

Wrong Reactions to Benedict's Resignation

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 13, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Ross Douthat, [writing in the New York Times](#) [1], expresses his hope that it will be another 500 years before another Pope resigns. He writes:

There is great symbolic significance in the fact that popes die rather than resign: It's a reminder that the pontiff is supposed to be a spiritual father more than a chief executive (presidents leave office, but your parents are your parents till they die), a sign of absolute papal surrender to the divine will (after all, if God wants a new pope, He'll get one), and a illustration of the theological point that the church is still supposed to be the church even when its human leadership isn't at fighting trim, whether physically or intellectually or (for that matter) morally.

I agree with Douthat that being Pope is not like being a CEO but, of course, the fact that we usually see him at the altar or preaching seems sufficient to remind the faithful that there is a spiritual dimension to his job. The analogy with a parent, however, has limited explanatory value. My Dad is still my Dad. So is my Mom who has gone to God. But, we do not expect my Dad to provide for the family anymore, nor shovel the snow, nor organize family vacations, etc. The bond of love remains but it is cruel to expect him to function as he did at fifty.

Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, the archbishop of Krakow and formerly the long-time secretary to Pope John Paul II, said that John Paul II stayed at his post until he died because "one does not step down from the cross." If Benedict has some serious ailment, or simply the physical pains of aging, he will carry that cross no matter what. He is not stepping down from any cross. Indeed, I would argue that Pope John Paul II was a little too generous in sharing his cross with the universal Church. When a Pope is incapacitated, as John Paul II was, the palace intrigues that ensue bring out the worst in human behavior. The last few years of John Paul's papacy were not a happy time. Think of the failure to move on the Fr. Maciel case.

I do think a Pope is, as the name indicates, a "father" and I am sure that being a father is sometimes an experience of the cross. But, I do not believe that we should expect of our popes what we no longer expect of our biological fathers, and I do not believe that laying aside the power of office is a sign of unwillingness to carry one's cross. To me, Benedict's decision is simply smart, obviously undertaken with a view towards the good of the Church, and I do not worry one whit about it becoming a precedent.

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[1] <http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/11/the-pope-abdicates/>