

## **Passing On Authority**

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 23, 2020

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The announcement of the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in early 2013 came as a surprise to many of us. We all just assumed that popes served until death. In reality, church law had allowed for a pope to resign, but it hadn't been invoked for centuries. Being in the seminary at the time, many of my classmates took the news especially hard. Some even felt betrayed. They really liked Pope Benedict, but couldn't believe that he could so easily give up the chair of St. Peter. Just up until a few weeks ago, there was a priest in the Diocese of Sacramento who was still saying the name 'Benedict' in the Eucharistic Prayer! The resignation of the pope has been hard for some Catholics.

I really like the response of the Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze to the resignation of Pope Benedict. As quoted at length in the book, *The Election of Pope Francis* by Gerard O'Connell, Arinze said this:

“it is clear to me that the pope had arrived at that decision over a long period, he hadn't rushed it. He's not a person who rushes things. It was also clear that he took a courageous decision, because something like this has not happened in the Church for about six hundred years. It was clear too that he loves the Church. He didn't put himself at the center; he was concerned only with what is good for the Church. That was his only preoccupation. He was not concerned about his personal convenience, nor the honor or praise that he gets as pope. So, I said to myself, the pope is teaching us all something very important by this act. One of the titles of the pope is 'Servant of

the servants of God.' We come and go. Any of us can go, only Christ does not go. Without Christ, the Church loses its foundation, its direction, its harmony. Popes come and go, bishops come and go, and so do politicians. The pope is teaching us all that the most important consideration for anyone in public office is not 'Do I like this seat?' No! The most important consideration is this: 'Does the community I serve profit by my service?' (12)

Pope Benedict reminds us that authority is at its best when it is passed on. Too often, we try to make it a personal possession of the one in charge. When this happens, abuse of power usually follows. In our first reading, the Lord had to forcefully take Shebna's authority away from him because of this. "I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station. I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah; I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority," the Lord said. Then, in our Gospel, Jesus says to Peter, 'I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.' By giving Peter the keys, he, in turn, was expected to pass these very keys on to his successors. That is what has happened for nearly 2,000 years in Catholicism.

*Authority is healthy when it is something that is actively being passed on.*

All of us, even though we are not the pope, share in the authority of Christ. But let us remember that authority is not something to grasp onto too tightly, for those who are most trusted with authority are the ones who can just as freely let it go and pass it on.