

Why did the Pope resign?



Dear Father Kerper: I was very stunned and even troubled by the sudden resignation of Pope Benedict. I had always heard: “Once a priest always a priest.” Doesn’t that apply to popes as well? How can something so ancient and so important to our faith suddenly change overnight?

Yes, the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in February certainly unsettled the Church by changing yet another seemingly permanent practice — the life-time “tenure” of the pope. Yet, when properly understood, his decision to step down actually reinforces Catholic

belief in the ultimate durability of the Church. How so? Allow me to suggest three ways. First, the Holy Father’s action reminds us of the *essential difference* between the man who holds a Church office — in this case, the Chair of Saint Peter, the papacy — and the office itself. By

fusing together the man and the office too tightly, we tend to transform the pope into a monarch rather than an office-holder.

Whereas the power of a king permanently resides in his own person, that of the pope does not. Kings are born to rule and pass on power through dynasties.

Popes, by contrast, are elected to serve. Upon election, the pope assumes the papal office as successor of Saint Peter. This office, which is not hereditary, consists of a collection of clearly-defined responsibilities and powers. Moreover, the office continues to exist even when no one occupies the Chair of Saint Peter.

This brings us to the phrase “once a priest always a priest.” However, Pope Benedict’s retirement doesn’t change this ancient Church teaching at all. In fact, it reaffirms it.

Here’s how. Whereas ordination as a bishop, priest, or deacon is absolutely irrevocable, the offices attached to Holy Orders are not. The pope must always be a bishop. Once a bishop always a bishop. However, not every bishop has a diocese. Some, for example, serve in various Vatican departments. And most eventually retire, relinquishing their authority. Upon retiring, Pope Benedict has simply become the retired bishop of Rome, no different from any other bishop except that he once held the papal office, which is linked with being bishop of Rome.

Second, Pope Benedict’s retirement demonstrates the Church’s astonishing ability to adapt to changing situations without altering anything truly substantial.

The new situation here, of course, is the vast extension of life expectancy brought about by advances in medical technology and the general improvement in living standards. In the past, men elected to the papacy at age 50 or so could expect to live into their 60s or early 70s. Now, many men, especially those in more affluent nations, live into their 80s and 90s.

Moreover, in the “old days,” heart attacks, strokes, serious infections, and almost every form of cancer ended in rapid death. Not any more. Today, seriously impaired people

can live for many years. In the past, it was highly unlikely that an incumbent pope would ever endure a long period of mental incapacity. Now the possibility is very real.

Pope Benedict, having been Blessed John Paul II's closest confidant and collaborator, witnessed at close hand his predecessor's many years of suffering, and the gradual loss of his outstanding abilities as an effective leader. Having seen this, Pope Benedict surely must have realized that the same could happen to him; and so he's acted to avoid a potentially long period of paralysis in the Church. By doing so, he has not fled suffering but acted courageously — and conscientiously — to protect the Church.

By retiring freely and without urgency, Pope Benedict has simultaneously upheld the tradition of life-time papal "tenure" while making a prudent adaptations to a new situation.

Third, and perhaps most important, Pope Benedict's retirement powerfully — and beautifully — reaffirms Catholic belief that Christ, not anyone else, is the firm foundation of the Church.

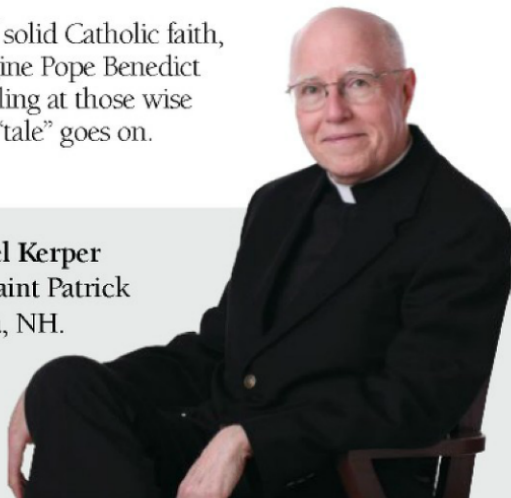
Though the pope may appear larger than life while holding the papal office, every pope, even the great ones like Blessed John Paul II, Pope Saint Gregory, and Pope Saint Leo, seem very small indeed within the vast sweep of Church history.

Pope Benedict, being a brilliant scholar imbued with a deep sense of Church history, has surely grasped his own ultimate smallness, fully understanding — and graciously embracing — his own small role. Precisely by doing this, Pope Benedict has magnified the true greatness of Christ, the only true and permanent shepherd.

As I finish this response, my mind returns to a relevant scene from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In the third volume, Frodo and Sam, two hobbits engaged in a very difficult mission against evil, take time to rest on their journey. Together, they reflect on all they've seen and endured. Sam, suffering from fatigue and some discouragement, wonders whether they're trapped in a "tale." He asked Frodo if the "tale" will ever end.

Frodo responded: "No, they never end as tales, but the people in them come and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later — or sooner." Sam laughed and said, "And then we may have some rest and some sleep."

Tolkien, a man of solid Catholic faith, perhaps could imagine Pope Benedict nodding and chuckling at those wise words. Indeed, the "tale" goes on.



■ **Father Michael Kerper** is the pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in Nashua, NH.

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