

The mis-use of the retired bishop of Rome, Benedict

June 10th, 2019

The heading on the cover of the latest edition of *The Tablet*, one of the most respected Catholic magazines in the English-speaking world, makes a clear point. It surfaces a question that has been bubbling under the surface of Catholic life since Pope Benedict resigned six years ago and was succeeded by Pope Francis. The question is: 'Have we one Pope too many?'

That question, unasked in that blunt form up to now, surfaces a difficult issue – Benedict is being used to undermine Francis. Those unhappy with the reforms underway under Francis are effectively campaigning to diminish Francis' influence and to block his way. And they're using their friendship with Benedict and their influence on him to create obstacles that will undermine what Francis is doing and obstructing the momentum for reform that his papacy has generated.

When bishops retire there's an unspoken protocol that clicks in. They keep quiet. They don't interfere. They don't keep looking over the shoulders of their successors. They never give any indication that they are in any way tut-tutting in the background. The same is true of former parish priests. Ideally they move out of the parish, cut any contacts they have with it, never comment on their successors, never ever proffer unsolicited advice and just let their successors get on with it. It doesn't always work, of course. As someone said one time: 'Some are gone and not forgotten; others are forgotten but not quite gone'.

While we know what the unspoken protocol is when bishops and PPs retire, with Benedict's retirement as pope – the first in almost 600 years, since Gregory XII retired in 1415 to end the Western Schism – it seemed the Church was in uncharted waters. Would he stay on in Rome? Would he continue to wear the traditional white garb? What would he be called? Would he be making statements? Would they get on?

When it emerged that Francis was taking the way of reform and rejuvenating the long-neglected vision of Vatican Two, supporters of the Benedict focus were unhappy. Then they were very unhappy. Then annoyed. Then angry. And gradually voices emerged intent on directly frustrating the Francis agenda.

At first it was mainly a few cardinals and higher churchmen whom Francis had removed from their positions (mainly those who opposed his Vatican reforms); then it was others who imagined they warranted promotion but their prospects in the new dispensation were no longer promising; and there was the hard-right of Catholicism who imagine that anyone who disagrees with them (even a Pope) is wrong.

Representatives of these groups created a certain momentum – or more accurately a presumption of momentum – and gathered around a reluctant Benedict, now in his 93rd year. Against his better judgement, he found himself recently writing a letter blaming the sexual revolution of the 1960s for the clerical abuse scandals. It was a sad blunder as it encouraged traditional Catholics to regard Benedict as something equivalent to the Leader of the Opposition and it overturned Benedict's promise

some years ago to devote his retirement to prayer and to remain 'hidden from the world'. Clearly, Benedict is now being used by a group of people who have gathered around him to frustrate the reforms of Francis.

But, as Butch Cassidy once asked the Sundance Kid, who are these people? The Tablet, through the journalist, Austen Ivereigh, names them: Benedict's long-time personal secretary and best friend, Archbishop Georg Ganswein; and Cardinal Gerhard Muller, who was removed by Francis from one of the top Vatican positions. Not part of the inner circle but supporters are Cardinal Raymond Burke, moved sideways from his post by Francis; the German bishop, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, who had spent 43 million dollars on his home and became known as 'the Bishop of Bling'; Steve Bannon, former strategist for President Trump and a robust critic of Francis; and a series of conservative Catholic groups, notably in America, among them Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia and the television channel, EWTN.

The effort to propose Benedict as an alternative Pope is gaining momentum. While the pious and fragile Benedict was and is the essence of loyalty to the Catholic Church, it is clear that he is being encouraged to become an authoritative figure in his own right. He had intended, as he told a journalist six years ago, that when he retired he wanted to be known as 'Father Benedict' not 'Pope Emeritus'; he was encouraged by Ganswein to live in the Vatican, to dress in papal white and to be referred to as 'His Holiness'; and Ganswein himself has talked up Benedict's position as an 'exceptional pontificate' though no one is quite clear what that means.

One of the extraordinary components in all of this is the ease with which conservative figures like Muller, Burke and Ganswein have taken to opposing Francis. Cardinals have a particular duty of loyalty to the Pope and their obedience is usually taken for granted – a red line as Teresa May might have said. When Benedict was Pope some of the cardinals now spectacularly disobedient were foremost in their declarations of loyalty to Benedict and critical of those who were perceived not to be. Now Muller, it would seem, is not just 'disobedient' to the Pope, as he would have understood it in the past, but personally disrespectful as well – in some of his comments. Indeed there's a delicious irony in his efforts to justify his opposition to Francis as a refusal to remain silent when the truth needs to be told. (It was Muller who 'silenced' Fr Tony Flannery for his great 'crime' of explaining in simple language the insights of modern biblical scholarship).

600 years ago, Pope Gregory XII retired to ensure there wasn't a schism or a fragmenting of the Catholic Church. The focus on unity within Catholicism, while it doesn't mean that everyone all the time is singing from the same hymn-sheet, needs to be protected.

Maybe retired popes like retired bishops or parish priests need to be encouraged, as the Americans would put it, to take a hike?

published by ACP – Association of Catholic Priests

source: <https://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2019/06/the-mis-use-of-the-retired-bishop-of-rome-benedict/>