Sistine Chapel chimney could get sootier

Posted on Friday 1st March 2013

Benedict XVI told the faithful gathered in St Peter's Square on 24 February 2013 that his retirement 'doesn't mean abandoning the church'. Many Catholics, though, including those who are not church goers, consider his unexpected resignation as the Vicar of Christ, an ill-thought out decision that will lead to an irreparable desacralization of the role.

German-born Joseph Ratzinger has been in the news from the start of his papacy more often than not for all the wrong reasons. Stories about his conscription into the Hitler Youth, failure to take a firm stance against various child abuse scandals before and since he became Pontiff in 2005, the ill-advised use in 2006 of a fourteenth century quote about the prophet Muhammad's 'evil and inhuman' legacy, insensitivity towards Judaism, especially the lifting of the excommunication of Bishop Richard Williamson, an alleged holocaust denier, inflammatory remarks about homosexuals, and last year's scandal over leaked Vatican documents, which is haunting his papacy to the very end, were bound to take their toll on the 85-year-old Pontiff who finally admitted that he simply does not have the 'strength of mind and body' to lead the Church.

Even the most enthusiastic church historians and hagiographers will need to think carefully when recording this Pope's legacy for posterity. One cannot help thinking that, notwithstanding the reasons for his sudden resignation, Benedict XVI's decision to go is a courageous act and one he will be most remembered for. His voluntary departure may eventually prove beneficial to a Church which, fifty years after the promising signs of the Second Vatican Council, has yet to come to terms with modernity.

We may never know all the reasons that made the Pope give up on his role as Peter's successor. What seems certain, though, is that, unlike his charismatic predecessor, John Paul II, who was literally incapacitated in the final years of his papacy, the current Pontiff understands that the Church needs not just a figurehead but an active leader.

The appointment of a new pope will not result in a changed Catholic Church because this is an inherently conservative institution and as such no single pontiff, irrespective of his charism, can do much on his own to radically change such a long established traditional institution. On the other hand, the resignation should not worry the Church or Catholic believers because this will not result in any schism, as this would have been the case a couple of centuries ago. More importantly, the new pope will have the support of Benedict XVI.

While Benedict XVI himself will not cast a vote, he will have a say, although indirectly, in the appointment of his successor. After all, he has appointed a significant number of cardinal electors – 67 to be precise – who owe him a debt of gratitude and share his conservative views. As such, one could argue that the issue is not if a 'conservative' or a 'reformer' will take the helm of the Catholic Church but if the College of Cardinals – an all-male club – which is dominated by the over-80s, is inclined to elect a young pontiff.

One wonders where the new pope will hail from. The Italian cardinals, who make 24 percent of the total numbers of 116 electors, may be eager to 'reclaim' the Vatican since 'losing' it in 1978. They may be in for another 'disappointment'.

One thing is certain: the 800,000 nuns will not have a say in the selection of the papal candidates and the election of the Head of their Church although they outnumber priests by two to one. Needless to say, electing a female Pope will remain a taboo, which, as legend has it, was allegedly broken only once for a few years in the Middle Ages.

The new pope, irrespective of age, 'race' or nationality, is bound to find the post too demanding, especially the constant media attention that comes with it. Benedict XVI has never been comfortable with publicity which is explained partly by his scholarly disposition, making one wonder why he agreed to take the helm of the Church in the first place. The old maxim that philosophers do not make good leaders apparently applies also to bright theologians.

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