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Editorial: Honor Benedict's honesty with bolder initiatives

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Benedict Resigns
Editorial

Pope Benedict XVI is leaving us, a weary, ailing and spent man. More than 60 years a priest, he gave himself entirely to the church. Elected pope almost eight years ago, he wanted to re-evangelize Europe, only to watch its churches' pews empty. With church laws and apologies, he tried mightily to right a sex scandal, but he failed to bring to account the enablers of the abusers. Benedict preached and taught keenly as a theologian, but his words as a pastor were muffled.

In the end, the weight of office became too much for him, at age 85, to carry.

Was it the person or the structure that finally failed us?

It seems he will be remembered most in history for the way he left the papacy, the first pope to resign in modern times. His final legacy, then, has yet to be written. It will certainly be shaped in part by his surprisingly beautiful and pastoral encyclicals and his book-length reflections on Jesus. And it will depend, as well, on what follows. This is a critical time for the church.

In the end Benedict's departure begs a central question that will not go away no matter who is chosen pope in the weeks to come. Can any person of any age effectively manage our global church as it continues to be mired in an outdated monarchal governing system? The answer by virtually anyone who looks honestly from the outside in is a resounding "No!"

With good reason, most of the world's monarchies have long faded into history. The few that remain have been transformed into ceremonial shells or mere symbols of authority. Monarchies clearly were incompatible with emerging democratic instincts, new understandings of human and civil rights, and with a more equitable sharing of information.

Our church is "200 years out of date" and in need of a "radical transformation," Italian Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini said in an interview two weeks before his death last August. "The church is tired," he said. "Our culture has grown old, our churches are big and empty and the church bureaucracy rises up, our religious rites and the vestments we wear are pompous."

The statement was remarkable not because it was new but because it came from a cardinal. The people of God, including priests, women religious and laity, have been saying as much for decades. Benedict's resignation now frees and amplifies these voices.

Benedict's example in departing may be the lesson itself, instructing us that bold reform is necessary for the future health of the church, for the effectiveness of our collective ability to preach the Gospels to the world.

There is nothing preordained about our church's governing model. We are in desperate need of fresh ideas. The ordination of women requires further theological discussions. Nothing, however, stops Benedict or his successor from changing the law, doubling the size of the College of Cardinals and making the new additions all women. Our prelates can no longer live in denial of the facts that women are educated and that the laity is the church.

Our church's leadership, it is clear, has failed for decades to take responsibility for the greatest scandal to rock our church in modern times -- the sexual abuse of children and its equally pervasive episcopal cover-up. To this day we continue to be mired in this tragedy, a realization undoubtedly playing into Benedict's decision to resign.

It is clear, too, that the attempt to march backward in time, reversing the more collegial instincts of the Second Vatican Council, is not an answer. It has merely delayed the day when we're forced to look honestly, from pew to papal palace, at what we've become.

The primary task of the new pope is simply this: to preach the Gospels with humility, modeling them to the world. He will have to separate the essentials from the nonessentials. He will be required to ask the questions that lead to authentic authority, the kind that authors the best in others.

In a real sense, Benedict did not allow himself the luxury of death, with its attendant weeks of lavish praise, fond remembrances and the excessive pageantry that gilds the papacy. He chose instead to leave on very simple, human terms. His words carry an honest portrayal of these uneasy times. He spoke of sins and divisions in the church, the face of which is, in his words, "at times disfigured."

Not too long ago, using the term "crisis" in relation to the church was dismissed as overstatement. Today, the word falls easily from the lips even of those in leadership roles. The church is in crisis. Benedict's honesty in recognizing that reality should be honored with even bolder initiatives. The people of God are waiting.

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