

On Benedict's bowing out: The butler did it

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Feb. 14, 2013 | Bulletins from the Human Side
Benedict Resigns

Pope Benedict XVI's resignation is big on buzz but is not the stunning surprise claimed by many pundits. It is rather a further example of the German theology professor's style that informed his years as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, his term as pope, and the formation of his legacy to the church.

He has followed the lesson plan carefully, marked our exam papers strictly, and, like the conductor of the [Berlin Express](#) [1], has announced that the train is leaving Rome at exactly 8 p.m. on Feb. 28.

The buzz, of course, like that about who will win the Academy Award, now centers on the identity of his successor.

If you have been paying attention in his class, you will know that the methodical Benedict who, along with his predecessor, Blessed Pope John Paul II, named all the cardinals with a vote at the coming conclave, has done everything to secure the succession; that is, to deliver a new pope so like them that, if necessary, he could exchange skin grafts with them.

To find a deeper reading of Benedict's motivation for leaving the office he seemed to seek with a Teutonic lack of subtlety eight years ago, look no further than [the Vatileaks scandal](#) [2] that symbolized the changing age, whose premonitory tremors then-theologian Joseph Ratzinger first felt a few years after the Second Vatican Council came to a close.

He thought, according to the London *Tablet* Rome correspondent Robert Mickens, that the often chaotic student protests that swept across Western Europe in the spring of 1968 mirrored the adjustment, undisciplined as he viewed it, that swept across the church immediately after the council. Ratzinger stopped speaking with his colleague Hans Kung and moved away from the progressive positions he had espoused enthusiastically as an expert at the council to criticize that gathering -- as he has to this day -- as a "rupture" with tradition that needed a new interpretation of "continuity" with the past.

Then-Archbishop Karol Wojtyla of Krakow, according to Mickens, reacted in a similar way when in the summer of 1968 many bishops throughout the world granted freedom of conscience to their flocks after Pope Paul VI restated the church's traditional teaching on birth regulation in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Wojtyla and Ratzinger, both by then cardinals, recognized the kinship of their feelings at the first of the conclaves of 1978 that, in choosing John Paul I, who would die after a month in office, proved a dry run for the election of Wojtyla as John Paul II that autumn.

Within a few years John Paul II persuaded Ratzinger to join him in Rome, making him the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and working with him to begin the gradual repeal of Vatican II's reforms that Benedict has continued through what has come to be known as the "reform of the reform," whose main goal of restoring the church to earlier practices and discipline is also a principal objective of the Year of Faith he recently initiated.

The butler did it; that is, served as an emblem of the crumbling of the hierarchical structures that Benedict has insisted on, so that, along with what Saul Bellow once called the "first frosts of old age," he has sensed deep within himself the irrevocable process of change that he may delay but cannot, in the long run, reverse.

We must recall that Benedict is a sensitive man, a lover of Mozart, a pianist of accomplishment, a man given to meditation, and, as such, attuned more finely than the average bishop to the changes that other artists (such as Picasso and Matisse) had heralded in the early 20th century in their rejection of old forms as unable to express the meaning of new times. World War I dealt a death blow to the hierarchical forms of European monarchies, and the 20th century will one day be understood as a long battle about how and whether humans stand on the same plain of humanity with each other or not.

When Vatileaks, with its embarrassing tales of ecclesiastical political intrigue and financial misdeeds, was identified as the work of a member of the papal household, it was clear that, as the Soviet Union learned after the Chernobyl disaster, the Vatican could no longer control information.

As the crack in Soviet management of information was a measure of its collapsing hierarchical structures, so, too, Vatileaks signaled that the hierarchical form was dysfunctional, that the framework Benedict was so determined to restore was coming apart in slow motion deep within the Vatican itself.

Vatican II and the Space/Information Age began in the same eye blink of history, with John XXIII's opening speech of Vatican II on Oct. 11, 1962, following John F. Kennedy's call for a round trip to the moon a month earlier. The pope's talk was broadcast live by Telstar, one of the first communication satellites, a product as well as a symbol of the dawning Space/Information Age.

Vatican II's return to collegiality, recognizing the authority possessed by bishops and their national conferences, prepared the church for the age in which only years later other great institutions would recognize that hierarchy no longer worked, and would experiment extensively to find de-centralized forms. The church in council was intuitively ahead of the times.

The birth pangs of that age were the source of the discomfort that theologian Ratzinger and Wojtyla experienced and associated, in over-interpreting liturgical experimentation as if it represented a complete overthrow of church practice, and in rejecting and, together, finally doing away with collegiality, not grasping that the Space/Information Age invalidated the hierarchical form.

As high tide cannot be delayed, neither can the impact of this new time, one of whose first-order effects is to make the control of information impossible.

Benedict XVI loves the church and he was succeeding with his "reform of the reform" and its 21st-century time travel to the 19th century. That his personal papers were no longer safe was more than random occurrence. Even his 89-year-old priest brother Georg [told NBC News](#) [3] that Vatileaks contributed to his brother's decision.

The sensitive Benedict felt, as the captain of the Titanic did the first shudder of his vessel's slashing itself open on the samurai sword of the iceberg, the sickening internal blow of the church's collision with a future that was already present in his own quarters. His vision of an old church restored suddenly seemed the child of a different destiny, beyond the well-ordered realization of his plans.

If he had debated retiring within himself, the iceberg spur of the future piercing Vatican controls convinced him that he had kept the faith as best he could, that he had run the race to its end.

He did it, history did it, old age did it, but more than anything else, the butler did it.

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[1] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040155/>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/judges-vatileaks-case-say-computer-tech-was-hard-believe>

[3] http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/02/12/16936793-popes-brother-pontiff-was-troubled-by-butlers-revelations?lite

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