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Where's Pope Waldo?

Ken Briggs | Feb. 28, 2014 NCR Today

Isn't that Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI something?

According to the script a year ago, he was retiring as pope and would live like a hermit out of public view and, more importantly, out of the hair of his successor. Though he'd live within a Payton Manning throw of the papal nerve center, we shouldn't expect to lay eyes on him or to imagine him as a player. Besides, he was presumed to be in the final stages of life and all he wanted was solitude.

Then came the publicized calls from Francis. Then a public embrace between two. Then he mingles with the new cardinal recruits. You just never know. The ex, former, resigned pope becomes a possible face in the crowd. The media had best be on Waldo Watch because these days you just never know where the healthy-looking Benedict might pop up.

Does this mean Benedict was playing possum, that he never intended to hide from view or be as unavailable as J.D. Salinger? Did he and Francis agree that they'd make joint appearances together or has it just happened?

Conscious deception seems totally contrary to the nature of Benedict. It is possible, however, that circumstances have inevitably created new pope/old pope get-togethers. After all, when you live in the same neighborhood it's likely you'll feel some kind of neighborliness and some obligation to invite the older guy to big functions. Otherwise he might feel left out and lonely.

Church politics suggests another motive. If Benedict has become sufficiently upset by directions Francis is taking -- in tone, not substance so far -- he might have decided to discard monkish solitude in an effort to assure church conservatives that law-and-order Catholicism still has clout. His co-presence with Francis on auspicious occasions strikes a visual balancing act. The next announced moment will be supreme example of that attempted even handedness: the conference of sainthood of John XXIII, the hero of progressives, and John Paull II, referred to by many conservatives as "The Great."

Benedict may be reasserting himself in the mix, therefore, in an effort to correct to a reformist trend he worries about and to shore up the traditionalist side of the church. By staying within the wings of the Vatican and by invitation from Francis, he would have taken that course with the permission and approval. The church has always contained theological and ecclesiastical movements that have struggled for the soul and temper of the church. Francis appears to have introduced another that has grown out of John Paul II's tightening response to John XXIII's loosening. Benedict's resignation gave him an opportunity to represent his own movement after he was gone, one that we thought had been rejected. But there's nothing to prevent him from devising a distinct way of maintaining his cause. It appears to be only a new twist -- and a clever one -- in an old contest over what the church is supposed to be. All's fair in love and within the Barque.

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