Opinion
Letters to the Editor

by NCR Staff

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Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, known most recently as the pontiff who renounced the papacy, but who was situated squarely at the centers of power during five decades of epochal change and unprecedented scandal in the global Catholic Church, died on Dec. 31 in the apartment he kept inside a Vatican monastery. Following are letters to the editor responding to NCR's coverage of Benedict's legacy. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

It is a disheartening sign of the ideological polarization of contemporary Catholicism that, mere hours after the announcement of the death of Pope Benedict XVI, your publication offered coverage so steeped in editorial bias.

Surely, the death of a pope is an appropriate moment to set aside, if only briefly, ecclesial politics. Journalistic integrity demands candor, but beginning the second paragraph of the lead obituary with the words "A man whose very name conjured images of a return to the theological repression of the 16th century for many" was an egregious example of editorializing through selective interpretation.



On the subject of his resignation the obituary goes on to say "In one humble, surprising act, he made way for a predecessor almost immediately seen as more capable of the office and more able to plot a course for Catholicism's future."

Seen by whom? There is certainly no doubt as to where NCR stands on the subject.

From Michael Sean Winters, we get an opinion piece that veers away from the life of the pope into an unsurprising and condescending diatribe against Catholic traditionalists. Apparently, the promotion to the episcopacy of men with whom the author disagrees represents "incalculable damage," and those visions at variance with his own are "backward." He is entitled to his beliefs, offering them regularly in his agitprop political essays, but was this the appropriate place and time?

Obituaries and memorials need not eulogize, but neither should they editorialize.

JOSEPH M. BEDARD
Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan

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Benedict was a tragic figure. He was a brilliant theologian and college professor who become pope almost by accident and could not do the job. As a man of character, he

knew he had to resign when he did — it was graceful. He didn't break mold but he paved the way for someone who has.

KAREN SILVER
Mohegan Lake, New York

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Benedict's personal modesty and diligence were admirable. He also recognized failings of his predecessor — protecting clerical criminals — that he could excuse due to age and infirmity.

In 2013, he should have retired his white garments and left the Vatican, but he was poorly advised.

Benedict's distaste for the secular world after Vatican II made him unfit for positions of authority such as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith prefecture and the papacy. The John Paul II/Benedict papacy confused faith with an imagined European cultural tradition stripped of its "modern" elements. It allied the church with authoritarian political currents which are at odds with Christian social justice and the gospel itself.

Sainthood is sometimes treated as a posthumous lifetime achievement award for the clergy. But we don't need to canonize another pope. The travesty of St. John Paul II should be enough to make the church suspend or at least scrutinize a practice that's been polluted over the centuries by politics and superstition. But that might take a miracle.

HENRY KELLEY
Arlington, Virginia

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Michael Sean Winters' piece on Benedict was remarkable in its graciousness toward Benedict. As an active woman in the church at the time of his reign, I remember feeling a sense of great relief at his resignation as well as a sense of wonder that he, in fact, had it in him to know he could no longer be pope of a church in deep crisis.

Like Winters writes, Benedict's bad decisions deeply affected how the American church coped with its own crisis. Me thinks that those decisions keep on destroying the good Catholic people who keep resigning daily from the institution they once loved and honored because of the changes of Vatican II.

The rich (NAPA Institute) need to go away empty.

Thank you, NCR, for hiring the excellent journalists that give us the truth we need to make decisions of conscience.

CYNTHIA YOSHITOMI
Santa Barbara, California

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The various essays which described the lifetime, contributions and papacy of Benedict were encapsulated, in my view, by the essay offered by Winters. All of the essays were informative and reflected the impressions many of us held about a highly intellectual pope and one whose personality saw his mission more as teaching rather than directing the faithful.

Some might have described Benedict's papacy as that of the "American pope" due to his influence upon our cultural divisions. The impression I have is that certain groups among our clergy as well as our more conservative laity pined for a continuation of Benedict's reign and were disheartened by his resignation. It appears they felt a continuation of his own conservatism, as they saw it, was in their own

interests and served as their excuse to marginalize others among the faithful who did not share their reactionary views.

Recent articles in NCR pointed out the fact that our recently elected leaders in the U.S. bishops' conference were all Benedict and John Paul II appointees and none was appointed by Pope Francis. That is a telling reflection of the influence Francis' predecessors hold on our domestic church. It is also one of the reasons our church is finding itself drifting slowly into irrelevance. The political influences which our bishops believe they hold are not shared by the majority of the faithful any more than they are reflected in the population at large.

Perhaps, the vitriol will subside as those who wanted Francis replaced by Benedict can come to the realization that their wishes which were always unlikely are now hopeless. Now perhaps they can take seriously what Pope Benedict had stated while in retirement that we have only one pope.

CHARLES A. LE GUERN
Granger, Indiana

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According to Jamie Manson and other academics who eulogized Benedict, NCR readers are led to believe that, in the world of theology, he was a dynamic, admirable force to be reckoned with. Furthermore, Manson's article gave perfect clarity to his expertise in that realm, as well as his encounters with men and women colleagues down through the years who wished to challenge his reputed knowledge and were left choking in his dust.

For the rest of us who remember him in his midlife as Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, we found it hard to believe the rumors even then that he was really at heart a kind, shy and gentle man. The actions of his office in silencing dissent of any sort, specifically in the area of clergy sex and power abuse, left a trail of chaos that lingers to this day.

For those of us who suffered under that oppression and still do, we, in Christian charity, surrender "good" Benedict to just another chapter in church history that, we hope, is the last papal remnant of a forbidding church.

NANCY McGUNAGLE
Kalispell, Montana

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Benedict was a disaster for the church: a dogmatic, historical-hierarchical bully who tolerated no different, never mind opposing, opinion to his own.

His wrongheadedness is well described in Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's excellent article. He bullied priests, bishops, cardinals and thinking laypeople. He was an intellectual coward, avoiding any debate or discussion where he could be proven wrong or challenged. He had no heart, no human understanding, no sense of his job. He always thought he was lecturing academics.

The church has made enough mistakes over the centuries. We do not need more people like this man running things. It is not hard to see why so many Catholics have left the church.

I'm 82, had an extensive Roman Catholic education, and I despair of seeing the church rise from centuries of ignorance and stupidity on sex, women and church governance. It is so unnecessary.

There are enough problems in the church to address instead of hectoring and domineering. Especially when your defense is often centuries-old nonsense.

FRANK DALEY
Waterloo, Ontario

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I read with shock theologian Tracey Rowlands' declaration that Pope Benedict XVI might be declared a doctor of the church because of his so-called contribution to the theology of the church. Is that the same "doctor" who refused to diagnose and treat the many pertinent issues raised by Catholic theologians throughout the world?

Pope John Paul II ended scholarly research (unless it came from the extreme right) and Benedict continued it. A professional doctor has to diagnose a medical issue before subscribing a treatment. It doesn't take a medical doctor to diagnose that the church needs a healthy dose of reality and change.

ROBERT M. HOATSON
Livingston, New Jersey

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As we mourn the passing of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, it's important to remember that his eco-theology included speaking up for animals. Wouldn't it be a fitting tribute to his good work for all Catholics to pledge to go vegan for one week, all of Lent, or even forever?

A man of great faith who cared for "the least of these," he spoke movingly about the industrialized abuse of animals, particularly those farmed for food. When asked about animals' rights in a 2002 interview, His Holiness — still a cardinal at the time — replied:

> "That is a very serious question. At any rate, we can see that they are given into our care, that we cannot just do whatever we want with them. Animals, too, are God's creatures. … Certainly, a sort of industrial use of creatures, so that geese are fed in such a way as to produce as large a liver as possible, or hens live so packed together that they become just caricatures of birds, this degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible."

As we begin 2023, let's carry on his legacy of care for animals, concern for the environment, and censure of factory farming by collectively embracing compassionate vegan choices so that Benedict — and God's animals — may smile upon us.

CANDICE M. KELSEY
Evans, Georgia

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Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's column on new provisions for retired popes is right on, but I'd go further. I'd find it refreshing to see retiring popes returning to simply serving the church as a priest, in whatever capacity their health might permit. It would be spiritually healthy to return to ordinary life after holding so much power.

Is this going to happen? Unlikely.

But consider another scenario. When the clergy abuse scandal exploded in the U.S., the press revealed that some two-thirds of the bishops in the U.S. had sheltered abusive clerics. The church's mission has been gravely hindered by the scandal which will not go away. Imagine where the church would be now if all of those implicated bishops had offered their resignations to the pope and returned to simple pastoral ministry.

Honest humility is a potent vehicle for proclamation of the good news. The church should try it.

CHRIS BUTLER
Rancho Mirage, California