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eNewsletter of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual

Papal Retirement: A Matter of Conscience by Mary E. Hunt

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The unexpected announcement of the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI is a welcome breath of fresh air. A human being, even a pope, ought to have the option to say enough is enough, I have done what I can do, and now it is time for someone else to take over. I applaud his move and read it as a sign of hope in a dreary ecclesial scene.

Speculation about his health is rampant. As with many elders whose offspring plot to take away the car keys, I suspect there was some backdoor lobbying to make this retirement happen. But I dare to hope that it was at least in part the considered judgment of an octogenarian who saw his predecessor propped up long after his prime and did not want the same for himself.

But before looking for the backstory there's something in Benedict's resignation statement that bears noting: "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."

Conscience, Benedict reminds us today, is still primary for Catholics. Examination of conscience: that is just the formula millions of us use to explain why we use birth control, enjoy our sexuality in a variety of ways, and see enormous good in other religious traditions. Conscience is the ultimate arbiter, and the Pope relied on his. Good on him, and good on the rest of us.

There has been a lot of fudging on the matter of conscience in recent decades. The post-Vatican II hierarchy has claimed that conscience is primary if, and only if, it is informed as they see fit. But Pope Benedict XVI is giving conscience a new lease on life. What's good for the goose is good for the gander—the appeal to conscience cannot be denied now that the Pope himself has had recourse to it.

Another takeaway: Just because a pope has not resigned since Gregory XII in 1415 does not mean it cannot be done. Nothing is forever. Much of what passes as "the way it is" in Rome is really just custom—like not ordaining women, claiming birth control to be a sin, regarding same-sex love as morally disordered, and the like. Customs change. Roman PR people say, "in the fullness of revelation such and such is now the case." Then the new thing emerges as "the way it is" and life goes on. I fully expect the next pope to be cut out of the same cloth as this man, but there is no stopping the feeling that the pressure to change customs is simply overwhelming.

WATER's Statement on the Pope's Resignation:

Let an Inclusive Church Rise!

WATER welcomes the news of the Pope Benedict XVI's resignation and wishes him a peaceful and dignified future.

The Pope's conscience-based decision reflects an honest assessment of his diminished capacity and an enlightened view of the job. We support freedom of conscience in this and in all things, including reproductive and sexual choices.

The Pope demonstrated by his abdication that change is afoot in the Catholic community. Rather than business as usual in the election of his successor, we take this as an opportunity to develop new forms of participatory leadership reflecting the diversity and maturity of the Catholic community. Let an inclusive church rise!

If substantive structural changes in the church begin to emerge, history will record Pope Benedict XVI with more than an asterisk for having retired. Rather, he will be remembered for ending a period of patriarchal rule and making way for a new era of equality. This is our prayer.

Upcoming Programs:

February 13: Teleconference Town Meeting,
1 PM EST

- Join us by phone.
- RSVP with "Register Me Teleconference"

by Tuesday, Feb.

12, 2013 to waterstaff@waterwomensalliance.org or
call 301.589.2509. [Read more.](#)

News reports of the papal announcement include the fact that many of the cardinals in the Consistory where Benedict XVI quietly dropped the news did not immediately understand his words because they were in Latin. A quick translation on their iPads surely rectified the situation. But it is fascinating to note that many of those 118 cardinals who will elect his successor are not competent enough in the ancient language to understand, "*Quapropter bene conscius ponderis huius actus plena libertate declaro me ministerio Episcopi Romae, Successoris Sancti Petri, mihi per manus Cardinalium die 19 aprilis MMV commissum renuntiare ita ut a die 28 februarii MMXIII, hora 20, sedes Romae, sedes Sancti Petri vacet et Conclave ad eligendum novum Summum Pontificem ab his quibus competit convocandum esse.*" Quick translation: by month's end I'm outta here and you need to elect a new person.

This does demystify the process a bit. Lesson learned: Latin is helpful but knowing how to push the translation button is another skill religious leaders need. More to the point, we need people who can listen and discern what is meant by words they do not understand coming from people they do not know. In our well-connected world the universal language is no longer Latin but listening.

What is news this time around is that rank and file Catholics want a new Church, not just a new pope.

We know that change is in the air because we put it there. Progressive Catholics all over the world are creating new forms of church since the old is so thoroughly discredited. No institution can withstand the onslaught of negative publicity that the Vatican earned over clergy sexual abuse and episcopal cover-ups without major changes. No hierarchy however fortified can hold out forever against spirit-filled steps toward equality and justice. This time, just electing a new pope will not do. Nor will closeting away a group of elite electors responsible to no one but themselves cut it for an election process.

Catholic people have consciences too. We expect to have a say in how we organize and govern ourselves. We cannot in conscience abdicate our authority to 118 mostly elderly men. Those days are over. If a pope can abdicate before he goes out feet first without the sky falling in then new egalitarian models of church can and will emerge too.

Even though knowledge of Latin is apparently no longer a required for leadership, we have a lot of people—women, married men, openly gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics—who are "ready and willing" to take on ministry and leadership. I know hundreds who are already actively involved in base communities, parishes, religious communities and social change groups doing a wonderful job of living new ways of being church. Some of them even know Latin.

What do you give to the Pope on the occasion of his retirement? I am sure he has more Rolex watches than he needs, and the red shoes he likes are out of my price range. But a new church would be just the thing to assure him a dignified old age. Instead of simply retiring quietly to Castel Gandolfo, if his health permits, Joseph Ratzinger might enjoy a good Bavarian beer with the rest of us as part of a renewed Church where all are welcome.

March 11: Contemplative Prayer, 7:30 PM EST

April 8: Contemplative Prayer, 7:30 PM EST

May 13: Contemplative Prayer, 7:30 PM EST

Please consider making a [secure online donation](#) for your participation in this event. Thank you!



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