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The Papacy After Benedict

Benedict XVI, the first Pope since the Middle Ages to resign his office, is also the first pontiff to maintain a Twitter feed—using the Latin handle @Pontifex. Benedict announced his decision Monday, not with a tweet, but in a speech delivered in Latin to cardinals of the Catholic Church. It now falls to the next Pope to make its global communications equal to its Latin.

Benedict's election to succeed John Paul II in 2005 was a statement. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had been for two decades an avatar of conservative Catholicism. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he supported the reintroduction of the Latin Mass, which had all but disappeared after Vatican II. He was especially articulate defending the rationale for moral traditions. At a time when other Christian denominations were scrambling to appear modern and relevant by ditching their vestments and high-church trappings, Benedict's election seemed an affirmation that a church need not be hip to thrive.

But if Christianity's relevance to the daily lives of Europeans seems to be in irreversible decline, that is not the whole story of religion today. Perhaps the most important religious development in our time is the rise of Islamist fundamentalism. Benedict courted controversy over Islam with his 2006 speech, "Faith and Reason," in Regensburg, Germany. He quoted the 14th-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus saying uncomplimentary things about Islam, quotes that led to death threats against the pontiff.

Largely lost in that controversy was the Pope's purpose in delivering the speech—an insistence that Faith and Reason need not be antagonists. Their convergence, he argued, "created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe."

You might also call it a defense of Western civilization, or simply the West. In the modern West, however, we have turned skepticism and tolerance into such pre-eminent values that we are in danger of rendering ourselves incapable of defending the virtues of the Western tradition. Pope Benedict refused to turn a blind eye when radical Islam suppressed freedom, notably freedom of conscience.

In the Middle East, China and elsewhere, Christians face persecution, expulsion, imprisonment or even death for cleaving to their faith. Coptic Christians in Egypt have suffered greatly after Mubarak, and in Iraq some of the oldest Christian communities in the world cling to a tenuous existence. Benedict's pontificate deserves to be remembered for the attention and energy he gave to the plight of Christians living in unfree conditions for religious practice.

The one issue during Benedict's papacy that threatened to overwhelm all others has been the sex-abuse scandals among the Catholic priesthood. The Church has brought upon itself much of the condemnation it's received over cover-ups and lax treatment of abusive priests, though Pope Benedict recognized the problem and acted, if belatedly, to air these crimes and draw a line under them.

Enlarge Image

The scandals nonetheless made clear that the Catholic Church's lumbering, centuries-old Vatican administrative bureaucracy is its Achilles' heel. Honed over centuries to protect itself, the Vatican in many ways is a 16th-century bureaucracy in a 21st-century world. It proved during the abuse scandals that it is an insufficient servant of the modern papacy.

Four years ago, as part of an effort to reconcile a group of schismatics, Pope Benedict reinstated an excommunicated bishop who was, as Der Spiegel put it, "a notorious Holocaust denier." Benedict apologized for the episode, noting that if the Church had accessed information available on the Internet, it could have avoided the controversy. Perhaps so, but the larger problem of the Church hierarchy's insularity will take more than a bit of Googling or papal tweeting to address.

An intellectually strong Pope such as Benedict can set worthy goals and articulate them with force and eloquence. But it comes to naught if the Vatican is either incapable of following through to execute the Pope's intentions, or even undermines them. For all the diplomatic attention given the Middle East, there is little to show for it. Benedict's failure to meet with dissidents during his visit to Cuba last year was a glaring and inexplicable failure by those preparing the trip.

It's possible that Benedict recognized all this and that it influenced his decision to resign in favor of a younger man with more energy to manage and reinvigorate such a huge institution. If so, this traditionalist pope will prove to have been wise in breaking the papal tradition of staying on the job until death.

The Catholic Church under Benedict and John Paul II has been exemplary in defending tradition against the erosions of the modern world. And the Church isn't the only institution to find itself routinely behind the communications curve. We hope, though, that when the cardinals gather to pick Benedict's successor, they consider someone able and willing to clean out the Augean Stables at the Vatican itself. The papacy's voice is needed. But it needs an upgrade.

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