinely holy man, a brilliant politician, and a leader who knows that reform requires a keen understanding of how creating a better future demands sophisticated invocations of the past.

Nothing demonstrated all three traits better than Francis' announcement that he would make both [Pope John Paul II](#) and [Pope John XXIII](#) saints. The obvious political analysis here is correct: On the whole, conservative

Catholics will cheer swift sainthood for John Paul while progressive Catholics will welcome the news that an overly long process of elevating John to the same status had reached its culmination. One for one side, one for the other -- it's a good formula for harmony, something Catholicism needs right now.

But much more is going on here. Rapid sainthood for John Paul was inevitable, partly because of widespread devotion to him around the church and not simply in its conservative wing. A campaign to sanctify him took off from the moment of his death. Whatever criticisms might be directed his way -- on his sluggishness in facing up to the clerical abuse scandal, for example -- there should be no denying his standing as a world-historical figure.

His vital role in the collapse of Soviet communism will always be recognized as the product of faith married to shrewd statesmanship. And, speaking personally, getting to cover John Paul's 1986 visit [to a synagogue in Rome](#) where he robustly and decisively condemned anti-Semitism will always endure as one of the most moving experiences of my journalistic life.

But that story is a perfect example of why it was essential to sanctify Popes John and John Paul at the same time. Without Pope John, there would not have been the John Paul we came to admire.

I should acknowledge my interest here since [I argued two years ago](#) for just this result. Elevating both popes was the only way to make clear that the sweeping reforms of the Second Vatican Council, called by Pope John, opened the way for John Paul's greatest achievements. These were, in large part, liberal triumphs involving a commitment to human rights, religious liberty and democracy as well as a stern opposition to religious prejudice and an emphasis on social justice and workers' rights.

Yet except among the ranks of scholars and older progressive Catholics, Vatican II is so often a dim memory. Moreover, there are conservative voices in the church that have sought to play



down just how important the council was in opening Catholicism to the modern world. Pope John embraced modernity and the lessons it had to teach Catholics even as he was critical of modernity's failings.

By lifting up John, Pope Francis is telling Catholics to embrace this legacy again -- beginning by paying attention to it. In so doing, he will reinforce comparisons already being made between himself and Pope John.

My Georgetown University colleague [John Borelli](#) noted recently in *The Tablet*, the British Catholic magazine, that Francis, like Pope John, has placed a heavy emphasis on social justice, has a deep and long-standing commitment to dialogue with other faiths, and has a similar unpretentious personal style. The *National Catholic Reporter* has repeatedly [linked the two popes](#) and noted a few months ago that Francis expressed his affinity with the pope of Vatican II by saying: "I see him with the eyes of my heart."

What might have looked like wishful thinking on the part of progressive Catholics for a re-engagement with Pope John's approach now seems much more like a clear-eyed view of reality.

There will be questions in both cases about Pope Francis' flexibility with the church's requirement that two miracles be attributed to saints. But as retired Newsweek writer Ken Woodward noted in his definitive 1990 book *Making Saints*, the church's process of honoring holy people has always been, shall we say, complex, and not without considerations that might be seen as political. Saints are made, after all, for the enlightenment of the living, and for those who come later.

Woodward followed the sociologist Robert Bellah in noting that telling the stories of saints creates "communities of memory that tie us to the past" and "also turn us toward the future as communities of hope."

By reminding Catholics of which aspects of the past he wants to celebrate, Francis has pointed the way for a more open, less divided church that examines the present and looks to the future with hope, not fear.

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*Peter Steinfels*

## Shock Therapy

**COULD THE NEXT POPE LEARN FROM BENEDICT?**

**B**y resigning, Pope Benedict served the church well. He has spared it another prolonged period of mounting disarray. He has “humanized” the papacy, as Joseph Komonchak and others have pointed out. He has jolted the church into allowing that something generally considered unthinkable for centuries is really not beyond doing after all. And he has set the stage for his successor to do likewise.

That is important. The Catholic Church needs shock therapy. True, among the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics, millions of saints are leading lives of prayer and charity so ardent, brave, sacrificial, creative, and enduring that they bring tears to normal eyes. They are the best of us—and then there are the rest of us. Except in parts of Africa, the much-heralded growth of Catholicism is simply in line with the growth in population—or not even that. Latin American Catholics are increasingly turning to Pentecostalism or drifting away from religious practice and affiliation altogether, although not yet to the extent occurring in Europe and North America. It would be comforting to think that what might be lost in numbers is being gained in depth, but as Catholic identity,

floundering in a sea of alternative visions, weakens from generation to generation, that seems unlikely.

The church needs shock treatment, and until the mini-shock of his resignation, Benedict, to the relief of many, did not seem like the man to administer it. Ratzinger, yes; Benedict, no. What shocks have come during his papacy were usually by blunder rather than intention. Evaluations of his tenure have balanced the pros and cons of his deeds according to the lights of the balancer. What is still untallied, except for his failure to unmistakably demand accountability in regard to clerical sexual abuse, is what has remained undone. Underlying conditions like the limitations, in numbers, quality, and age, of the clergy or the massively eroding credibility of church teachings on sexuality are no better than when he took office in 2005. Much of the hierarchy deludes itself with slogans in search of substance like “The New Evangelization,” or rationalizes inaction with the familiar alibi, “The church works in centuries.” In fact, history teaches that the church often suffers for centuries from its failure to act during critical passages.

Will Benedict’s successor do any better? Back in 2005, observing the long painful and paralyzing decline of John Paul II, some of us felt that the next pope should *immediately* establish a procedure for a pope to conclude his service while still alive. Establishing such a rule for the surrender of papal power at the very outset of a papacy would forestall suspicions of behind-the-scenes manipulation in the case

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of an ad hoc resignation like Benedict's. (It is remarkable that so few such speculations have arisen, at least to date, in Benedict's case.)

This time the white smoke will presumably greet us almost on the brink of Holy Week, so first things first. The new pope should focus his own and the world's attention on the Paschal Mystery. From entry into Jerusalem through Last Supper, passion, death, and Resurrection, from palms to holy oils, consecrated bread and wine, shrouded statues, venerated cross, new fire, and baptismal water, let the new pontiff simply be vested in the sacred rites.

Between Easter and Pentecost he can deliver the necessary shock therapy. To begin, Pope Novus, as we might call him, should declare that his predecessor's wisdom in resigning reveals a permanent insight into the realities of a modern papacy. Henceforth, popes will either serve a term of twelve years or resign at the age of eighty-two, the choice depending on each pope's reading of the church's needs at the moment. Papal interventions to determine the church's choice of a successor, something Benedict has adjured but another pope might not, will be formally prohibited.

Because the beginning of a papacy is the opportune time to deal with the delicate question of such transitions, Pope Novus should move to make future conclaves more representative. He might create a new position of "cardinal electors"; their only function would be to vote in a conclave. Cardinal electors would constitute one third of those voting. They would include the heads of the ten largest religious orders. The rest would be chosen biannually—and their names kept *in petto*—by the presidents of the bishops conferences of each continent. The number of cardinal electors would be proportionate to each continent's Catholic population. At least half of them would be women. Heads of Vatican offices, although eminently eligible for election to the papacy, would not participate in the conclave unless they had become cardinals while serving as ordinaries.

The specifics are arguable, but the general idea is clear: continuity but not cloning.

Reforming the tenure and election of popes would signal that the church is open to change, even though it only affects the future. That needs to be complemented with a dramatic gesture of immediate consequence. One idea would be a papal establishment of a massive Catholic Pietà Fund to be devoted to the health, education, and safety of women around the world. The goal would be to raise \$1.2 billion, or a dollar for each of the world's Catholics. While pledging to maintain the church's role as a steward of artistic heritage, Pope Novus might initiate this fund by offering to sell one or several of the Vatican's signature artworks (the Pietà itself?). Perhaps Catholics or others could outbid buyers to keep these objects in Rome. In any case, contributions to the Pietà Fund would become a feature of papal journeys and international events like World Youth Day. Would this diminish Peter's Pence? On the contrary, it would probably swell it. And by plac-





ing administration of the fund in the hands of Catholic women, Pope Novus would also signal openness to reexamining the role of women in the church. Had John Paul II taken a dramatic initiative like this early in his papacy, the church's voice on several major issues would have won a much greater hearing.

Two other initiatives could be reserved for Pentecost, May 19. On that day, the pope would invite bishops, theologians, and knowledgeable laity to submit their thoughts on two topics. One would be very practical: how to make the world synods of bishops an effective institution. The other would be very fundamental: *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* on the church's understanding of sexuality.

Pope Novus would pledge to act within several years to reform the synods. He would be wise to warn that the discussion of sexuality would take time and no one should expect hasty conclusions about specific norms.

Is all this fantasizing? Obviously. Is it fantastic? These initiatives are moderately disruptive insofar as they admit of change in the church, hardly a heretical notion. They are only slightly more controversial in encouraging broader participation in the shaping of that change. They are otherwise open-ended—and about as unthinkable as a pope resigning.

Pope Novus, whoever he turns out to be, will preach many words between his election and Pentecost. They will evoke familiar images and stir familiar sentiments. But unless they are accompanied by a few vivid, imaginative, and substantial initiatives, they will wash over the listening world and the listening church, with at most an arresting phrase or two lodged in our hearts. We will stumble on. The church does not live by popes alone. The opportunity to build on Pope Benedict's startling gift will have been squandered. ■

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