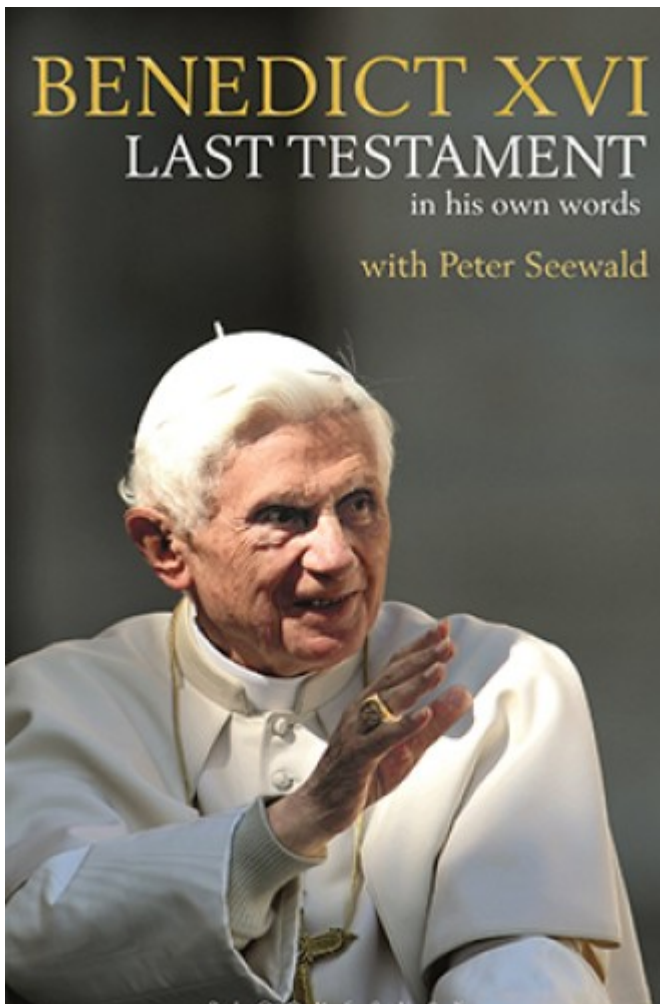


Conversations with the other pope

Benedict XVI's book is both unusual and important. Mostly because it never should have been written.

by [Jon Sweeney](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Last Testament

In His Own Words

By Pope Benedict XVI with Peter Seewald, translated by Jacob Phillips
Bloomsbury

German journalist Peter Seewald does readers both a favor and a disservice with his generous introduction to this collection of interviews with Pope Benedict XVI. He reminds us of Benedict's gifts to the Roman Catholic Church, the academy, and the written word. But then he speeds past all the problems. After ten pages of mostly nodding in agreement, thinking it was good to recall what had been good in Benedict's papacy, I found my pencil digging into the margin of the 11th page, where Seewald concludes, "The historic act of [Benedict's] resignation has fundamentally changed the office of Peter at the last. He gave it back the spiritual dimension to which it was assigned at the beginning."

Hold on. It's important not to miss the real reason this book is both unusual and important: it never should have been written. Prior to Benedict's resignation, no modern pope had ever resigned from office in the way that an embattled CEO might resign from a corporation, weary of dealing with stockholders and a difficult board of directors. And if a modern pope were to resign, one might hope that he would also cease giving interviews and writing books. The faithful don't want or need more than one pope doing these things at a time. We had enough of that during the Middle Ages.

Before Benedict, the only pope to resign willingly and freely from the chair of St. Peter was Celestine V, who stepped down in 1294. Celestine was simply unprepared for the job. A hermit in his eighties, he was elected by the College of Cardinals when they couldn't agree on anyone else. He was a placeholder to some and a puppet to others. No one expected him to do much or to live very long. He spent most of his time in private prayer instead of engaging with his other responsibilities. Eventually he couldn't take it anymore, and he quit. Celestine thought he would be able to go back to his mountain and his former life. His successor wouldn't allow that, so Celestine was thrown in prison, never to be heard from again.

Benedict, as Seewald points out, engaged in a great many things as pope. He wrote magnificent books and encyclicals (the three-volume *Jesus of Nazareth* is the real standout), moved ecumenical relationships forward, and focused the church on faith over numbers. But there were early signs that he might resign. Experts speculated

about it after the infamous 2006 Regensburg University speech when Benedict referred to Islam as “evil and inhuman,” and then again in 2010 as he failed to manage a growing clergy sexual abuse scandal. Critics pointed to a lack of managerial and diplomatic skills—ineptitude similar to that shown by Celestine 700 years earlier. Benedict quit in February of 2013.

Benedict tells Seewald why: “[M]y hour had passed and I had given all I could give.” This statement is odd, given how courageously and faithfully his mentor Pope John Paul II carried on his papacy despite the debilitations of Parkinson’s disease, osteoarthritis, and two assassination attempts. It’s also surprising that, when asked if he now fears dying, Benedict responds, “there is the fear that one is imposing on people through a long period of disability.” Surely there’s an implied critique of his predecessor there, although Seewald doesn’t take note of it. When asked if there was ever a moment in his papacy when he prayed for God to release him, Benedict answers no: “[God] had put me in this place, and so He would not let me fall.”

Taken together, these statements reveal Benedict’s apparent belief that neither mistakes in the chair nor resignation itself can be considered failures. He seems to believe that success and failure can be measured only by God, and then only personally, within his conscience. Even after he was elected pope and (in his words) the “guillotine” fell upon him, God seems to have been his personal Lord and savior, but not his boss.

Seewald is also working on a biography of the emeritus pope, and these interviews—which span the period from immediately before to shortly after Benedict’s resignation—are a part of his research. The foreword is written as if the journalist has found his hero: it praises Benedict’s intellect, wisdom, honesty, patience, and even “his shy smile,” while diminishing the problems of his papacy. Seewald often shuffles responsibility to others, as in his analysis of Benedict’s handling of the clergy sexual abuse scandal: “[T]here have in fact been many failings and errors, especially by the various authorities in individual countries.” Seewald’s questions often include superlatives, referring, for instance, to a “great speech” Benedict once gave or the “revolutionary message” of a public address. As a journalist he’s pitching softballs.

There are some beautiful moments in the book. Benedict is winsome and his humility and gentle spirit are a real inspiration. “I am an entirely average Christian,” he says to Seewald at one point. Still, having an emeritus pope is unprecedented

and troublesome—so much so that Pope Francis was forced to make this comment to reporters last June:

I never forget that speech [Benedict XVI] made to us cardinals, “among you I’m sure that there is my successor. I promise obedience.” And he’s done it. But, then I’ve heard, but I don’t know if it’s true . . . that some have gone to him to complain because of this new Pope, and he chased them away.

That was bound to happen, which is the primary reason why popes are not supposed to just walk away.