

Papal resignations

Richard McBrien | Apr. 12, 2010 Essays in Theology

Because of the dramatic outbreak of sexual-abuse cases involving priests in Germany as well as in Ireland, Austria, and Switzerland, the scandal and ensuing crisis have suddenly become a European problem as well as an American problem, with concerns now being expressed even about the administrative record of Pope Benedict XVI when he was Archbishop of Munich and Freising from 1977 to 1981.

In the last few days, I have been asked by a major U.S. news magazine whether the pope might be forced to resign because of his alleged mishandling of a case involving a priest who had been convicted of sexual abuse, subjected to a criminal sentence without imprisonment, and com-pelled to pay a fine for his behavior.

The priest was sent away for therapy and then allowed to return to pastoral ministry?all while Joseph Ratzinger was his archbishop. The then-vicar general of the archdiocese has taken responsibility for the decision, pointing out that the future pope was too busy with many other administrative responsibilities.

But some critics, including the theologian Fr. Hans Küng and Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, a major advocate of ecclesiastical transparency on this issue, have found the explanation less than compelling.

As of this writing, however, I do not foresee any set of circumstances in which Pope Benedict XVI would be compelled to step down as Bishop of Rome and earthly head of the universal Church.

In the United States, for example, the only American bishop forced to resign over this issue is Cardinal Bernard Law, former Archbishop of Boston.

I made the point at the time that not only did the evidence of malfeasance begin mounting against him, but more significantly he had lost the confidence and support of many of his priests, some of whom signed a letter calling upon him to resign.

No amount of pressure from lay groups, however, has been sufficient to bring down any other U.S. bishop who, in their opinion, has covered up the predatory behavior of culpable priests or, worse, kept them in pastoral ministry by irresponsibly transferring them from assignment to assignment.

Four Irish bishops thus far have resigned over this scandal, but none has done so in response to pressure from their own priests, much less a body of laity. While I certainly do not applaud the weakness of lay groups, that is unfortunately the reality.

Unless and until a bishop loses the support of a significant number of his priests, as Cardinal Law apparently did, the Vatican will put no pressure on him to resign because of his mishandling of this problem.

What has been true in the U.S. hierarchy is doubly?no, triply so and more?true of the Bishop of Rome.

The principal source of pressure on Pope Benedict XVI would have to emanate, it seems to me, from the

hierarchy and clergy in his native Germany. This is highly unlikely.

Have other popes resigned under pressure?

The first pope to have abdicated (another word for "resigned") his office as Bishop of Rome was Pontian (230-35), who was exiled by the anti-Christian Emperor Maximinus Thrax to Sardinia, known as "the island of death," where he eventually succumbed to harsh treatment.

Other popes who have abdicated, or resigned, include Silverius in 537, under pressure not only from the Empress Theodora but even from his elected successor Vigilius; John XVIII in 1009, who may or may not have been subjected to pressure before entering a monastery; and Benedict IX in 1045, who was caught in the crossfire between two powerful Roman families, was reinstated two years later, but then forced to resign again the following year under pressure from the Emperor Henry III.

The matter of papal resignation emerged again as recently as the summer of 1992 when, after Pope John Paul II's surgery, there was much speculation about whether he would resign for reasons of health.

As I wrote in a column for the week of November 20, 1992, "Several of the cancer specialists quoted in the press since July have pointed out that a tumor the size of an orange is almost never benign, notwithstanding Vatican assurances to the contrary.

"The pope's post-operative public appearances in Rome have only served to fuel this speculation. He has looked drawn and fatigued.

"And during the Holy Father's recent visit to the Dominican Republic or the meeting of the Latin American Bishops Conference, he followed an uncharacteristically limited schedule."

Was the speculation about the pope's health on target back then? The simple answer is "No."

The pope never did resign and, in fact, died a natural death in April of 2005, almost thirteen years later.

Neither will Pope Benedict XVI resign.

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