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One year ago, Pope Benedict XVI resigned. What a difference a year makes

Dennis Coday | Feb. 11, 2014
Benedict Resigns
Perspective

Cast your mind back to February 2013. Remember what was happening and how people felt. How you felt. The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI on Feb. 11, 2013, caught the world by surprise, but after the initial shock wore off, it didn't seem all that surprising.

Remember what we, in the U.S. Catholic church, had been through: an "apostolic visitation" of congregations of American women religious; a doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the appointment of overlords to help them "reform." Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois had been excommunicated because he supported women's ordination. Long established and trusted scholars, Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, had been censured. The chairman of the U.S. bishops' National Review Board for child protection had warned the bishops that complacency threatened the continuing implementation of their policies and guidelines meant to keep children safe. The U.S. bishops seemed to be doing their best to scuttle health care reform over -- of all things -- artificial contraception; their campaign for religious freedom seemed petty and partisan. A clunky, ideologically driven translation of the Mass prayers had been thrust upon us.

I remember people feeling dejected and drifting away from the church. Not storming out, just drifting away.

Writing last year about the state of the church (and by "the church" I mean we, the people in the pews who form the body of Christ), Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister used the word "weary." She wrote that "weariness is far worse than anger. Far more stultifying than mere indifference. Weariness comes from a soul whose hope has been disappointed one time too many. To be weary is not a condition of the body -- that's tiredness. No, weariness is a condition of the heart that has lost the energy to care anymore."

I remember reading Chittister's column and nodding in agreement. She had captured as a bug in amber the zeitgeist of early 2013.

Benedict himself reflected this weariness in his last public appearances as pope. He gave a surprisingly intimate speech at his last general audience, saying the papacy had been a "great weight" on his shoulders.

"I felt like St. Peter and the apostles in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. The Lord has given us many days of sunshine and a light breeze, the days when the fishing is plentiful. But there were also times when the water was rough ... and the Lord seemed to be sleeping."

I was in Vatican City the day Benedict began his retirement with a helicopter ride to Castel Gandalfo. It was a Thursday evening about 5 p.m. Dusk was just settling in; a somber orange cast fell across the Roman sky. I am not one to seek portents in nature, but I must say that the atmosphere felt melancholy.

About a week later, I met Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn at a Mass he celebrated in the Basilica of St. Bartholomew, a Roman parish that is a shrine to 20th-century martyrs, such as El Salvador Archbishop Oscar Romero. He could not talk about the secret conversations among the cardinals, so I asked him to describe the mood in those meetings. "It is a time of thirst" in the church, he said.

Another week later and Pope Francis was introduced to the world. Looking a bit stunned, he bowed from the waist and asked the crowd before him and the multitudes watching on television to pray for him.

"Now let's start working together," he said.

What a difference a year makes.

Much has been made of Francis' simple lifestyle, his charisma and his deft use of media, which has enabled him to capture the imagination of much of the world beyond our Catholic enclave.

Just recently, I spoke to a parish group in south Kansas City, Mo., about Francis. More than a hundred people came out on a bitter cold night. I've given about a dozen such talks since last spring. Every time, all the seats have been filled. The people who come are the opposite of weary.

Today, Schönborn talks about "Francis is encouraging, reviving and renewing the church." Bishop Manfred Scheuer of Innsbruck, who also met Francis on the Austrian bishops' "ad limina" visit, told a German magazine that being a bishop is a high-pressure job. That hasn't changed under Francis, he said, but "the pope has brought about a change in atmosphere. One can breathe easier."

Isn't that where we all are? The issues, problems and challenges listed in paragraph two above have not been resolved, but aren't we all breathing easier?

Some are critical: Amid the Francis hoopla, what has he actually done? They seem to forget Francis' first charge to us, his first order spoken from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica: "Now let's start working together."

Francis isn't going to change church doctrine, he says, but he is encouraging us to question and discuss. The prime example is the questionnaire from the Vatican for the Synod of Bishops on the family. That was thrown open to all. It was up to individual bishops and individuals to respond. The Catholics of Germany did. Did you ever in your life expect Catholics to be publicly discussing, without judgmental language, cohabitation before marriage as a pastoral reality?

Doctrines won't change, but laws and pastoral practices might. That's what comes of discussion and all of us working together.

What has Francis actually done? He is making all the baptized co-responsible. He's giving us our church back.

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