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## Communicating the Untimely

### Pope Benedict XVI's Resignation and the Second Franciscan Age

The decision by Pope Benedict XVI, announced on 11 February 2013, to renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome with effect from 28 February 2013 at 8pm Roman time (Benedict XVI 2013b) has been diversely commented and interpreted by observers seeking to make sense of an extraordinary, unexpected, yet not unprecedented event. Scholars and pundits have raised questions relating to Canon Law, ecclesiology and, indeed, the economy of secular communication. These perspectives have shed interesting, albeit scattered insights on this decision; and yet its motivations remain difficult to fathom. This article will take the different perspectives on Benedict XVI's resignation into account while paying particular attention to its very own untimeliness and the message that this untimeliness addresses to the Church and the world.

Hardly anybody nowadays expects the end of the world. This expectation is either confined to the fringes of our society or defused within secularised variations about the consequences of global warming. That considerations about the end of the world would influence political or even ecclesiastical decisions seems improbable. And yet it has been argued that similar considerations played an essential role in Benedict XVI's resignation. Following its announcement and the subsequent election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio to the Papacy, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2017, Part I and Appendix) stated in a widely acclaimed essay, translated into English as part of *The Mystery of Evil*, that Benedict XVI had reasserted the coexistence of Good and Evil in our world and the role of the Church as a *katéchon* delaying the coming of the Antichrist when such coexistence were called to cease. According to Agamben, Benedict XVI's resignation thus prolonged a reflection that he had initiated as the theologian Joseph Ratzinger long before the papal election of 2005. This is not the place to comment on Agamben's reading of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI nor to contextualise both thinkers' reflection on the notion of *katéchon* that played a crucial role in political thought in the Weimar Republic and the 1930s under the influence of the jurist Carl Schmitt and his critique, the theologian Erik Peterson. It suffices to say that Agamben's reading is possibly more Schmittian than he may have liked and that it does not do justice to the young Ratzinger's reflection on the exegesis of the fourth-century North-African theologian Tyconius on 2 *Thessalonians* 2, 1-8, where *katéchon* is mentioned twice (Staub 2017).

If anything, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI has consistently erred on the side of a caution when it comes to eschatological claims. It would not be too difficult to find reasons for this attitude in both his upbringing in a family with a deeply rooted mistrust in secular ideologies, in particular National Socialism, and the influence of modernist French theology on his theological training and thinking (Ratzinger 1998). His caution may indeed go a long way in helping us understand his decision to renounce the Papacy. For, there is a precedent for this decision. If we ignore Pope Gregory XII's resignation from the See of Rome on 4 July 1415, which, while happening on the pope's own accord, responded to one of the main agenda points of the Council of Constance, i.e. the resolution of the Western Schism, the last pope to

freely resign before Benedict XVI was Pope Celestine V who, having been elected on 5 July 1294, abdicated that same year, on 13 December. If Benedict XVI's resignation has often been related to Celestine V's, scant attention has been paid to the fact that both episodes have been interpreted against the background of eschatology. The intensity of the argument may have differed, but the similarity remains striking.

Pope Boniface VIII, who included the precedent set by his immediate predecessor Celestine V into *Liber Sextus* (1, 7, 1) (Corpus Iuris Canonici 1959, 971), famously asked about the radical groups of his time that claimed the legacy of the eschatological theory developed by the twelfth-century Cistercian Abbot Joachim of Fiore: "Why are these fools awaiting the end of the world?" (McGinn 1971, 30). This remark points to a common attitude at the top-echelon of the institutionalised Church in the 13<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of Scholastic teaching and thinking. Bernard McGinn (1971) showed, long ago, how the Scholastics reacted to the challenge of the Joachites by either rejecting their thinking (Thomas Aquinas) or integrating and, thus, defusing it (Bonaventure). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the renunciation of Celestine V, albeit extensively debated among the masters of the University of Paris, was considered licit by all those whose views are known to us (Wei 1993, 55). True, Peter John Olivi's attitude towards eschatology marked an undeniable departure from the cautious attitude adopted by Bonaventure and thus anticipated the split of the Spiritual Franciscans from the Franciscan Order's mainstream (Burr 1993). It did not, however, lead him to different conclusions from the other masters regarding Celestine V's resignation, which he too saw as licit.

Ratzinger did not give up his professorial habit on being elected pope in 2005, and nor has Benedict XVI renounced it since his resignation in 2013. His caution against radical eschatology may be explained in part by his habit. While a comparison with the late thirteenth-century theologians of the University of Paris on these grounds may rightly seem far-fetched, Joseph Ratzinger's work gives us a clue of the importance of some of these people to his own reflection. Bonaventure, on whose theology of history the young Ratzinger submitted his *Habilitationsschrift* in 1957 (Ratzinger 1971), died twenty years before Celestine V's election and resignation, in July 1274. As has already been mentioned, though, his influence as well as the influence of his Dominican counterpart Thomas of Aquinas, who had died a mere four months before him, remained strong among the masters who took position in the discussion prompted by Celestine V's papal resignation (McGinn 1971). This intergenerational connection was not lost on Ratzinger/Benedict XVI: a leading scholar on Bonaventure's theology of history, he twice visited the shrine of Celestine V (who died in 1296 and was canonised in 1313) in L'Aquila in the Abruzzi region during his pontificate.

In a series of *Collationes in hexaëmeron*, or (*Evening*) *Conferences on the Six Days (of Creation)*, held in the Spring of 1273 in Paris, Bonaventure (2018, Introduction) took the opportunity to engage with Joachim of Fiore's controversial, yet influential understanding of the three ages of history. The most critical aspect of this theology of history was the claim that the Age of Christ had been superseded by the Age of the Holy Spirit. The pneumatological turn performed by Joachim of Fiore had sharpened the eschatological dimension of history. By Bonaventure's time, Joachim's thought had been endorsed by radical Franciscans who saw saint Francis of Assisi as having introduced the Age of the Spirit. As the Minister General of the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure needed to respond to this interpretation and, thus, to engage with Joachim de Fiore's theology of history.

Bonaventure did not dismiss the pneumatological turn performed by Joachim of Fiore (McCaughey 2020, 212). While returning to saint Augustine's emphasis on Christ being the fulfilment of history, he insisted on not confining this action to the past and the present (Ratzinger 1971, 83). Instead, it was essential to include the future, in which Christ will act through the Holy Spirit. Albeit subtle, this shift away from Bonaventure had huge implications. Most importantly, it firmly established the Church at the core of history. While Bonaventure's ecclesiology remained open to them, ecclesial movements such as the Franciscans were no longer opposed to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but they were rather considered an essential part of the Church and a support to the Papacy.

While inclusive under normal circumstances, Bonaventure's ecclesiology bore some risks in extraordinary times. Celestine V's resignation was such an extraordinary event and so was Benedict XVI's, even though the latter could be, and has been, tied to the former. This difficulty was not lost on Benedict XVI. Thus, his decision to resign closely conforms to the letter of the (very short) second paragraph of Canon 332 of the *Code of Canon Law* (1983) ("If it happens that the Roman Pontiff resigns his office, it is required for validity that the resignation is made freely and properly manifested, but not that it is accepted by anyone"). Similarly, the motivation given by Benedict XVI is aligned on the *motu proprio* apostolic letter *Ingravescentem aetatem* of 1970, by which Pope Paul VI extended the principle of age-limitation for ecclesiastical office-holders introduced by the Second Vatican Council to the College of Cardinals (Paul VI 1970). Little attention has been paid, though, to the sentence following the statement that Benedict XVI had found his strengths wanting for the adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry. "I am well aware", Benedict XVI adds, "that this ministry, due to its essential spiritual nature, must be carried out not only with words and deeds, but no less with prayer and suffering" (Benedict XVI 2013b).

The mention of prayer and suffering obviously points to Christ's Passion and Death on the Cross and, beyond, to the Resurrection. It may too hint to the choice of Benedict XVI's immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul II, to discharge his ministry until his death while giving testimony to Redemption through suffering according to the apostolic letter *Salvici doloris* that he had released in 1984 after the attack that almost took his life on St Peter's Square in 1981 (John Paul II 1984). While *Salvici doloris* mentions saint Francis of Assisi next to saint Ignatius of Loyola as an example of suffering with Christ, his place in Bonaventure and Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's thought is even more important. Indeed, it is essential as saint Francis is the herald of the presence of Christ in the world through the Spirit and the archetype of the Church (Ratzinger 1971, 32). Thus, by referring to prayer and suffering as being at the heart of the essential spiritual nature of the Petrine ministry, Benedict XVI firmly rooted the Papacy within Bonaventure's ecclesiology and, hence, within his theology of history. Therein lies the eschatological dimension of Benedict XVI's resignation.

By asserting Bonaventure's open ecclesiology in the very declaration of his resignation, Benedict XVI chose to close the debates to which the precedent set by his distant predecessor Celestine V had given rise and, thus, to make a remarkable intervention in our own time. Celestine V's contemporaries were already struck by his striving to reconcile the exercise of the Petrine ministry with the ascetic form of monastic life to which the then Peter of Morrone had committed himself when he set up his own community inspired by the ideals of saint Francis and belonging to the Benedictine family (Herde 1981). Unsurprisingly, Celestine V

intended to return to his community after resigning, only to be prevented from realising his plan by his successor Boniface VIII. Celestine V's canonisation after Boniface VIII's death, while it rehabilitated his person and settle once and for all the issue of the legitimacy of his resignation, did not resolve the ecclesiological quandary that his pontificate had caused. Indeed, eschatology returned in its radical expression among Spiritual Franciscans under Pope John XXII, leading to a posthumous condemnation of Olivi's endorsement of Joachim of Fiore in 1326 (Burr 1993), which itself reverberated on Bonaventure's theology of history and his ecclesiology. From this point of view, Benedict XVI's resignation was a response at almost 700 years distance to the decision of 1326 and its consequences for the reflection on eschatology, ecclesiology, and the place of the Papacy in them.

That his successor chose to be named after Francis of Assisi vindicates Benedict XVI's decision in favour of Bonaventure's theology of history as the retirement of the emeritus Bishop of Rome in the Mater Ecclesiae monastery on the Vatican Hill and his physical coexistence with Pope Francis close the parenthesis opened by Boniface VIII's opposition to Celestine V's plan to retire among the members of the monastic community that he had founded. In other words, Benedict XVI's resignation marks a rebalancing of ecclesiology towards Bonaventure's theology of history and his controlled eschatological outlook.

Where does Benedict XVI's siding with Bonaventure's controlled eschatology and inclusive ecclesiology leave the world? Here again, the momentous decades of the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries may give us a clue that we can follow through to Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's upbringing and formative years in Germany. For, one of the most important and influential observers of the events that unfolded around 1300 was no other than Dante.

The influence of the Franciscans on Dante can hardly be underestimated (Park 2014). Dante was in close contact with the Franciscans from as early as the 1280s, in his twenties. Furthermore, this relationship continued after his exile from Florence in 1302 and lasted until his death in 1321 and even beyond. Dante's mortal remains were placed into a Roman sarcophagus outside the cloister of the Franciscan convent in Ravenna before being moved to the convent's cloister and eventually displaced to a specially commissioned neoclassical tomb nearby in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given Dante's long association with the Franciscans, his ideal of the Friars was very much shaped by the lasting influence of Bonaventure's works within the Order. Yet Dante was deeply interested too in secular power. Indeed, Dante's most original achievement in this regard might have been the way in which he took human society out of its Christian embrace in his treaty *On Monarchy* (*De monarchia*) by defining human happiness as worthy of being pursued in its own right (Kantorowicz 1957b, Chapter 8). Dante thus saw a Franciscan or, more precisely, Bonaventurian Church and Papacy as the context against which his ideal of the polis or, in his words, *humanitas* (as distinguished from *Christianitas*) could grow. As far as the latter is concerned, his approach was Aristotelian and inspired by Thomas Aquinas's systematic rather than Bonaventure's historical theology.

The secular side of Dante's complex thought invited secular ideology already in his own time. This tendency was even more perceptible as Europe and the West grew more secular in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The national poet in Italy, Dante would come to be seen in Germany as the herald of secular politics (Ruehl 2015, Chapter 4). While it would take too long to dwell on the intricacies of Dante's reception in German thought and imagination, it is

not far-fetched to claim that his life and work were used to carve the *Reichsidee* out of its universalist medieval and Catholic context and merge it with a secular *Staatsidee* which was at best compatible with Protestantism. The most daring expression of this reinvention can be found in Ernst Kantorowicz's famed biography of the medieval emperor Frederick II (1957a), first published in 1927. "The image of Frederick as ruler and the image of Frederick's state survived actually only in miniature", Kantorowicz wrote in the last chapter of his biography (668). "Spiritually", he adds, "they received immense extension through Dante". "It has often enough been demonstrated", Kantorowicz concludes, "that Dante only proclaims what Frederick had lived." A radical secular reading of Dante's thought could thus be instrumentalised by German nationalism.

In 2006 Benedict XVI (2006) addressed the participants of the Pontifical Council *Cor unum* with a rare reference to Dante. To the informed observer, the terms of his address would have been reminiscent of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1986). Balthasar had exerted a strong influence on Ratzinger (Brotherton 2015), and it was to be expected that his reflection on Dante had had a lasting effect on Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's own work. Like Balthasar, Benedict XVI found in Dante's work an original insistence on the corporeal nature of salvation. Despite Aristotle's influence on him, Dante "perceives something completely new and inconceivable for the Greek philosopher", as Benedict XVI explained, namely that God has a human face and a human heart.

One year later, in his still young Pontificate, Benedict XVI chose two of his general audiences to commemorate the 16<sup>th</sup> centenary of the death in exile of John Chrysostom, the Greek Church Father and erstwhile bishop of Constantinople. In his second address, Benedict XVI (2007) returned to some of the themes that he had related to Dante in the previous year. This association was all but fortuitous. For, John Chrysostom features in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He does so precisely in the context that interested Balthasar (1986), in the Fourth Sphere of Heaven, the Sphere of the Sun, where he is mentioned as a member of Bonaventure's circle (Digital Dante 2019, *Paradiso*: Canto 12).

John Chrysostom, Benedict XVI tells us, proposed no less than the model of the primitive Church as a pattern for society. He thus intended to give the city "a soul and a Christian face". That "face" was not meant in a mere metaphorical sense. Benedict XVI emphasised John Chrysostom's social doctrine, which was based on the idea that the city was built on the person, rather than vice versa as had been the case in the Classical Greek model. The person in question was the poor man, as Benedict XVI explained, whom Christians considered a brother while he had been excluded from citizenship in the traditional polis. In a subtle allusion to the Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (1965), Benedict XVI tied the poor to Jesus' face.

This latter point was made explicit by Benedict XVI (2013a) at a general audience held less than a month before he announced his resignation, on 16 January 2013. In it, Benedict XVI returned to his own exegesis on *Dei Verbum* from 1967 (Ratzinger, 1969). There, Ratzinger had insisted, with Bonaventure, on the relation of Revelation to history and its Christological centre. In his address from January 2013, he reiterated – quoting *Dei Verbum* – that Christ was "the mediator and the sum total of Revelation". From this Revelation he inferred that "our life must be oriented to meeting Jesus Christ, to loving him" (Benedict XVI, 2013a). Yet

it is loving our neighbour, as Benedict XVI added, that “enables us to recognise the face of Jesus in the poor, in the weak and in the suffering”.

Here a line can be drawn from John Chrysostom’s *Hexaëmeron*, with the ultimate step of God transforming creation from within our hearts through the Holy Spirit, to Bonaventure and, ultimately, to Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. A few weeks before his resignation, Benedict XVI admonished us to learn to see God’s face and “at the same time to turn our gaze to the final moment of history when he will satisfy us with the light of his grace” (Benedict XVI 2013a).

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