

# Futurechurch – A post-Benedict, post-Pell Church

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The most important thing Pope Benedict did in his papacy was to resign, which he did on 28 February 2013. This was a revolutionary move because no pope had resigned since Celestine V in December 1294; he had only lasted five months in the papacy. Benedict's action was one of the most important acts of any pope for centuries because by resigning he relativised the papacy by draining it of its 'fatherhood mystique', the notion that you can't stop being a 'father'. It's ironic, however, that the man who denounced relativism, actually relativised papal absolutism and set a precedent that frees subsequent popes from the obligation to sit it out until death, no matter how incapacitated or sick they are.

The key to understanding Benedict's resignation was the prolonged and public dying process of the too-long-lived John Paul II. Ratzinger had been very close to John Paul and he feared that something similar might happen to him. By 2013 he felt his strength was beginning to wane as his administration began to collapse around him, so he acted. In fact, he was a real contrast to John Paul: as theologian Uta Ranke-Heinemann said: 'The enormous difference between John Paul II and Ratzinger is intelligence. Ratzinger is much, much more intelligent ... Wojtyla was tedious without end ... Ratzinger has much more of what the French call *esprit de finesse* [delicacy, sensitivity]. John Paul had none.'

While the Ratzinger papacy will be seen as a mere interlude in church history, it was certainly the last hurrah for a Eurocentric church. Ratzinger chose the style 'Benedict' precisely because Saint Benedict was seen as the patron of European Christianity. The election of Francis is a sign that the centre has shifted to the peripheries. Europe is no longer normative, as it increasingly abandons its Christian roots and embraces secularism. The European Union is not even certain that it wants to acknowledge its Christian roots, as the debate over the European Constitution showed in 2004.

Benedict's legacy is a mixed one. His papacy was characterised by an attempted 'reform of the reform', a phrase attributed to the now archbishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka, Malcolm Ranjith. The message was that we needed to recover the correct, genuine interpretation of Vatican Council II. Benedict claimed that there were two interpretations which he characterised as 'the hermeneutic of discontinuity or rupture' and 'the hermeneutic of reform or continuity'. ('Hermeneutic' simply means 'interpretation'). For Benedict the 'renewal in continuity' image of Vatican II was the correct one. He didn't seem to notice that the majority of Catholics agreed with him, believing that while the Council certainly introduced new ideas like religious liberty, the vernacular liturgy and ecumenism, at the same time it maintained and developed the on-going Catholic tradition. But Benedict was obsessed with myth of discontinuity, which he says is '[going] beyond the texts [of the Council] and making room for ... its spirit. In this way, obviously, a vast margin was left open for the question on how this spirit should subsequently be defined and room was consequently made for every whim.'

The real problem here is that he's setting up a false dichotomy between continuity and discontinuity, something he often does. It's easy to demolish a caricature and his description of the 'rupture' school is a caricature. No sensible pastoral-progressive theologian, or thinking Catholic says the Council was a complete break with the past and an absolute new beginning. He creates dichotomies, either/or situations when both/and resolutions are possible. In fact, the

only people who have created a rupture in the church since Vatican II are the Lefebvrists, the schismatic followers of archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, with whom Benedict has tried very hard to make peace through compromise. But they rejected his overtures and remain obdurate.

Connected to the ‘rupture’ is his critique of what he calls the ‘dictatorship of relativism’. Here he seems to be referring to the kind of post-modernism that nowadays dominates large swathes of Western culture, especially in universities. This is the theory that there are no ‘metanarratives’, no big, overarching stories that convey binding truth. According to post-modernism all that we have are our narratives of personal and community experiences. And, yes, Benedict is right. This is a problem in Western culture, but it is utterly irrelevant to the great majority of Catholics in the developing world. No one in South Sudan, Kiribati, or Bolivia is worried about relativism; they just want a square meal, or prevent rising sea levels.

One of the worst legacies of both Benedict and John Paul II is that they have left us with a bevy of dud bishops. In shaping the church to their peculiar agendas, both these popes appointed bishops who were either bland representatives of head office, or culture warriors hunting down any deviation from sexual and gender dogma. The popes’ agents in the appointment process were the previous heads of the then Congregation of Bishops, Italian Giovanni Battista Re from 2000 to 2010 and French Canadian, Marc Ouellet from 2010 to 2023. The Congregation is now called the Dicastery for Bishops with the newly appointed Robert Prevost, OSA (age 67) in charge. Born in Chicago, Prevost was formerly superior general of the Augustinian order and then bishop of Chiclayo, Peru. Why Francis waited four years to replace Ouellet, who was well beyond retirement age, is a mystery?

In two countries particularly there was a deliberate policy begun under John Paul and continued under Benedict to replace an existing pastorally-inclined hierarchy with ‘orthodox culture warriors.’ The first was the Netherlands where replacement was easy because it was a numerically small hierarchy. In the United States the Apostolic Delegate from 1973 to 1980, Belgian Archbishop Jean Jadot, assigned by Paul VI, had appointed a group of impressive pastoral bishops. But from the early-1980s onward, they were gradually replaced by conservatives and culture warriors some of whom are nowadays openly opposed to the Pope Francis agenda. Recent appointments by Francis have improved the situation, but the majority are still dead wood. Something similar happened in Australia, largely brought about by George Pell. The result: a weak episcopate, with the bishops constantly telling us in the renewal movement that almost all decisions we asked them to make were ‘beyond their competence’. This illustrates the failure of bishops to assume responsibility for their own dioceses and care for their people. As ‘company men’ they’re always looking over their shoulders to Rome.

Benedict was convinced that the liturgical renewal of Vatican II had been badly mismanaged. I mentioned Ranjith earlier and the term ‘reform of the reform’; he invented this notion when he was working at the Congregation – now Dicastery – for Divine Worship. The claim was that Vatican II had abandoned the ‘vertical’ or ‘spiritual’ aspect of the liturgy and thus ‘secularised’ worship. The beauty was ‘gone’. The reactionaries claimed that one way of fixing this was changing the vernacular translations from dynamic equivalence (a translation that enshrines the meaning of the text) to a literal translation of the Latin text. This was enshrined in *Liturgiam authenticam*, an instruction of the Congregation by the Chilean prefect, Cardinal Jorge Medina Eztevez. In the Anglosphere the new translation aimed at so-called ‘timeless English’ while remaining absolutely true to the Latin. The claim was that the dynamic

equivalent text was ‘banal’ and ‘not true to the original Latin’ and that it lacked a ‘sacred’ feel. The translation process was supervised by the *Vox clara* (‘Clear Voice’) committee, chaired by Cardinal George Pell. The result was the elimination of the dynamic equivalent text with a translation that is nothing more than pseudo-mid-Victorian English posing as ‘sacred’ language which was imposed on the Anglo world in December 2011. Elsewhere I’ve described it as ‘the product of a third-rate Victorian novelist writing on a very bad day.’

Not satisfied with the destruction of a perfectly good English translation, Benedict then made another major concession to the protagonists of the so-called Tridentine Mass of 1570. In the July 2007 apostolic letter, *Summorum pontificum*, Benedict set-up two Masses: the ‘ordinary’ vernacular form celebrated according to the Roman Missal promulgated by Paul VI; and the ‘extraordinary’, that is the form celebrated in Latin according to ‘The Roman Missal promulgated by Pius V,’ The Tridentine Mass. Benedict decreed in *Summorum pontificum* that any priest can celebrate the ‘extraordinary form’ in private without permission from anyone, and that ‘in parishes where a group of the faithful attached to the previous liturgical tradition stably exists, the parish priest should willingly accede to their requests to celebrate Holy Mass’ following the Tridentine Latin form.

In other words, it was open slather! Given that the ‘Tridentine Mass’ is used as a cover for the rejection of Vatican II, Benedict was opening the floodgates to the reactionaries. After wide consultation with the bishops, Pope Francis closed these loopholes with another apostolic letter, *Traditionis Custodes* (July 2021) and subsequent instructions, severely restricting the celebration of the Tridentine Mass, in order to maintain church unity and heal the schisms created by Benedict’s approving celebrations of the Tridentine Mass.

Another problem is that under both John Paul and Benedict curial governance was largely neglected because Pope Wojtyla was globe-trotting and Benedict wasn’t interested in governing. Also, he appointed the wrong man to run the Vatican, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, as Secretary of State. At the beginning of Benedict’s papacy, writers and journalists covering the Vatican – including myself –thought that Benedict would focus on running the Vatican, given his long experience in Rome, but we were wrong. He was simply not interested in governance.

That freed Vatican bureaucrats to run amuck. The Vatican became a seething morass of competing interests, not helped by power-hungry Bertone’s incompetence and the machinations of Benedict’s secretary, now Archbishop Georg Gänswein, nicknamed ‘gorgeous George’, who controlled access to the pope and who inspired Italian designer, Donatella Versace, to develop ‘the clerical look for men with more brain and less muscle’. The Vatican became a sieve with leaks galore, infighting and talk of an underground ‘gay lobby’. So, Benedict XVI made exactly the right decision when he resigned, but he should not have called himself ‘Pope Emeritus’, but ‘Bishop of Rome Emeritus’. He should have also left the Vatican.

Finally, a few words on Cardinal George Pell, always known to (disrespectful) Australian Catholics as ‘George’, or sometimes as ‘Big George’. Born in Ballarat, Victoria in June 1941, he was ordained in Rome for the local diocese. A fellow student of his at Propaganda College in Rome told me that in those days he was very interested in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He then went on to Oxford University, completing a doctorate in history on Saint Cyprian (died 258AD), bishop of Carthage, who argued that every bishop was a pope in his own diocese and who strongly opposed the then-pope, Stephen I (254-257). After

returning to Australia, Pell was appointed head of a Ballarat Catholic teacher's college, then rector of the Melbourne seminary, followed by appointment as auxiliary bishop of Melbourne, then archbishop of Melbourne in 1996, moving to Sydney in 2001 as archbishop. He was made a cardinal in 2003. In 2014 he was appointed to the Vatican's Secretariat of the Economy.

In March 2019 he was jailed for sexually assaulting two choir boys in Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne. The High Court of Australia upheld Pell's appeal on April 7 2020. In a unanimous judgment, the seven justices quashed Pell's convictions and entered judgments of acquittal on the grounds that jury should have entertained doubt as to Pell's guilt. They found that there was 'a significant possibility ... that an innocent person has been convicted.'

In my view Pell has left us with a diminished church in Australia. His whole approach was absolutist, a kind of 'boots and all,' dogmatic, no equivocation, no compromise attitude, especially on reproduction and gender issues, as if these were somehow at the heart of the gospel. His attitude was to 'take on' the secularists and those who disagreed with his vision of church, including back-sliders like those of us who wanted to at least enter into dialogue with the culture. He loved things like the 'clash of the titans' when he took on so-called 'new atheist' Richard Dawkins on ABC Television back in 2012. In my view it amounted to little more than 'the clash of the minnows.'

The problem was the thuggish and uncompromising image of Catholicism that Pell projected to the community; you see something similar in quite a few of the US bishops. Here it's worth noting that Pell often spoke in the United States at outfits like Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, MI. Pell was also a consistent and very public global warming 'sceptic' and often wrote and spoke about it. Environmentalism, for him, was the new pagan 'religion'.

On the issue of sexual abuse, he seemed to show a complete lack of pastoral care and he seemed to engage in a persistent effort to limit the church's liability. This is illustrated in the John Ellis case when he was archbishop of Sydney. He claimed that Ellis, who had been abused by a priest at age 13 when an altar boy, was seeking what Pell believed were excessive damages. He claimed that the archdiocese was an unincorporated institution that could not be sued. The Royal Commission into Institutional Sexual Abuse found that the reason for Pell's decision to fight the case 'was to discourage other prospective plaintiffs from litigating claims of child sexual abuse against the Catholic Church.' But in the process the treatment of John Ellis by the archdiocese and Pell was appalling.

Finally, there is no doubt he did good work between 2014 and 2017 in the Secretariat for the Economy. He was always a good financial manager and in Rome he applied contemporary standards of accountability and transparency and attempted to bring in outside accounting firms to audit Vatican finances. He tried to stop various sections of the Vatican hiding money away off the books for a 'rainy day'. Before Pell, the place tended to run along the lines of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' and vice-versa. Pell came undone to an extent when he tackled the arcane finances of the Secretariat of State where he ran into a brick wall. But he had to return to Australia to face sexual abuse charges before too much could be achieved. Just like Benedict XVI, he was a very mixed blessing for the church and Catholicism.

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