

Pope's Abdication: A Sign of the Times

by Claudio Celani

Feb. 20—The resignation of a Pope is a rare historical event. In fact, there is only one other Pope who resigned voluntarily, Celestine V, and that was more than 700 years ago. Thus, the announcement made by Pope Benedict XVI on Feb. 4, to become effective on Feb. 28, indicates that no institution, not even the Catholic Church, is immune from the tremendous crisis which is shaking humanity.

There are no grounds to challenge the motives given by Josef Ratzinger for his abdication, namely, that he realizes that his dwindling energy does not allow him to govern the Church effectively. However, it is the divisions within the Church and resistance to the Pope's reforms which have made the task so difficult, and the energy required which is so challenging for an aging Pope.

For half a century now, the battle lines of the conflict in the Catholic Church have been defined by Vatican II Council. That Council, convened by Pope John XXIII and concluded by Paul VI, established guidelines for the Catholic Church to change its course in harmony with a notion of progress as defined by the "Westphalian" order of sovereign and independent nation-states. The best expression of the Council is Paul VI's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which declared that "development is the new name for peace." The Council marked a shift toward an ecumenical policy and away from the centuries-old oligarchical control over the Catholic Church.

Under Benedict XVI's Pontificate, the fight between the

two factions has overlapped with the secular strategic fight between pro- and anti-Westphalian factions. The lack of a solution to the world crisis, and the increasing domination of the imperial faction in the West have boosted the anti-Westphalian faction inside the Vatican as well. The conflict has exploded in an unprecedented form and has almost led to paralysis, with the Vatican attacked from the outside, and torn by internal fights, which recently saw the Pope targeted from several sides.

It is not to be excluded that by deciding to abdicate now, Ratzinger aims to shake things up and start a new game. When a Pope resigns, the Curia (Vatican Administration) also resigns, and a new one is appointed by his successor. Benedict XVI is in a position to influence the choice of the next Pope, as he appointed over half of the College of Cardinals himself, and most of the others were appointed by his predecessor and mentor John Paul II. Among the two groups, he can count on a strong faction that would follow his leadership.

The way Ratzinger has managed the interim phase until his resignation takes effect tends to support this view. At his last public meeting with Roman priests on

Feb. 15 in the Vatican, he focused on the issue of Vatican II. He spoke for one hour without a written text, showing that despite his age, he is fully in control of his intellectual powers.

His message was: Vatican II was misrepresented to the world's Catholic community. Now I will tell you what it really meant, and why the Roman Catholic Church must follow this path. He stressed that the intention was to open the Church to the world and to progress, reversing the route taken after the Galileo trials. However, he added, this intention was banalized in its implementation, leading to disasters. Fortunately, Benedict said, the idea of the Council was powerful enough to slowly get through.



Presidency of Poland
Pope Benedict in Poland, Oct. 17, 2010.