



The Next Chapter

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Millions of people do it every day. Anybody can. But the Pope is not just anybody. And retirement was not in the job description.

What do we make of the Pope's announcement this week that he will resign? While not without precedent, it is an act that is so exceedingly rare as to be shocking. It has been nearly 600 years since the last Pope gave up Papal power, and even then it was for political, not personal, reasons.

Seen within the context of what a Pope stands for, Pope Benedict XVI's renunciation is as radical as it is extraordinary. After all, the Pope, according to Catholic doctrine, is infallible. And what could show more fallibility than his concluding: "My strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the ... ministry."

While there are many controversies that marked this Pope's reign, he will perhaps be remembered most for this moment – for his retirement, and for the humility he modeled in choosing it.

"In today's world," he reflected, "subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith...both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me."

If we take this extraordinary admission in, it is immediately clear that it is relevant not just to popes but to each and every one of us.

After all, who among us is not, ultimately, affected by age? The carefree vigor of our youth gives way to aches and pains in places we didn't even know we had, to doctors' waiting rooms, to slowing down where we're used to speeding up.

If we are honest, we are all eventually confronted by the stark reality that more of our days are behind us than are ahead. And we have two choices: Hang on, or admit our frailties and forge a new path.

It is no easy choice. After all, the forces that compel us to hang on are strong. We've always been a doctor, a teacher, a lawyer, an entrepreneur – we've been taking care of others for so long, can we accept the tables turning?

We've been making Seder nearly all our lives and now the kids want to move it to their house, a mixed blessing. Less work, it is true, but what will happen to our special recipes, our Seder tunes ...

What we do is not just a label. It is who we are when we look in the mirror every morning; it is where we get our sense of self-worth and self-confidence. That is particularly true for those in positions of power. The rush of responsibility, the praise of the crowd, the allure of authority are exceedingly hard to give up.

It takes great humility to step back and let others step into your place – a humility even Moses, known as the most humble of all, did not always have.

As Moses nears the end of his life, the *midrash* says, the *bat kol*, a heavenly voice, starts announcing, with increasing urgency, the hours, minutes, even seconds remaining to him. With intense awareness of his own mortality, Moses first begs for the opportunity to live longer, but all his entreaties are refused.

Finally, he reconciles himself to the need to appoint a successor, and Joshua is chosen. But even then Moses cannot let go. "Until now," God tells him, "it was your

turn to serve. Now it is Joshua's turn." "Sovereign of the universe," Moses answers, "let me go and be his student." "Go ahead and try!" God replies.

So Moses gets up early and hurries to Joshua's door. Joshua is sitting there, teaching, and does not see Moses. The people of Israel gather at Joshua's tent, aghast. "What is this?!" they say. "Moses stands while you sit there and teach?" When Joshua looks up and sees Moses, he tears his clothes and wails.

Moses, in the model of Popes for the last 600 years, would not let go, even when it became clear that a new generation needed new leadership. For Moses, there is nothing other than leading the people – no adult learning courses, no travels to the South of France. He is what he does, he does what he is.

We all know people like that. Perhaps we ourselves are people like that. But Pope Benedict's words this week challenge us to ask ourselves – must we be? Is there, perhaps, another way?

When we encounter the infirmities and indignities of age or illness, can we respond with a new dignity, a new hope brought of humility?

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein pointed out that commentators throughout the centuries have noticed a discrepancy in our *parasha* this morning between the height of the Temple as a whole (30 cubits) and the Holy of Holies which was only 20 cubits. How could it be, they wonder, that the Holy of Holies, the highest spiritual height, should be the lowest point of the Temple?

Rabbi Hanina answers this question in the Talmud in a creative way. He says that the difference in those 10 cubits was filled by *Cherubim*, the angels which represent God's constantly renewing relationship with us all. In other words, the Holy of Holies is an embodiment of the teaching that humility creates a space for new relationship, new

holiness. What we previously assumed was an indignity is actually making room for a crown of glory.

So too our lives. As we age, there is much we must let go of. The running, both literal and figurative, that characterized our youth gives way to the deliberate steps of growing older. But if we confront those changes with humility and hope, our last chapters may just be our best.

After all, humility is making way for those angels – recognizing that we have other interests that can be every bit as meaningful as what made us feel powerful or important before – and that we can find purpose and meaning in addressing those interests. That we do not have to be CEO to make an impact or, more importantly, to make meaning.

There is power and promise in slowing down to volunteer, to spend precious moments with a spouse, a friend, children or grandchildren.

For all the losses of age, there is also the pride of watching others grow to do what we no longer do and the wisdom to know, as God said when seeing God's new partners, Adam and Eve, placed in a new world, "It is good."

Pope Benedict will retire to his books – who knows what kind of scholarly contributions he will yet make – and to a life of prayer which is most meaningful for him.

As for us, at some point, we too must come to terms with our limitations.

In those moments, may we find and possess the humility to make way for what truly matters, and in so doing, make for ourselves a Holy of Holies – whose smaller stature leaves room for new relationships, new holiness, and new possibilities.