

Ave Atque Vale
Hail and Farewell

From the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI
through to the election of Pope Francis

edited by Michael kelly sj

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Michael Hedley Kelly SJ

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Introduction

Michael Kelly SJ

Ave Atque Vale—Hail and Farewell—is how the Roman poet Catullus ends his elegiac tribute to his deceased brother and these words have always been used to mark an end and a beginning. Whether it was 600 or 900 years since a pope resigned, the action is unprecedented in the modern papacy.

The papacy as we have it today was most impacted by events in the nineteenth century. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the papacy suffered at the hands of Napoleon Bonaparte who at one point imprisoned Pius VI and then humiliated Pius VII at his coronation as French Emperor. These were low times for the papacy.

However, they led succeeding popes and the Curias to follow a consistent policy of enhancing the leadership and significance of the bishop of Rome throughout the next seventy years, culminating in the definition of Papal Infallibility in 1870. The lasting effect of that decree was the declaration of the pope's 'primacy and immediacy of jurisdiction' throughout the Roman Catholic Church.

The year of the declaration at Vatican I was also significant because in the same year, the pope lost the Papal States. As a substitute for temporal power, the Pope had now extended his authority as a universal spiritual power. This was subsequently qualified at Vatican II with its emphasis on collegiality. But, especially through the influence of Joseph Ratzinger as Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and then as pope, this emphasis has been muted.

Benedict XVI's resignation has been rightly praised as an act of humble recognition that he could no longer do, at eighty-five, what he had been elected to do at seventy-eight. But what he was doing, even at eighty-five, was something he had been intent on since his 40s. Joseph Ratzinger the

theologian and a couple of others (Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar being the best known) developed a clear vision of where the church after Vatican II needed to go and a team of supporters to propagate those views.

These were minority views among the post-conciliar theological community. But with the occupation of several key decision making positions in the Vatican by supporters of the views, the minority has held sway in the directions for church ministry and mission, for theological exploration and in leadership appointments for over thirty years.

What led Benedict XVI to resign is a matter of pure speculation, and the confirmation of what motivated the action really relies on one source—Joseph Ratzinger. Was it exhaustion and the effects of his advanced age? Was it the recognition that his vision and practice, far from helping the church, actually contributed to the chaos the church now finds itself in at an administrative level? Only one person can give that answer.

The first section of this book reviews the legacy Benedict XVI bequeaths to the church—through a comparison with the ministry of Rowan Williams in the Anglican Communion, his theological legacy, his approach to faith and reason and, in a lighter vain, his dress sense.

The resignation led to the time honored wait-and-see game of chimney watching. This watching is preceded by a period where consensus is reached about the issues that need to be addressed in the church, as well as the qualities and characteristics that are required in the next bishop of Rome.

So it was when Joseph Ratzinger was elected. Reports were many of his impressive interventions in the pre-conclave congregations about the threats that secularism and relativism posed to the gospel and the church. Ratzinger proposed himself and was accepted by the cardinals as the one to address these challenges as best any pope could.

This time, from what we know, it was Jorge Maria Bergoglio's interventions at the congregations—on the dubious relevance of the church to contemporary communities and their challenges and the obstacles that an inefficient and incompetent bureaucracy in the Vatican posed to preaching the gospel and nourishing the faith of Catholics—that received most approval and delivered a swift voting process.

Section Two of this book looks not so much at the process as at what challenges the pope succeeding Benedict must face. Granted that the vote can always produce surprises such that the odds offered by bookmakers

are misleading (and were shown to be in this case), any new person in the job today will necessarily have to deal with just how polarised the church is, how frustrated many Catholics and others are at the way church leaders avoid or mute the truth about church life today and how inept much of the media management by the Vatican is.

However, with the election of Jorge Maria Bergoglio to the See of Peter, the script has changed and new sets of players, promising to kick towards different goalposts, are now coming into place. There are rising expectations that, inevitably, will have to be qualified by experience. A new style can lead in many directions. The new pope is no heavyweight theologian. He is an intelligent pastor. He knows things are not working. But what will he do?

The third section of this book has a series of observations on what difference the new Pope has made immediately. Reflections on the surprise that comes with someone elected to join a world stage after a life in a particular if significant part of the globe, some whimsical poetry and the well known catalogue of issues and what his track record suggests will be his approach to them are canvassed.

While Bergoglio comes from a particular time and place, he is also the subject of experiences—of faith, society, spirituality and governance—that are distinctive and unprecedented in one who is Bishop of Rome. That is the focus of the final chapter—what we can glean from Bergoglio's experience to suggest what we might expect in coming years.

At seventy-six, and with a few health issues, the current Pope cannot be expected to be in office for a long time. He may follow Benedict's precedent and the customary habit in the Jesuits of six-year terms for leaders. Whatever his tenure, it is bound to be an experience of a very different Pope to the last two.