

The Renunciation of Pope Benedict XVI

The media, of course, is calling it a resignation. But it's not so much a resignation of a political office as it is a renunciation. The 85-year-old pontiff's decision to renounce the power and prestige of the papal office is so unexpected, almost unprecedented, as to take the world by surprise.

Of course, we Americans of all people can understand what thoughts must have coursed through Pope Benedict XVI's mind as he prayed about this weighty decision. We saw this kind of renunciation with our first president, George Washington. He did not leave the presidency before his second term expired, true, but he renounced all further exercise of power on March 4, 1797. It was then he strode out of the Senate chamber in Philadelphia. He purposely prodded President John Adams and Vice President Thomas Jefferson, the new nation's elected leaders and Washington's own successors, to go before him. He knew the importance of symbolism. King George III had once been George Washington's bitterest enemy. He said if Washington renounces his power, he truly will be the greatest man in the world. He did. He was.

Pope Benedict XVI knows that however insistent the world is, however menacing its foes are, the Church of Jesus Christ will stand forever. This Pope has not tried to keep up with the times. Or the Times. Too many church bodies today are desperate to be thought modern. Some are indifferent to the lives of the unborn. It's as if they missed that story about Herod and the Innocents. Or, those synods and conventions that breathlessly ponder whether or not to take the plunge and declare that marriage between persons of the same sex is the new revelation. It's an insight that the most serious Bible scholars for two thousand years somehow managed to overlook. And we can view with sorrow those religious bodies that

solemnly declare that affordable health care for all is so important that it's worth trammeling freedom of religion in order to mandate it.

In renouncing the power and the glory of the papacy, Pope Benedict XVI is clearly putting the life and mission of the Catholic Church and her 1.2 billion believers above his own earthly being. He knows that the challenges the Church faces-the dictatorship of relativism in the developed countries and the murderous threats of militant Islam in the Bloody Crescent-will demand the vitality of a younger man. Still, no one can doubt the steadfastness of this Pope's witness.

When he issued his first papal encyclical, the media raced to report it. What would be the Pope's subject? Ordination of women? Priestly celibacy? The threat to religious belief from a culture increasingly drenched in sensuality? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Pope Benedict XVI has never marched to the media's drumbeat. He did not seek to satisfy the agenda of the hour. Instead, the Pope reminded the City and the World what it was in danger of forgetting: God is Love.

As he renounces the papal throne, it's funny to remember the media caricatures of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger before he was elevated. In the days of Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger was often called the Pope's "enforcer." In those days, he headed the Vatican's sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

While critics in the media dubbed Cardinal Ratzinger "God's Rottweiler," a none too subtle reference to his German birth, and a hint of ferocity, the real Joseph Ratzinger belied all the press hype. Soft-spoken, mild-mannered, even sweet-tempered, he defied all the stereotypes.

It was his unyielding support for his brother in Christ, Karol Wojtyla, soon to become Pope John Paul II, that brought

Cardinal Ratzinger to the attention of the world. Their fraternal collaboration was one of the great partnerships of the modern era.

That brotherhood was itself a testimony to the eternal truth that God is Love. The Bavarian teenager Joseph Ratzinger had been forced into the Hitler Youth. Young Karol Wojtyla, the Polish seminarian, had come within a hair's breadth of being murdered by that same Nazi regime that slaughtered millions of Poles and Jews.

The fact that Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict the XVI could have overcome national differences to work together for the New Evangelism is a source of hope for all mankind. By unapologetically defending Christian Truth, we work for peace, we advance reconciliation. Now, the scene opens upon a dramatic new vista. Whomever the College of Cardinals chooses in Rome, he and we will live in interesting times.

Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI built on an imperishable foundation. Their legacy can inspire all mankind.

Ken Blackwell *is senior fellow, Family Empowerment at Family Research Council. This article appeared on , Feb. 12.*