

Primus inter pares? – the papal abdication will change more than the man at the top.

The unexpected announcement by Pope Benedict XVI that he is to retire with almost immediate effect has sent the world of the press into near hysteria. The Roman Catholic Church's response seems more measured, if that is it is possible to gain an insight into the collective mind of over a billion Christians.

No other pope has resigned for, we are told, over six hundred years and Benedict's action therefore lacks contemporary counterpart. However, the resignation may set a radical precedent for the next stage in the existence and governance of the largest of the Christian denominations. To understand the potential consequences it is important to acknowledge that what has taken place is really an abdication for at least since the high Middle Ages the Latin patriarchy has functioned as an elected monarchy.

Since then the death of office holders of the Chair of Peter was the only accepted means of relinquishment. We need look no further than Benedict's predecessor for an example. John Paul II remained pope (with a certain Cardinal Ratzinger as his closest advisor) into his sad dotage with absolutely no perceived intention of leaving the office.

In contrast Benedict has cited his own failing health in his eighty-sixth year saying, "my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry."¹

Since a flirtation with the liberal views of Vatican Two in his early years we are told that the young Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, witnessing the effect of the student riots of the sixties became increasingly conservative, even reactionary in his views. The Vatican and parts of the wider Roman Catholic Church responded during his pontificate with a partial restoration of the Tridentine Latin Mass, a growing politicisation of Church views over matters such as abortion, contraception and same-sex

¹ See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/feb/11/pope-benedict-resignation-statement-in-full> (Accessed February 2013)

marriage. This was particularly evident in the recent American Presidential election.

Other 'ecumenical' gestures included the setting up of an ordinariate for disaffected Anglicans once described in the British press as 'desperate bishops [Anglican flying variety who have] invited Rome to park tanks on Archbishop's lawn'.²

In these actions or reactions there has been something of a whiff of desperation as Western Roman Catholic numbers and vocations have plummeted and the effects of what became a worldwide paedophile scandal have engulfed the Church. There has been a sense that the papacy has been out of touch, perplexed and uncertain.

Now, Benedict has acted decisively in a way that will probably be the hallmark of his seven-year tenure. He has bequeathed a (probably unintentional) legacy of change in how leadership of the Roman Catholic Church is understood, one that goes far beyond a simple alteration of incumbent. A precedent has been set for abdication on the understandable grounds of poor health that will ensure that future popes are replaceable with 'best by' dates. Future changes of leader will be therefore need to be described correctly as 'retirements' or 'resignations' because the monarchical nature of the papacy will no longer exist.

This is not to suggest an imminent outbreak of conciliarism along the lines of the medieval reform movement that suggested supreme authority in the Church lay in ecumenical councils over and above the pope himself.³ It will however mark a profound, if subtly expressed, alteration in the way in which the papacy is viewed. This will almost certainly be for the better both in the Roman Catholic Church and the wider Christian community.

The first Church of England Archbishop of Canterbury to resign was Randall Davidson in 1928. Interestingly, his response to the papal bull *Apostolicae Curae* which declared in 1896 Anglican orders to be 'absolutely null and utterly void' was to stress the

² See: <http://journalisted.com/article/1499z> (Accessed February 2013)

³ Conciliarism emerged in the fifteenth century in response to the Great Schism that brought rival popes to Avignon and Rome. Condemned by the Fifth Lateran Council of 1512-17. It was not finally crushed until the doctrine of Papal Infallibility promulgated at the First Vatican Council of 1870.

strength and depth of Protestantism in the English Church and he regarded Rome's views of Anglican orders as secondary to other more important differences. In his days as Cardinal Ratzinger the now outgoing pope had listed *Apostolicae Curae* as a teaching to which Roman Catholics must give 'firm and definitive assent'.⁴

Now, given Benedict's 'abdication' this editorial dares to suggest that such language and formulations will be harder for Roman Catholic leadership to pronounce in future.

Nicholas Henderson
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⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal commentary on the concluding formula of the *Professio Fidei*
See: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1998_professio-fidei_en.html (Accessed February 2013)