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Has Benedict XVI reshaped his legacy?

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Legacies are partly in the eye of the beholder, and that's certainly true of popes. Academics may remember Benedict XVI as the most impressive intellectual to occupy the Throne of Peter in centuries, while victims of sex abuse may recall him as a symbol of the church's unfinished business.

Whether either perception is fair is, for now, beside the point. Both ways of seeing Benedict, and many more, are in the air.

At first blush, however, it would seem that the way in which Benedict is stepping off the stage may be reframing his legacy ? not in the sense of resolving debates over his papacy, but perhaps providing a more generous optic for assessing the pope.

When he first announced his resignation on Feb. 11, the reaction was surprisingly positive across the usual divides.

Some longtime critics were a bit catty about it; the left-of-center German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung*, for instance, ran the headline "Thank God!"

In the main, however, commentators applauded Benedict for humanizing the papacy a bit, with some styling his resignation a collegial act that made the pope more akin to other bishops. Across the spectrum, observers also have praised the courage, humility and love for the church Benedict seems to have expressed.

Others see Benedict's decision as a refreshing change of pace. We're accustomed to seeing politicians desperately clinging to power, athletes who don't know when to hang it up, and celebrities lusting for one more turn in the spotlight. To see someone at the pinnacle of their profession, so to speak, willing to go gently into that good night has struck many people as comparatively noble.

Benedict probably enhanced these perceptions at yesterday's General Audience, delivering the most personal and emotionally candid speech [1] of his papacy, if not his entire life.

I bumped into Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster yesterday, who said he had just been on the BBC and described Benedict's remarks as "the most un-papal speech you'll ever hear," referring to its remarkably personal tone.

Benedict referred openly to the "great weight" of the office, to the "moments that weren't easy" he experienced, and the letters from simple people around the world he's received.

He also struck a note of humility: "Loving the church also means having the courage to make tough choices, suffering, having always before you the good of the church and not yourself," he said.

It would be naïve not to think there was some political subtext. In part, Benedict was likely trying to lay to rest an avalanche of conspiracy theories about the "real" reason he's quitting. Even so, his remarks had the whiff of a man honestly opening his mind and heart.

While there are few polls directly gaging reaction to Benedict's resignation, it's striking that a Pew Forum survey taken two days after the news broke found that 74 percent of American Catholics have a favorable impression of him, substantially higher than the 51 percent who want the next pope to maintain the traditional positions identified with his papacy. That gap may hint that the resignation has created space for people to distinguish between the man and the pontificate.

To be sure, substantive debate over Benedict's legacy isn't going away. This afternoon in Rome, the Survivor's Network of Those Abused by Priests is scheduled to hold a press conference to announce a request for the United Nations to impose sanctions on the Vatican and its officials for allegedly violating the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. The same group, in tandem with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Law, earlier asked the International Criminal Court to indict Benedict XVI.

Nevertheless, it's hard not to suspect that with the passage of time, people will look back on Benedict's papacy not just for its policy decisions and controversies, but also for the seemingly humble and self-effacing way it ended.

That, of course, assumes that Benedict keeps his pledge to remain "hidden from the world." If the perception is that he's continuing to exercise influence from behind the scenes, all bets are off.

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