

CONSCIENCE, INTERRUPTION, AND THE PETRINE MINISTRY: BENEDICT XVI'S RESIGNATION AND DIALOGUE WITH THE MODERN WORLD

By

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Abstract

Pope Benedict XVI's resignation on February 28, 2013, was a disruption in modern Catholic consciousness, even if it was not without historical precedent. Lieven Boeve posits that the resignation can be understood in terms of cognitive dissonance—a tension between Benedict XVI/Ratzinger's theological vision of a Church called to conversion and coherence, and the concrete reality of ecclesial scandals unfolding within a cultural context increasingly perceived as hostile to faith. According to this reading, the resignation served as an attempt to reduce the dissonance arising from the gap between theological ideals and lived ecclesial reality. This essay engages Boeve's insight further by showing that Benedict XVI's resignation constitutes a major interruption in the exercise of the Petrine ministry and, by implication, in the life of the Church itself. Rather than a mere administrative decision or a capitulation to pressure, the

resignation is interpreted as the culmination of a theologically coherent vision rooted in Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of conscience and shaped by an Augustinian ecclesiology that resists sacralized and monarchical models of papal authority. Flowing from a Newmanian account of conscience, Benedict XVI's resignation emerges as an act of truthfulness that reshapes papal authority as service under discernment and opens the Church to renewed dialogue with a pluralistic modern world. The sacramentality of the Petrine office does not deny its human limitations and vice versa. Precisely in this way, it witnesses to a Church that invites the world to conversion by taking a decisive step in the conversion process.

Keywords: Benedict XVI, Ratzinger, Papal resignation, conscience, Petrine ministry, Augustinian ecclesiology, Newman, cognitive dissonance, Church-State relations, Vatican II

Introduction: Benedict XVI's Resignation and Cognitive Dissonance

Lieven Boeve sees Benedict XVI's resignation through the lens of cognitive dissonance arising from the non-alignment between an ecclesial and theological vision and the lived reality of the Church. The dissonance lies between a pure Church that invites the world to conversion and the actual reality of the Church, plagued by scandal and a world not open to the gospel. As Boeve reads it, such a vision risks insufficient openness to dialogue, both ad intra and ad extra. The resignation was a way of reducing the dissonance.¹

The theory of cognitive dissonance has the merit of not limiting the pope's resignation to an act merely propelled by biological contingency, without attention to the theological intentionality that informed the carefully

announced resignation, juridically framed and undertaken in full freedom of conscience, *coram Deo*.² This theological underpinning of the resignation is rooted in Ratzinger's ecclesial and theological vision, which renders the resignation an interruption of settled imaginations that equated the essence of the papal office with a sacralised monarchy. The resignation shows the limits of such models of papacy, and it humanises the Petrine office as an ecclesial service exercised with personal responsibility and conscience.

This study employs a theological-hermeneutical method, engaging the primary texts of Benedict XVI/Ratzinger and offering a conclusive critical appropriation of Lieven Boeve's interpretive framework. It combines historical-theological analysis with ecclesiological interpretation to examine the theological meaning of Benedict XVI's resignation. It argues that Benedict XVI's resignation should be interpreted not primarily as an administrative response to ecclesial crisis, but as a theologically coherent act of conscience rooted in Ratzinger's Augustinian ecclesiology and Newmanian understanding of conscience, an act that interrupts sacralized models of papal authority and reconfigures the Petrine ministry for a pluralistic age. Therefore, any justice to the fact of Ratzinger's resignation must first pay attention to how he envisions conscience and its links to the papacy. Given that an exercise in conscience reveals the deep thoughts and intuitions of the person, Ratzinger's basic Augustinian theological and ecclesial vision, especially as it concerns the papacy and the reality of the Church in the world, will be explored. This opens the way for us to examine the implications of the resignation for the Church today.

The Primacy of Conscience and the Authority of the Pope

Pope Benedict XVI's theology of conscience is fundamental to understanding his resignation. His interest in the topic was shaped by his friendship with his seminary prefect, Alfred Läpple, who, in early 1946, introduced him to Newman's idea of conscience.³ This introduction enabled Ratzinger to retrieve an ontological account of conscience that has been neglected by neo-scholastic manuals, which restricted conscience to its role in practical reason in moral and ethical decisions.⁴ He articulates this ontological foundation of conscience through the concept of anamnesis.

The word anamnesis is etymologically from the Greek *aná* = "again" and *mnēsis* = "memory." It ordinarily means to remember or call to mind again. As it concerns conscience, Ratzinger distinguished the anamnesis of creation and the anamnesis of faith.⁵ The anamnesis of creation is the original memory of truth and goodness that is ingrained in us. In the human person created in the likeness of God, the anamnesis is "an inner ontological tendency... toward the divine." It is the "god-like constitution of our being" and the capacity of the human being to recall and hear the echo of God within. This has deep Pauline roots, where the apostle speaks of the law written in the hearts of the Gentiles (Rom. 2:14–15).⁶ It is also what St. Basil refers to as "the spark of divine love which has been hidden in us."⁷ The monastic rule of St. Basil amplifies this further: "The love of God is not founded on a discipline imposed on us from outside, but is constitutively established in us as the capacity and necessity of our rational nature."⁸

Yet the anamnesis of creation requires assistance from without. The anamnesis of faith, which is the

Christian memory, provides this support, not as an imposition, “but brings to fruition what is proper to anamnesis, namely, its interior openness to truth.”⁹ The anamnesis of faith unfolds in a constant dialogue between within and without. It is a sign of the certainty of the Christian memory, which flows from its sacramental identity, discerns from within between what genuinely unfolds its recollection and what destroys or falsifies it.¹⁰

Within this framework, the papal primacy is not foreign or extrinsic to the Christian conscience: it correlates and serves it. The pope serves conscience by safeguarding the Christian memory. This position reflects Ratzinger’s explicit Newmanian stance, echoing Newman’s famous affirmation before the Duke of Norfolk that he would first toast to conscience before toasting the pope.¹¹ The teaching authority of the pope does not impose its teachings from without, but elucidates and defends what conscience recognizes from within.

Resignation and Conscience

This Newmanian foundation of his theology of conscience enlightens us on how Benedict XVI views the papal office and why he could resign. The person of the pope is at the service of the office and not coextensive with it. While the office requires him to assume a responsibility that demands the offering of his whole self, it also enables him to acknowledge the truth about his limitations in exercising the office.

Before his resignation in an interview in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the possibility of papal resignation: “If a pope clearly realizes he is no longer physically, psychologically, and spiritually capable of fulfilling the office, then he has a right, and under some circumstances, also an obligation to resign.”¹² Earlier,

however, when asked whether the danger posed by his office, such as the many cases and scandals, made him think he should resign, he noted: “When the danger is great, one must not run away. For that reason, now is certainly not the time to resign. Precisely at a time like this, one must stand fast and endure the difficult situation. That is my view. One can resign at a peaceful moment when one cannot go on. But one must not run away from danger and say that someone else should do it.”¹³ How, then, does one distinguish between standing firm amid danger and recognising the inability to continue?

While Benedict XVI cited his failing health and advanced age, other interpretations suggest he must have been pressured by the Church’s problems to resign. Some list the Vatileaks, sexual abuse scandals in the Church, as some of these reasons. Others point to conspiracy theories like the Third Secret of Fatima and the Prophecy of Malacy to advance reasons for his resignation.¹⁴ A commentator even spoke about the ‘rightness’ of the decision, even when he admits its validity.¹⁵ In responding to these views, Pope Benedict Emeritus maintains that his resignation was not coerced, as any coercion would render it invalid.¹⁶ Although he acknowledged that the role of the pope is not merely functional, comprising an aspect of witness in suffering, as his immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul II, showed, he does not think this should be repeated arbitrarily.¹⁷ He discerned a conscientious need to resign when he recognised his diminished capacity to exercise the office adequately.

At the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis was full of praise for Benedict’s act of humility in resigning. He said the resignation had nothing to do with personal issues, but it was his last act of governance. He characterised the resignation as revolutionary: it created

an institutional door, a marvellous example and an unparalleled precedent for future popes.¹⁸ He said he even prepared a resignation letter in the first year of his pontificate in case he became medically unfit.¹⁹ But later he said he did not think the pope's resignation should become a fashion, because the Pope's ministry is *ad vitam* (for life), and it should not be a normal thing or a fashion for popes to resign.²⁰ The divergent emphases highlight the complexity of the resignation and caution against reducing it to mere pragmatism or capitulation to pressure. Therefore, it is salutary to see how the resignation is rooted in the fundamental Augustinian theological and ecclesial vision of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

Ratzinger's Augustinian Theological and Ecclesial Vision²¹

Claims that Pope Benedict XVI must have resigned under pressure often portray him as someone with an idealised vision of the Church. Ratzinger's deep Augustinian ecclesiological vision, however, resists such idealism. From a retrieval of Augustine's two cities of the earthly and heavenly cities, Ratzinger situates the Church within a sacramental-ecclesiological framework that rejects both an idealistic and a theocratic interpretation of the Church.²² The Church is not simply an empirical institution, but a sacramental one whose concrete reality, whose pneumatological essence, transcends the moral condition of her members.

Vatican II articulated this vision by describing the Church as the kingdom of God already present in mystery, marked by both the already and the not-yet of the Kingdom of God.²³ The Church is historically identifiable, but eschatologically open. There is a fundamental identity of the Church with the historical Christian community, even when it goes beyond it. The Augustinian concept of 'corpus

permixtum' captures this tension: the Church is composed of saints and sinners. Ratzinger expresses this tension when he notes that the saints exemplify the true reality of the Church even when she appears in history clothed in flesh, which reveals and conceals this truth:

The actual truth of the Church, her reality, is in the saints. But this Church emerges in time before the resurrection, clothed in a fleshly garment, which at the same time signifies and hides this truth. From here, Augustine can say: the Catholic Church is the true Church of the Saints. Sinners are not really in her, for their membership is each a resemblance typical of the mundus sensibilis. But on the other hand, he can stress that it is not part of the Church's business to excommunicate such sinners, because it is not her business to cast off this body of flesh. Rather, it is the Lord's business to awaken her and to form her to her truly salvific outlook.²⁴

This vision renders scandals in the Church unsurprising, even when unacceptable. The Church is continually called to conversion and therefore remains *semper reformanda*.²⁵ Ratzinger's engagement with Bonaventure further reinforces this position, especially in Bonaventure's objection to the thought of Joachim of Fiore that there would be a future age of a pure Church within history.²⁶ The Church's sacramentality cannot be reduced to any historical perfection.

This Augustinian vision also resists any theocratic interpretation that fuses the Church and the state. The Church and the state are two distinct realities with distinct rights and responsibilities. As persons who belong to the

Church also belong to the state, the point of convergence between the Church and the state is the properly functioning conscience of individuals. Conscience here is not arbitrary subjectivity, but a moral faculty grounded in creation and faith. Newman's insistence that conscience has rights²⁷ because it has duties becomes decisive: ethical life requires transcendence, which also gives religion a fitting place in public discourse.²⁸

This nuanced understanding of the relationship between the Church and the state and the role of conscience differentiates Ratzinger's Augustinian heritage from one that sees an opposition between the Church and the world²⁹ or the presentation of Christianity as a metanarrative which blurs the distinction between the Church and the state and posits a Church that encompasses the whole social reality in an empirical or an idealistic sense.³⁰

How This Vision Shapes the Resignation

Benedict's resignation emerges as a theological gesture rather than a mere administrative decision. In the *Declaratio*, where he announced his resignation, he linked contemporary challenges and the requirements of the Petrine office to the need for adequate strength of mind and body—a strength he discerned he no longer possessed.³¹ By acknowledging the historical contingency of the person who occupies the papal office, Benedict rejected any sacralised notion of the papacy and subjected the office to discernment. In an age of medical advancement and increased longevity, functional capacity becomes an unavoidable consideration. While the papacy transcends functionalism, effective governance and proclamation, however, require a functional personal capacity. The resignation symbolically re-emphasises dimensions of service already intrinsic to the Petrine

ministry while relativising excessively monarchical interpretations of papal authority. It strips the papacy of any political mystique, more akin to monarchical power, without secularising it. It clarifies the distinction between the person and the office and affirms that ecclesial structures exist for mission rather than for self-preservation.

Conclusion: Resignation as Interruption

Lieven Boeve's category of interruption offers an apt hermeneutical key for capturing Benedict's resignation. For Boeve, interruption occurs when our settled understandings and convictions are disrupted: "Christian identity emerges in the interruption of both self-evidence and closure."³² The Christian narrative does interrupt our secular self-understanding and ecclesial complacency. Pope Benedict XVI's resignation interrupts the assumption that authority must cling to power to remain credible and that the papal office must necessarily be exercised until death. By this act, the resignation aligns the papacy more closely with the dynamism of the Church and the sensibilities of modern and postmodern times. Until the 1983 Code of Canon Law, there was no official age for bishops' retirement. It was seen as an office to be exercised *ad vitam*.³³

The defining elements of a bishop's resignation under the 1917 Code are that bishops ordinarily remained in office until death, transfer, or the pope's acceptance of the resignation. Resignation was an extraordinary measure permitted only for grave reasons; it was not a routine administrative practice. The bishop lacked a subjective right to retire, and his resignation was entirely at the discretion of the Roman Pontiff. Age was not considered a sufficient cause for resignation unless accompanied by incapacity. The Code did not provide for emeritus status

for bishops. The legal framework of the Code on this issue reflects a pre-conciliar theology that emphasised the personal bond between the bishop and the diocese, hierarchical stability, and ecclesial governance that prioritised office-holding over pastoral effectiveness. The introduction of the age limit for the resignation of bishops at seventy-five by Pope Paul VI in 1966, and its codification in the 1983 Code in canon 401 §1, represents a paradigm shift from *ad vitam* or lifelong tenure to pastoral accountability, and from exceptional or extraordinary resignation to the normative submission of resignation.

The resignation has reminded us that the pope, who carries out a more taxing function than any other bishop, is also the bishop of Rome and brings the papacy closer to the collegiality of his fellow bishops. By his free resignation amid advanced age and failing health, Pope Benedict XVI has brought the Petrine office closer to the dynamism of the ecclesiology that shaped the renewed understanding of the resignation of bishops. His coherent and strong Augustinian heritage holds a key factor in enabling this discernment, which marks a recognisable step in *ecclesia semper reformanda*. While it may not become a fashion for popes to resign, nor normative as in the case of bishops, Benedict XVI's resignation establishes a moral horizon that may guide any future discernment concerning papal resignation. In this way, the *peritus* of Vatican II brings the Council's ecclesiology closer to our contemporary moment, even as he calls the world to conversion.

As this paper is offered in honour of Lieven Boeve on his sixtieth birthday, it expresses gratitude for his sustained engagement with the theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. After his extensive work on interruption, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Ratzinger has come to occupy a distinctive and privileged

place among his writings. Therefore, the perception of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation as an act of interruption is a fitting *laudatio* of Boeve's thought, a thought that is also open to interruption.

Endnotes

¹ Lieven Boeve, “Conversion and Cognitive Dissonance: Evaluating the Theological-Ecclesial Program of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI,” *Horizons* 40, no. 2 (December 2013): 242–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2013.73>. See also Lieven Boeve, *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church, and Society* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 91–94.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Declaratio*, February 11, 2013, Vatican.va (English translation), accessed January 31, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130211_declaratio.html.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 43. Alfred Läßle wrote his doctoral dissertation on Newman. See Alfred Läßle, *Der Einzelne in der Kirche : Wesenszüge einer Theologie des Einzelnen nach John Henry Kardinal Newman*, Münchener theologische Studien (München Zink, 1952). In an interview, Läßle made an informative remark of their college days when he stated: “Newman was not a topic like any other. He was our passion.” See Alfred Läßle, “That New Beginning That Bloomed among the Ruins,” *30Days*, 2006, accessed February 2, 2026, http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_10125_13.htm.

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 31

⁵ Basil, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, Resp. 2, 1: PD 31, 908. Cited in Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 31.

⁶ “This anamnesis of the origin, which results from the god-like constitution of our being, is not a conceptually articulated knowing, a store of retrievable contents. It is, so to speak, an inner sense, a capacity to recall, so that the one whom it addresses, if he is not turned in on himself, hears its echo from within. He sees: That’s it! That is what my nature points to and seeks.” Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 32

⁷ Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 31.

⁸ Basil, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, Resp. 2, 1: PD 31, 908. Cited in Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 31.

⁹ Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 33–34. Citation at 34.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 35–36.

¹¹ Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 35–35. See John Henry Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), 261.

¹² Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, interview with Peter Seewald (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 39.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 30

¹⁴ For a discussion of these factors adduced for the resignation see Douglas Youvan, "The Resignation of Pope Benedict XVI: Exploring Official, Plausible, and Conspiratorial Perspectives" (2024), ResearchGate, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11258.40645>.

¹⁵ "Thus, on the 10th anniversary of the dramatic helicopter ride from the Vatican to Castel Gandolfo, we know more about the abdication than we did in 2013, but the case for the rightness of the decision remains to be made." Raymond J. de Souza, "Pope Benedict's Resignation: Debate Continues 10 Years On," *National Catholic Register*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/pope-benedict-s-resignation-debate-continues-10-years-on>.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Last Testament: In His Own Words*, with Peter Seewald, trans. Jacob Phillips (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 26.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Last Testament*, 21-22.

¹⁸ See Pope Francis, interview with *La Nación*, December 7, 2014, *La Nación* (Argentina), accessed [date you accessed it], https://www.cope.es/religion/hoy-en-dia/vaticano/amp/noticias/entrevista-exclusiva-papa-francisco-del-diario-nacion-20141207_1842851.html.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, interview with ABC (Spain), as reported in "Pope: 'My resignation letter is ready in case of health problems,'" Vatican News, December 18, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-12/pope-i-signed-my-resignation-letter-in-case-of-medical-problems.html>.

²⁰ Pope Francis, in conversation with Jesuits, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, February 2, 2023, in *Pope Francis: 'The pope's ministry is for life,' resignation should not become 'the normal thing'*, *La Civiltà Cattolica* (English translation), accessed January 31, 2026, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/rassegna/pope-francis-the-popes-ministry-is-for-life-resignation-should-not-become-the-normal-thing/>.

²¹ Cf. Idahosa Amadasu, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger: A Critical-Constructive Study of the Encounter between Christian Faith and Greek Culture* (PhD diss., Catholic University of Leuven, 2013), 56-77.

²² Joseph Ratzinger, "Herkunft und Sinn der Civitas-Lehre Augustins: Begegnung und Auseinandersetzung mit Wilhelm Kamlah," *Augustinus Magister* 2: 965-67

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, no. 3, Vatican.va (English translation), accessed January 31, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/va_t-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

²⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1954; reprint, 1992), 146. [Translation mine].

²⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, interview with Vittorio Messori (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), xx-yy.

²⁶ Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971), 115–123.

²⁷ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 250

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe? The Church and Modernity in the Europe of Upheavals*, trans., Brian McNeil (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1994), 39.

²⁹ This is in contrast to the interpretation of Charles Curran when he says:

“‘Ratzinger is a theological

Augustinian who equates the heavenly city with the church and the earthly city with the world; hence the strong opposition between the church and the world in his thinking.” Charles E. Curran, “A Place for Dissent: My Argument with Joseph Ratzinger,” *Commonweal* 9, no. 132 (2005): 18.

³⁰ This is why Ratzinger’s Augustinian heritage is different from that of John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy group. Milbank writes: “Better then, that the bounds between Church and State be extremely hazy, so that a ‘social’ existence of many complex and interlocking powers may emerge, and forestall either a sovereign state, or a hierarchical Church.” John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 1994), 408. This is in stark contrast to Ratzinger’s affirmation of the distinction between the Church and the state from his interpretation of the Augustinian two cities.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Declaratio*.

³² Boeve, “Interrupting Tradition,” *Modern Theology* 24, no. 1 (2008): 31.

³³ For legal and ecclesiastical sources on the resignation of bishops, see Catholic Church. *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983. Can. 401 §§1–2; Benedict XV. *Codex Iuris Canonici Pii X Pontificis Maximi iussu digestus*. Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1917; Second Vatican Council. *Christus Dominus: Decretum de pastoralis episcoporum munere in Ecclesia*. October 28, 1965. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): 673–96, no. 21; John Paul II. *Sacrae disciplinae leges*. Apostolic Constitution, January 25, 1983. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 75 (1983): vii–xiv; Paul VI. *Ecclesiae Sanctae* I. Motu proprio, August 6, 1966. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): 757–87 and Pope John Paul II, *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), can. 401 §§1–2. For canonical and doctrinal commentaries on the resignation of bishops, see John A. Coriden. “The Resignation of Bishops.” *The Jurist* 46 (1986): 344–66; J. P. Beal, “The Pastoral Office of the Diocesan Bishop,” in *The Ministry of Governance*, ed. J. P. Beal (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 2000), 143–70 and J. P. Beal, J. A. Coriden, and T. J. Green, eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), ad can. 401. For historical-theological studies on the resignation of bishops, see Y. Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011) and A. M. Stickler, *The History of*

Canon Law, trans. E. G. G. Walsh (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

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