



Pope Benedict XVI Announces Resignation

In an unanticipated statement that shocked members of the Catholic Church and greatly surprised the rest of the world, Pope Benedict XVI announced on Monday that he would resign from the papacy, effective February 28.

Benedict, who is 85, delivered his statement to a small gathering of cardinals, speaking in Latin, the official language of the Catholic Church. He said, in part:



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.... In today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the bark of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me. For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome.

The papal announcement was followed by a news conference called by the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi.

"The pope took us by surprise," the [New York Times](#) quoted Father Lombardi, who quoted from a lengthy interview that a German journalist had with Benedict in 2010. During that interview, Benedict had said that "if a pope clearly realizes that he is no longer physically, psychologically and spiritually capable of handling the duties of his office, then he has a right and, under some circumstances, also an obligation to resign."

Benedict, noted the *Times*, is "the church's 265th pope [and] the first German to hold the title in half a millennium."

Generally regarded by the mainstream media as a "conservative" pope, though secular political labels generally fail to describe an institution that is hierarchical in its structure, Benedict was often at odds with the more "progressive" elements within the Church that rebelled against its doctrines. A report in the [Wall Street Journal](#) noted:

The Pope has ... been criticized by liberal Catholics for last year's crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an organization that represents the majority of American nuns and sisters. In April 2012, the Vatican issued the results of a four-year review of the women's group, saying it engaged in "radical feminism" and must submit to oversight from an officially appointed "delegate" from the church.

A *USA Today* article in the [Detroit Free Press](#) reported that when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (as Benedict was known before becoming Pope) headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the congregation "disciplined or rebuked many priests and scholars, notably Latin American priests and cardinals who believed in 'liberation theology,' punished prominent writers [such as] Hans Kung [and]



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Charles Curran whom Ratzinger thought strayed from orthodoxy, [and] relieved Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle, one of the U.S. church's most prominent liberals, of some pastoral duties."

"In the political realm," continued the article, "Ratzinger decried any candidate's support for abortion or euthanasia rights, saying Catholic politicians who held such views should be denied Communion if they failed to heed private warnings by their bishops."

Also, continued the *Free Press* report, Benedict sought "to restore the Mass, the centerpiece of Catholic worship, to historic richness by drawing the prayers said and sung closer to their ancient Latin roots."

Additionally, "In 2007, he liberalized permission to use the 16th-century Tridentine Mass in Latin, a move hailed by traditionalists and condemned by those who saw it as an attempt to reverse the Second Vatican Council's encouragement of Catholics to worship in their own tongues."

[ABC News posted](#) quotes about the Pope's resignation from leaders around the world, including President Obama, who said: "On behalf of Americans everywhere, Michelle and I wish to extend our appreciation and prayers to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. Michelle and I warmly remember our meeting with the Holy Father in 2009, and I have appreciated our work together over these last four years. The church plays a critical role in the United States and the world, and I wish the best to those who will soon gather to choose His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI's successor."

British Prime Minister David Cameron stated: "I send my best wishes to Pope Benedict following his announcement today. He has worked tirelessly to strengthen Britain's relations with the Holy See. His visit to Britain in 2010 is remembered with great respect and affection. He will be missed as a spiritual leader to millions."

[The National Catholic Register](#) reported a statement from New York's Archbishop, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who said, in part: "Pope Benedict often cited the significance of eternal truths, and he warned of a dictatorship of relativism. Some values, such as human life, stand out above all others, he taught again and again."

During his pontificate, Benedict appointed 84 cardinals, of which 67 (those under age 80), as cardinal electors, will take part in the conclave to elect Benedict's successor. There are currently 118 Cardinal Electors.

While Benedict's appointees are often described by the secular media (or even the more liberal Catholic press) as being "conservative," terms such as "conservative" or "liberal" are generally subjective and may vary greatly depending on the philosophy of whoever is using them.

An article in what many consider the theologically "liberal" [National Catholic Reporter](#) went to great pains to classify Benedict's appointees as Bishops in the United States in categories it defined as "right," "center-right," "center-left," and "left." The writer categorized Cardinal Dolan as "center-right," stating: "In general, center-right bishops such as Dolan are eager to challenge Obama on the 'life issues,' but they also tend to shrink from polarizing measures such as communion bans for pro-choice Catholics, and they remain open to collaboration in other areas."

The NCR writer continued:

On the other hand, with the possible exception of Vigneron in Detroit, none of Benedict's key appointments in the United States have gone to bishops associated with the right either. Instead, the pattern seems to be to turn to more centrist prelates seen as good administrators and pastors, comfortable with the media and the public. Dolan's affable, relentlessly sunny persona represents a



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classic case in point.

As noted, however, using secular political terms to describe a monolithic spiritual institution such as the Catholic Church is generally inadequate.

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