

**The Resignation of Pope Benedict XVI:
An Abandonment of the Cross?
A Theology of the Papal Ministry in the Light
of the Theology of the Cross**

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Preamble

FEW EVENTS in contemporary history have generated so much public interest, discussion, comment, and speculation in the media and among both religiously inclined and uninclined (or disinclined) persons, as the unexpected announcement by Pope Benedict XVI of his intention to resign as the 265th Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church. Addressing the Cardinals in a Consistory, the Pope himself declared:

After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry. I am well aware that this ministry, due to its essential spiritual nature, must be carried out not only with words and deeds, but no less with prayer and suffering. However, in today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me.

For this reason and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that *I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005, in such a way, that as from 28 February 2013, at 20:00 hours, the See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant and a Conclave to elect*

the new Supreme Pontiff will have to be convoked by those whose competence it is.

In the above few words, Pope Benedict XVI wittingly or unwittingly made a historic decision that is of immense import for the Roman papacy, of which the full import, historical and theological, may not be fully known immediately. But what is certain for now is that, by *renouncing the ministry of Bishop of Rome*, former Cardinal Ratzinger has opened a new chapter in the contemporary history of the Catholic papacy and of the Church as a whole. It is a chapter that will no doubt include theological issues and questions on the very ministry of the Bishop of Rome. In this essay we shall explore a few of these theological questions and issues.

Delineating the Theological Issues and Questions

A good starting pointing for articulating some of the key theological questions arising from Pope Benedict's renunciation of the *ministry of Bishop of Rome* would be its reception by the general public. Across the length and breadth of the globe, the Pope's resignation was received with shock, incredulity, disappointment, sorrow, a feeling of betrayal and even anger. Perhaps for most Catholics, for whom his resignation had a more direct and immediate significance and consequence, and even perhaps for some non-Catholics or non-Christians, there must have been an added feeling of panic and sense of being directionless like a flock suddenly left without a shepherd. Despite the scandals and crises that have recently dogged the Catholic Church and more particularly the Vatican headed by the Pope, the papal ministry remains for many, especially Catholics, the last bastion of stable authority in a world that is marked by a crisis of authority. The unexpected resignation of Pope Benedict represented for many, therefore, a very disturbing and distressing event. It was like having the rug pulled out from under their feet, and it left them with a feeling of great vulnerability. The myriads of conflicting emotions that enwrapped the hearts and minds of many who heard of Pope Benedict's resignation can be simply encapsulated in the following phrases: The Pope cannot resign! The Pope should not have resigned! It could be said that the latter feeling became the more dominant perspective, especially in the light of Pope John Paul II's own experience and example and the reason adduced by his successor for relinquishing the ministry of the Bishop of Rome.

It would appear then that in the minds of most Catholic faithful and the general public the Pope *does not* and *should not* resign from office. In the eyes of critical scholars, this general opinion is understandable and

explainable, as it is a rarity for a pope to resign. In fact, in his last General Audience, Pope Benedict himself acknowledges the “novelty” of his decision.¹ And so, while the strong emotional response to Pope Benedict’s resignation may be attributed to a collective perception rooted in centuries of established tradition, one nonetheless cannot completely rule out the theological import of this strong collective response. It is our task to unravel how this charged emotional reaction embodies a *contemporary perception and expectation* of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome regardless of the received accumulated memory about the ministry and office of the Pope in its historical developments. One might then ask: what is the theological content that is embedded in that strong reaction to the Pope’s resignation?

The Pope: More Than a Bishop?

In his brilliantly written and illuminating book: *The Bishop of Rome*, the French Canadian Dominican ecclesialogist Jean-Marie Tillard, in exploring the intricate “theological problem of the papacy,” captured with great perspicacity the core of the theological issue regarding the office and ministry of the Bishop of Rome in the title of the first chapter of his book: “The Pope . . . more than a Pope?”² Perhaps a more appropriate title would have been: “The Pope . . . more than a Bishop?” But anyhow, commencing from the basic presupposition that the papal office and ministry is essentially and primarily an episcopal one, Tillard argues that, for one to correctly appreciate and interpret the true and proper nature and character of this ministry, one must always locate it within the context of the episcopal college and never outside or above it. And so, the pope, though first among all other bishops, by reason of the precedence of the See of Rome, remains essentially and fundamentally a bishop like other bishops, given also the fact that the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders is rooted in the episcopal ministry. Sacramentally speaking, therefore, the pope is nothing else but a bishop, notwithstanding the years of historical evolution, which have given the papacy a character and image that suggest, or at least seem to suggest, that the pope is more than a bishop. This according to many critics, especially among theologians

¹ Pope Benedict is right in calling his decision to resign a “novelty,” notwithstanding that there have been instances in history, albeit few, of popes who resigned or were made to resign. See Daniel Bornstein, “A Brief History of Papal Resignations,” Religion and Politics, February 24, 2013, religionandpolitics.org/2013/02/24/a-brief-history-of-papal-resignations/.

² J.-M. R. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, trans. John de Satge (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982), 3.

from both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, and no less the Protestant traditions, is a distortion arising from centuries of papal pretensions, or as Tillard himself would put, from the roots of a certain attitude.³

But removed from all polemical controversies and historical hangovers, it is without doubt that one of the issues confronting contemporary Christendom as a whole is the articulation of an adequate and comprehensive response to the twofold question that Jesus addressed to his disciples, viz.: *Who do people say I am? And you who do you say I am?* Peter, who on behalf of the rest of the disciples offered a clear, concise, and definitive answer to that question, appears, in turn, to be asking that same question about himself. These questions are no new questions. In fact, they are questions that had already begun to echo prior to the Second Vatican Council in the thoughts and writings of “progressive” theologians and ecumenically inclined Catholic and non-Catholic theologians. They are questions to which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council attempted to find responses in their effort to recover the original context and meaning of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome.⁴ These questions also lie at the heart of Blessed Pope John Paul II’s invitation to fellow bishops, priests, religious men and women, lay men and women, theologians, Catholics and non-Catholics, indeed, the whole people of God, to help him discern and articulate how this ministry could be better understood, interpreted and better exercised as a ministry of communion and unity.⁵ They are questions that lie at the heart of the ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church and the ecclesial communities of the Reformation and post-Reformation Traditions. And so the question of the proper identity of the Bishop of Rome is fundamental for understanding his ministry in and to the Body of Christ. The recurrence of these questions is certainly due to the fact that a clear, precise, and definitive response, akin to Peter’s own response to Jesus’ question, is yet to be found and articulated among the disciples of Christ. Is the pope, though a bishop, more than a bishop—just as Christ, though a prophet, is much more than a prophet?⁶

³ Ibid., 50.

⁴ See especially *Lumen Gentium* (LG), §§18–29.

⁵ Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, May 25, 1995, §96.

⁶ There are theological tendencies which have already begun to visualize the Papal ministry in a more universal dimension, i.e. as a universal pastorate, especially as a universal ministry of Christian unity. See the recommendations of the World Conference of the Commission on Faith and Order, Report of the Second Section, Santiago de Compostela (1993): *Confessing the One Faith to God’s Glory*, 31, 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 166, World Council of Churches (Geneva, 1994), 243.

In some ways, the global reaction to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI re-echoes those important questions. This global response compels us to reflect critically on the papal ministry in the light of today's global context, taking into consideration its implications and consequences for the universal mission of the Church. This global response further impels us to rethink, reinterpret, and perhaps harmonize accepted theologies (and perhaps canonical norms or provisions). For instance, what theological presupposition (or presuppositions) underlie the thinking of many Christian faithful which in their estimation makes the resignation of every bishop at the age of 75 a normal and accepted pastoral norm, while the resignation of a pope, who is essentially also a bishop, is an "unusual" if not an "abnormal" happening, not minding the fact that such papal resignation is provided for in canon law? But even more importantly, the global response to Pope Benedict's resignation raises a new theological question for the episcopal and perhaps priestly ministry, namely: is the episcopal ministry a ministry *unto death*, that is, until death, or is it one that could be abridged in time? This question assumes a much greater relevance when viewed through the prism of the *theology of the Cross* and its relation to papal/episcopal and priestly ministry.

The Papal/Episcopal Ministry and the Cross of Christ

Stanislaw Cardinal Dziwisz, Archbishop of Cracow and former personal Secretary to Pope John Paul II, is credited with having remarked, in response to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, that Pope John Paul II refused to step down from the Throne of Peter even as he neared the end of his life because "he was convinced that one doesn't come down from the cross." This statement, widely reported in many international media,⁷ was certainly made as a veiled critique of the reasons given by Pope Benedict XVI for stepping down from the *sedes* of St. Peter. Dziwisz's critique in a way cast Pope Benedict in the light of the Apostle Peter running away from the city of Rome, that is, from a likely martyrdom (i.e., the Cross), in that famed novel and later movie *Quo Vadis*? The import of this critique was not lost on the retiring Pope; hence in his ultimate Wednesday audience Pope Benedict gave an unambiguous but gentle response to Cardinal Dziwisz and to all who hold similar views. Addressing the large crowd that gathered to listen to his public catechesis for the last time, he declared:

⁷ See for example: vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/news/detail/articolo/wojtyla-wojtyla-wojtyla-22147/; www.catholicregister.org/columns/item/15911-papal-office-is-forever-changed.

In recent months, I felt that my strength had decreased, and I asked God earnestly in prayer to enlighten me with his light to guide me to the right decision, not for my sake, but for the good of the Church. I have taken this step in full awareness of its gravity and also its novelty, but with a deep peace of mind. Loving the Church also means having the courage to make tough choices, and suffering for them, always holding as first the good of the Church and not oneself.

The “always” is also a “forever”—there can be no return to private life. *My decision to renounce the exercise of active ministry does not deny this fact.* I am not returning to private life, to a life of travel, meetings, receptions, conferences and so on. *I am not abandoning the cross, but I am remaining at the foot of the Crucified Lord.* I will no longer hold the power of the office for the government of the Church, but by rendering the service of prayer I shall rest, so to speak, in the domain of St. Peter. St. Benedict, whose name I bear as Pope, is a great example of this. He showed us the way to a life which, active or passive, belongs wholly to the work of God.⁸

This statement by Pope Benedict XVI is, indeed, very significant. While the Pope, in the above statement, disagrees with Cardinal Dziwisz’s interpretation of his gesture, that is, that his renunciation of the ministry of Bishop of Rome is equivalent to renouncing the Cross, he nonetheless agrees with him essentially that the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, and by extension that of all bishops, is closely and, in fact, inseparably connected to the Cross of Christ. In his interview with Peter Seewald, Pope Benedict explains the role and nature of the Petrine ministry in the light of the Cross of Christ, which is what defines and gives the papal primacy its character and quality. The ministry and primacy of the Bishop of Rome, he says, is rooted in the primacy of martyrdom, which is what has marked the origin and history of that particular church. Thus, Benedict concludes, the fact that all the early popes were martyrs is significant. Standing there as a glorious ruler is not part of being pope, but rather giving witness to the One who was crucified and to the fact that he himself is ready also to exercise this office in this way, in union with him.⁹ Pope Benedict further underscores his clear conception of the ministry of the papacy in relation to the Cross of Christ when he explains: *My decision to renounce the exercise of active ministry does not deny this fact. . . . I am not abandoning the cross, but I am remaining at the foot of the Crucified Lord.* Perhaps, without realizing or intending to do so, Cardinal Dziwisz

⁸ Emphasis added.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World, The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times—A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. M. J. Miller and A. J. Walker (San Francisco/Bangalore: Ignatius Press/Asian Trading Corporation, 2010), 9.

provided us an important hermeneutic for understanding and interpreting what might best be described as the *spirituality of the papal/episcopal ministry*. And so, far beyond and far above the usual visualization of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome and, indeed, all episcopal ministry in terms of office, power, rank/hierarchy, dignity, etc., the ministry of the episcopacy is one that is intrinsically and intimately tied to the Cross of Christ.¹⁰ Although Cardinal Dziwisz may have, unwittingly, brought into focus the mystery of the Cross as integral to the spirituality of the papal/episcopal ministry, he in no way invented it. In fact, the Gospels makes it clear that the Cross is at the very heart of the mystery of the one who oversees the flock of Christ in so far as the mystery of the Cross is what defines and shapes the ministry of Christ, the Good Shepherd. This theological outlook is the peculiarity of the Gospel of John. Blessed Pope John Paul II provides us an excellent reading, exegesis, and theological exposition of this outlook and thus provides us with the right perspective for understanding this outlook.

The Cross and the Apostolic Ministry in the Theology of Pope John Paul II

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Blessed Pope John II anchors the priestly ministry, of which the episcopacy is its full expression,¹¹ in the ministry of Christ the Good Shepherd. According to him, [the Church] knows that Jesus Christ himself is the living, supreme, and definitive fulfillment of God's promise: "I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:11). He, "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20), entrusted to the

¹⁰ One can at this point immediately begin to see the insight and insistence of the Patristic Fathers on the intrinsic and inseparable connection between the episcopal ministry, the Eucharist, and the Church. Cf. John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries*, trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001); see also the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch, which is one of the earliest post-apostolic writings that highlights the intrinsic triadic connection of the Eucharist, Bishop, and Church. Writing to the church in Smyrna, Ignatius would warn: "Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid" (cf. *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, no. 8).

¹¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV), *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, 25 March, 1992, §17.

Apostles and their successors the ministry of shepherding God's flock (cf. Jn 21:15ff.; 1 Pt 5:2).¹² But this good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep (Cf. Jn 10:11, 15). He is not like the hired man, who abandons the sheep (Jn 10:12). This total dedication and commitment to his sheep even to the point of laying down his life is what the Pope characterizes in this Exhortation as *pastoral charity*¹³ (*amoris officium*).¹⁴ According to him, "the essential content of this *pastoral charity* is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church [sheep]."¹⁵ This total gift of self, which characterized and defined the mission of Christ, who "loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25), is what is demanded and must characterize the ministry of all who have been entrusted with the task of shepherding and watching over the flock of Christ. This gift of self is a virtue by which they imitate Christ in his self-giving and service. It determines their way of thinking and acting, their way of relating to people. It makes special demands on them.¹⁶ But what else is the meaning of the Cross, if not the definitive action, sign, and symbol of the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep? Here, one sees the intrinsic connection between the pastoral ministry of Christ, carried on by his Apostles and their successors, and the Cross. And so, Cardinal Dziwisz is quite right in intuiting this inner connection between the ministry of the Bishop of Rome and the Cross of Christ. It is absolutely necessary for the one who shepherds Christ's flock to remain bound to the Cross of Christ. This *amoris officium* is what is distinctive of that very ministry and so it can be said of the episcopal/papal ministry as it can be said of the Church that it bears profoundly the structure of the Cross.¹⁷

¹² *PDV* §1.

¹³ John Paul, *PDV* §23.

¹⁴ Saint Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* 125, 5; CCL 36, 678 quoted in *PDV* §23.

¹⁵ John Paul, *PDV* §23.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid*.

¹⁷ Cf. Gediminas T. Jankunas, *The Dictatorship of Relativism: Pope Benedict XVI's Response* (New York: St. Paul's, 2011), 79. In his own usage of this notion, that the Church should have the structure of the Cross, Pope Benedict employs it to speak, not of the mystery of suffering which the Cross signifies, but its relational (vertical and horizontal) dimensions: the vertical dimension pointing to God and the horizontal to humankind. Of course, this relational dimension cannot be divorced or separated from the core aspect of suffering which the Cross typifies. One can also speak of the Cross pointing to two dimensions of sufferings: the vertical dimension which points to or explicates the suffering of God in and with man, and the horizontal dimension which points to the co-suffering of man with his fellow man. Our focus here is not yet on the two-dimensional character of the ministry of the bishop. That will be explored later. We have only tried to highlight the link of this ministry with the Cross of Christ.

And so, to abandon the Cross is to abandon the flock of Christ; and one abandons the flock of Christ when he abandons that very ministry of watching over the flock entrusted to his care. To abandon that ministry implies ultimately a renunciation of the Cross. A good shepherd, however, never abandons his flock, that is his post, which is at the foot of the Cross.

Is Resignation a Renunciation of the Cross?

Does the resignation of a pope, especially for reasons of the burden involved in carrying on that ministry, constitute a renunciation of the Cross and, by extension, the flock of Christ? This is the question that the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI has raised—or rather, this is a question that Cardinal Dziwisz's remark has occasioned. This question is all the more pertinent especially since the ministry of shepherding the flock of Christ is an entrusted mission. It is a mission which the minister did not choose of his own accord; rather, the mission was laid upon him, like a Cross. It is a mission which the minister is expected to bring to full consummation and which, in fact, totally consumes the one who brings it to full completion. On the Cross, therefore, Christ brought to consummation the mission entrusted to him by his Father, hence he could cry: "it is finished (consummated)" (Jn 19:30), but by this very act he was also consumed; hence the evangelist immediately adds, "And bowing his head he gave up his spirit" (Jn 19:30). It would seem then that it is only when one is himself consumed that he may be said to have brought to completion/consummation the mission entrusted to him. This appears to be the logic underlying Cardinal Dziwisz's reasoning. The pope does not resign from the ministry of shepherding the flock of Christ; he rather must die in office, for only in that way does he bring to full consummation that mission entrusted to him by Christ through the votes of the cardinals gathered in a conclave. It would appear then, that the burden of age, a deteriorating strength of mind and body, are insufficient grounds for not consummating the mission of shepherding Christ's flock. These, indeed, it may be argued may be ways of being consumed as one strives even with his utmost and residual energy to bring to consummation that ministry and mission for which he was chosen. Rather than focus on, and perhaps be overwhelmed by, one's sense of incapacity, one is to focus on Christ who strengthens him (cf. Phil 4:13) and whose grace is ever sufficient for him (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). As John Paul II himself observes, "[it] is precisely in Peter's human weakness that it becomes fully clear that the pope, in order to carry out this special ministry in the Church, depends totally on the Lord's grace and prayer: 'I have prayed for you that your

faith may not fail' ” (Lk 22:32).¹⁸ Could it be that a pope who resigns from office on whatever grounds of personal incapacity is like the Apostle Peter, who has removed his gaze from Christ and his Cross and is frightened by the turbulent water and strong wind—and in his personal weakness (cf. Mt 14: 30ff) renounces the ministry entrusted to him? And so the question remains, did Benedict XVI abandon the Cross when he renounced the ministry of the Bishop of Rome?

Bound to the Cross of Christ: Two Contrasting Models

The logic of the theological arguments outlined in the preceding paragraphs may seem to suggest a “Yes” answer to the question that concluded the preceding paragraph. But even more, the still-fresh and powerful image and memory of Blessed Pope John Paul II, sick, old, trembling, curved yet very resolute in carrying on the ministry of the Bishop of Rome right to his very last moment, appears to confirm decidedly the “Yes” verdict to the above question. In fact, the very image of a tired and weak John Paul II clinging tenaciously to his papal crosier, etched with the image of the crucified Christ, is almost a prophetic symbol that wordlessly explicates the theology of the apostolic/episcopal ministry that is closely bound up and rooted in the Cross of Christ. In a word, the ministry of Pope John Paul II seems to bear credible testimony to that spirituality of the episcopal ministry, a spirituality of *pastoral charity* (*amoris officium*) in which he the shepherd is willing to bring to full consummation his entrusted mission of pasturing the flock of Christ by allowing himself to be completely consumed like a holocaust. But does the ministry of Benedict XVI fall short of this spirituality?

The answer to this question is to be found in the answer to the following question, namely: in what does the spirituality of *pastoral charity* consist, given that this spirituality stands at the very heart of the papal/episcopal ministry and indeed, the priestly ministry? As mentioned previously, “the essential content of this *pastoral charity* is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church [sheep].” The shepherd who watches over the flock pours out his life like a libation for the good of his sheep.¹⁹ All his actions are motivated and directed towards the good of the flock over which he keeps watch. The shepherd does not, in other words, think of himself, his own good, but only the good of his flock. He does whatever it takes to ensure that the good of his flock is safeguarded, even at the very cost of his own life. It is a death to self so that others may live, as St. Paul himself reminds

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §4.

¹⁹ Here one can see the unmistakable features of Pauline theology.

his own Christian community. It is in this death to self that the mystery of the Cross and the Crucified Christ shines through and in which the shepherd becomes truly conformed to the one true Shepherd. Upon close examination of Pope Benedict's statement announcing his resignation, we can unmistakably discern that underlying his motive for renouncing the office of Bishop of Rome is that overarching *pastoral charity* which lies at the very heart of the episcopal ministry as described above. Indeed, the very words of the Pope Emeritus encapsulate and underscore this very motivation. In what appears to be an *apologia de fuga sua*,²⁰ Pope Benedict explains: "I have taken this step in full awareness of its gravity and also its novelty, but with a deep peace of mind. Loving the Church also means having the courage to make tough choices, and suffering for them, always *holding as first the good of the Church and not oneself*." The good of the Church is the very essence of pastoral charity. It would seem then, that Pope Benedict accepted "death"—a certain and perhaps an unusual kind of death—for the overriding good of the Church. His was not a physical death, nor can it be completely qualified as a spiritual death. It is a death in which he buries himself in obscurity and seals himself behind the walls of prayerful silence. This is the death which he assumes for the good of the church towards which he has great pastoral solicitude and charity. It is a death he willingly accepts based on his deep awareness that prolonging his pontificate would not serve the interest of the Church but perhaps his own.

Now, it would be pointless to argue why Pope John Paul, weighed down by old age and sickness, did not take a similar step. Was it that he sought to remain in the limelight even at the cost of the good of the Church? There is, certainly, a serious flaw with this line of reasoning, as it completely ignores the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each papacy or episcopal ministry. While there may be common elements that cut across the episcopal ministry, each one who is called to that ministry is unique and each call is also unique. Each one, that is, each pope or bishop, is called with the specificity of his character and person. But besides these psychological and human elements, the theological grounding for the uniqueness of each Bishop of Rome is discipleship. The one who is called to watch over the flock of Christ is first and foremost a disciple, the one who sits and listens at the feet of the Master. He is one who has been given a disciple's tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. However, he must first wake up each morning to listen, as one being instructed (cf. Isa 50:4). Although, he watches over the flock, the

²⁰ This is the title of a work of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, in which he offers a reason for seeking to escape from the responsibilities of the priesthood.

pope/bishop does not own the flock, for there is only One Shepherd, the Good Shepherd. And so, he must listen like a good disciple to the one who has entrusted him with that task, and follow the dictates and directions of the One Shepherd, who knows what he has in mind and in view for his flock. Once again, we see in the very words of Pope Benedict this very quality of a good and dutiful disciple. He says: "In recent months, I felt that my strength had decreased, and *I asked God earnestly in prayer to enlighten me with his light to guide me to the right decision*, not for my sake, but for the good of the Church." The faithful disciple follows the dictates, not of his own heart, nor the expectations or desires of the crowd, and not even the norms of canon law, but the very voice of the Spirit. It is without question that what the Divine Master demands of one disciple is not what he may demand of another. Again, the Gospel of St. John distinctively points out the uniqueness of the fate of each disciple, in Jesus' response to Peter's question in reference to the beloved disciple, "Lord what about him?" (cf. Jn 21:21). The destiny of each disciple is in the very hands of his Master. It is therefore, pointless to evaluate and judge the ministry of one pope on the basis of another's. There is no one single mold that fits or that should fit all popes. It is crucial to underscore and uphold this unique, flexible, individual, and personal character of the ministry of the episcopate or papacy if the ministry is not to lose its spiritual character and quality. The one who bears the shepherding rod and crook of Peter must place greater premium on an attentive ear and obedience to the voice of the Lord who has personally called him to watch over his flock, over and above canonical provisions, ecclesial customs, and, indeed, all human expectations and demands. Understandably, such unrestricted room for personal action may appear risky precisely because it falls outside the control of human authority. Yet, it is precisely in that attentive listening and obedience to the voice of the Lord that one rediscovers the truth that the Church is the Lord's, and he and he alone is the one who guarantees security and stability to his flock. It is a truth that can easily slip out of our consciousness, especially when we create a certain image and vision of the pope. This is, in fact, one of the lessons of Pope Benedict's resignation. As already noted, his sudden resignation threw most Catholics into panic and bewilderment. It was, for some, one of the apocalyptic signs of the end of the Catholic Church, especially following the series of scandals that had bedeviled it in recent times. Legitimate as the feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, doubt, and fear may be in the wake of his resignation, such feelings betray a lack of absolute trust in the one who has sworn to be with his Church until the end of time. Pope Benedict's quiet but firm insistence that he needed to leave the

scene at this point of the Church's life and history must, on the contrary, have flowed from that deep and clear conviction that the Church is not his but the Lord's and so the fate and future of the Church does not depend on him but on Christ and on him alone. And so, Christ, and not the pope, is the protagonist, the one who reigns supreme and thus guarantees the future and stability of the Church. And so by his resignation, Pope Benedict recalls the whole church to an important truth that the theology of the pope as the Vicar of Christ and the visible head of the Church must never be allowed to obfuscate the more important truth that Christ is the Head of the Church, and so all depend on Him.

Benedict's Resignation: A Norm for Successive Popes?

By virtue of his resignation has Benedict XVI set down a norm which future popes are *bound* to follow? The import of this question may not be immediately felt or fully grasped, but it is a question that cannot be ignored, especially in light of how history unfolds itself. One can say with a good measure of certainty that there would definitely have been a not too positive evaluation of Pope John Paul II's tenacity in remaining in office despite his advanced age and failing health had his papacy followed that of Benedict XVI. Just as Benedict is criticized in some circles for lacking the courage and endurance of John Paul II to carry on the papal ministry to the very end in spite of his failing strength, John Paul would have similarly been highly criticized for lacking the humility, honesty, and selflessness of Benedict to quit office when his weakness and fragility became too manifest, had his papacy followed that of Benedict. And so the question, which of these two examples is the ideal model for future popes?

The response to this question would largely be shaped by the evaluative criterion employed. If the *Corporate Board Room Management criterion* is employed—that is, a criterion which lends more importance to contemporary managerial principles of corporate leadership with its accompanying qualities of efficiency, competence, articulateness, agility, dynamic exuberance, charisma, etc.—an eighty-some-year-old, bent over, stuttering and quivering man will hardly fit the image of a corporate head of what in the media and other circles is often considered the largest corporation in the whole world. It is expected, in this case, that one will naturally be inclined towards resignation as a norm for one who, as pope, begins to display signs of frailty. A diminishing health and increasing frailty would, in this logic of corporate management, negatively affect not only the corporate image of the corporation but also its overall efficiency and productivity and hence competitiveness. For proponents of this perspective, not only is it inconceivable that strength can shine through weakness

but, in fact, weakness and strength are incompatible bedfellows. However valid this approach to corporate leadership might be, it is nevertheless important to bear in mind that the Church is not an association for religious or humanitarian purposes but a living body, a community of brothers and sisters convoked by the Father and bound together by the Spirit under the headship of Christ the Good Shepherd. It is this divine origin and nature of the Christian community that also distinguishes its ministries, especially the papal/episcopal ministry.

A second and opposing perspective is one that rejects resignation as a norm for popes merely for reason of fragility on account of age or ill health. It is a perspective that approaches the issue from a more theological than pragmatic angle. It is a perspective that is rooted in the Christian belief that strength, particularly Divine strength, can powerfully shine forth through human weakness. This is a truth that is pervasive in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline epistles. Paul himself speaks of God choosing the weak in order to demonstrate that it is the power and strength of God that is at work. Thus, in mere earthen vessels, the infinite treasure of God's graces is embodied, so that the immensity of the power of God is made clearly manifest (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). Applying this logic, the frailty of an old and ailing pope cannot constitute a real obstacle to God's continuing providence for the Church of Christ Jesus; and therefore, a norm imposing a moral or canonical requirement of resignation will constitute an affront to God's sovereignty. In addition, such a requirement, whether by norms of canon law or by norms of public opinion or pressure (moral norms), would completely ignore the distinctive and unique character and vocation of the episcopal/papal ministry as one that is first and foremost that of discipleship. According to Raymond Brown, although in a very real sense all Christians are called to be disciples of Jesus, it has nevertheless been felt that those engaged in the special Christian ministry are bound in a special way by the demands of Christian discipleship.²¹ Brown goes on to explain the radical character of discipleship with its rigorous demands. It is both its radicalness and its rigor that have permeated and shaped the understanding of a Christian ministry, that priesthood is neither part-time nor temporary.²² It is a vocation unto death! Building on this insight, one could therefore argue that, as first and foremost a disciple, one who is called by Christ to assume the ministry of shepherding the flock of Christ is called to do so until the one who called him decides otherwise. He stays at his post until the Chief

²¹ R. Brown, *Priests and Bishops: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 23.

Shepherd relieves him of that responsibility. It therefore will be wrong for either him or someone else to relieve him of that responsibility *except in very exceptional and extreme situations*—for instance, in the case of insanity or heresy.

Now, since attentive obedience is the chief virtue of a disciple, it should be the prerogative of each individual pope to decide, presumably of course, in attentive obedience to Christ who called him and entrusted this ministry to him and who is ever mindful of his body the Church, either to stay on or to quit. Although this approach could be faulted on the ground that it appears rather too subjective and even individualistic, since it could ignore the ecclesial dimension of the ministry and thus exclude the possibility of ecclesial input, it remains the best approach that accommodates and reconciles the examples of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Each, it could be said, chose the right course of action after careful and prayerful listening to the voice of the One who called them. Any other approach short of this will present these two models as mutually exclusive and thus necessitate the need to choose one model over the other.

On the whole, the two perspectives, viz., that which is inclined towards the resignation of a pope as a desirable norm and the other perspective, which opposes such a norm, each have their merits and demerits. While the former articulates and appropriates the benefits and values of modern managerial and corporate leadership qualities, it, nonetheless, fails to take into consideration an essential truth of the Christian Gospel, particularly that which pertains to the mystery of the Cross of Christ: that which appears as weak, worthless, despicable in the eyes of men, can in God's hand become an instrument of inestimable force. On the other hand, for all its articulation and appropriation of the richness of the Christian Gospel, the second perspective appears to ignore or minimize the fact of human sinfulness, which can sometimes prevail over the obligation of attentive obedience. The human vices of pride, vainglory, selfishness could be so present and dominant as to drum out the voice of Christ urging a pope to resign and relinquish office for the good of the Church. This, of course, can pose a real danger to the entire Church. But can a middle way be found between these two perspectives? Perhaps. But whatever this third perspective may be, what is certain is that Benedict XVI's resignation cannot constitute a norm which subsequent popes are obliged to follow.

Canon 401 §1 & §2 and the Cross of Christ

In the light of the foregoing discussions, one cannot but raise a question about the implications of Canon 401 §1 & §2. The two sections of the canon state:

- §1. A diocesan bishop who has completed the seventy-fifth year of age is requested to present his resignation from office to the Supreme Pontiff, who will make provision after he has examined all the circumstances.
- §2. A diocesan bishop who has become less able to fulfill his office because of ill health or some other grave cause is earnestly requested to present his resignation from office.

This canon, like several others, highlights the still unresolved tension between the bishops of local churches and the Bishop of Rome, that is, the Pope. These canons contain some vestiges of the pre-Vatican II conception of a bishop as a subordinate of the pope and the papal curia, a conception that the Second Vatican Council tried to correct. Of course, in practice the mentality that the bishop is a quasi-subordinate of the pope still prevails.²³ And, indeed, the canonical stipulation that requires a local bishop to present, that is, submit, his resignation—naturally to the pope through the appropriate decastry of the papal curia—upon attaining the age of seventy-five or when weighed down by ill health appears to suggest such subordination even if it does not presume it.

In our preceding discussions, we had argued towards the conclusion that the papal ministry, marked as it is by the *structure of the Cross*, demands a life-long commitment which can be renounced only in attentive obedience to the voice of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep as the Crucified Savior. But the papal ministry is essentially an episcopal ministry, and so this theological conclusion must also apply to each bishop, since they too are true shepherds of that portion of God's flock entrusted to their care. Besides, there is actually one single episcopal ministry shared in common by all bishops (including the pope) by virtue of their incorporation into the one single college through episcopal consecration and by the hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college (*LG* §22). Apart from the secondary but nonetheless important question, Why should a bishop be canonically required to resign at a certain age while no similar canonical requirement is made of the Bishop of Rome? there is the more important question about the

²³ The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, while clearly affirming the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, nonetheless clearly affirm that bishops are not to be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiff, for they exercise the power which they possess in their own right and are called in the truest sense of the term prelates of the people whom they govern. In fact, bishops were referred to as vicar and legates of Christ, thus indicating that they derived their ministry, authority, and power from Christ himself (cf. *LG* §27).

legitimacy or validity of such a canonical stipulation, which impinges on the essential character of the episcopal ministry, that is, its inner connection to the mystery of the Cross. The weight of this question becomes even more pressing in cases in which a bishop resigns upon attaining the canonical age even though he may still possess the spiritual, mental, and physical strength to carry on that ministry way beyond the limit of the canonical age.

Another question raised by the provision of these canons is whether a canon can legislate the cessation of service to Christ and his Church. This question is rooted in the theology of the episcopacy of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. Although it is evident that one may be required to resign or retire from an office, one may not and, in fact, cannot be required to retire from a service, especially a service of love (*amoris officium*) which is the essential nature of the episcopal ministry as explained earlier in this essay. But is that not precisely what the provisions of Canon 401 ask bishops to do—given that the office which the Lord committed to the pastors of his people (i.e. bishops) is, in the *strict sense of the term*, a service which is called very expressively in sacred scripture a *diakonia* or ministry (Acts 1:17 and 25; 21:19; Rom 11:13; 1 Tim 1:12)?²⁴ Here one can draw a powerful insight from the ministry of priests (of which the ministry of the episcopacy is the fullness).²⁵ It is odd to hear of a priest, however old or sick, retiring from the priesthood. Yes, he may retire from exercising the functions of a parish priest, but he carries on the priestly ministry of celebrating the liturgy, hearing confessions, etc., until he is completely incapacitated. These sacramental actions belong essentially to a priest's ministry and identity. Now, the very identity of a bishop lies in shepherding. He is first and foremost a shepherd who watches over the flock of Christ. In shepherding the flock of Christ, he celebrates the liturgy for them; proclaims the Gospel of Christ to them; heals them through the sacraments of reconciliation, etc. But these are aspects of the primal service of shepherding.²⁶ It is in this primary function of shepherding that a bishop is clearly and definitively distinguished from an *ordinary* priest—we would otherwise fall back to that dubious characterization

²⁴ *Lumen Gentium* §24; emphasis added.

²⁵ *LG* §§21, 26.

²⁶ This view is unambiguously well attested in the thought of the Council Fathers, who articulated the heart of the ministry of the episcopate in the following words: "In that way, then, with priests and deacons as helpers, the bishops received the charge of the community, presiding in God's stead over the flock of which they are the shepherds in that they are teachers of doctrines, ministers of sacred worship and holders of governing office" (*LG* §20).

of a bishop as a senior or exalted priest.²⁷ And so, it will not be sufficient to argue that when a bishop retires or resigns he continues to celebrate the liturgy, preaches, and hears confessions. Even if he does these, he still is not fulfilling that primary function for which he is ordained a bishop and which gives him the identity of a bishop. Neither would it suffice to argue that, in resigning or retiring, a bishop merely gives up the exercise of governance. It is very doubtful if the threefold function of a bishop as a shepherd, as stated in *Lumen Gentium* §20 (viz., teacher of doctrines, minister of sacred worship and holder of office), can be separated. This threefold function constitutes the essence, character, and identity of the ministry of the episcopate. And so the question remains whether the provisions of canon law can legitimately demand that a bishop cease carrying on a *diakonia* entrusted to him by Christ.

Returning to our earlier notion of the episcopal ministry being marked by the structure of the Cross, that is, in its two dimensionality,²⁸ it's quite easy to notice that the provisions of Canon 401 focus on only one beam or dimension of the Cross, that is, the horizontal dimension. It would appear that the overriding concern of this canon is to guarantee that each local Christian community has as its shepherd one who is healthy, strong, mentally alert—in short, one who is fit to administer his diocese. There is, in other words, a concern for the horizontal relationship between the bishop and his flock. Since it is presumed that at seventy-five, one may have much less mental and physical vigor for keep-

²⁷ The view that bishops and priests are merely two degrees of dignity of the same grade of Order was a prevalent view of the medieval theology of Orders. See the discussion of medieval theology of Order in chapter 3 of Aidan Nichols's *Holy Order: The Apostolic Ministry from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1990). This view sharply contrasts that of virtually all the Patristic writers, except for St. Jerome, whose position encapsulates in a classic and apt manner what would eventually become the dominant view for several centuries. According to Jerome, "for with the exception of ordination, what does a bishop do that a presbyter does not do?" Earlier he argued that "the Apostles clearly teach that presbyters are the same as bishops" and that one presbyter is elevated over other presbyters only for the purpose of avoiding schism (cf. *Letter* 146). The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council abandoned this position and retrieved the much earlier Patristic theology that conceived the bishop as being invested with the fullness of the sacrament of Orders; he is the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood (*LG* §26). This position brings the Catholic theology of the episcopate into line with that of Byzantine theology, given that the Conciliar Fathers quoted the words of the prayer of episcopal consecration in the Byzantine rite in describing the ministry of the Catholic episcopate (cf. *LG* §26; see footnote 49).

²⁸ See footnote 17 above.

ing up with the demands of the office of a shepherd, it follows, therefore, that a bishop should retire from office. This reasoning sounds both intelligent and valid. Viewed from this perspective, it is not difficult to see the ease with which one can speak of establishing a canon that requires a bishop to resign, since the criteria for office are seen and judged almost purely from a human perspective. But this perspective, as we see in the provisions of Canon 401, ignores the vertical dimension of the Cross, which is the relational dimension between the bishop and Christ (God) who called him and entrusted to him the mission of shepherding his flock. The bishop, therefore, has an immediate and direct obligation to the one who entrusted him with that ministry as much as he has an obligation to the flock over which he presides, that is, the obligation to see that they are properly watched over. Here we have a meeting of two obligations: to Christ and to his flock. Whereas the latter belongs to what may be termed the public forum, the former lies within the domain of the private/personal; in other words, it is a domain to which no one else but the bishop and Jesus Christ, the good Shepherd, has access. Here, both enter into an intimate dialogue to arrive at a decision as to whether the bishop is still in a position to fulfill his obligation to both Christ and his flock. We are dealing with the question of freedom: responsible freedom, as Walter Kasper would put it.²⁹ Each bishop must be given the vital space to make responsible decisions, not only in the matters of implementing universal norms, but also in deciding whether or not to carry on the episcopal ministry in the face of certain challenges.³⁰

Conclusion

The resignation of Pope Benedict, while by no means a novelty in the history of the Catholic Papacy, is an event of no small significance in contemporary history. But how much influence this event should have on future papacies is an entirely different question. Through our theological analyses, we have demonstrated that, though important as a historical event, Pope Benedict's resignation cannot constitute a standard or norm of action for future popes. His resignation does not circumscribe the limit of the tenure—or better still, the years of *diakonia*—in the papal ministry. **N·V**

²⁹ Walter Kasper, "On the Church: A Friendly Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger," *The Furrow* 52 (June 2001): 324.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*