I once asked my father if he would like to be Pope.

He said no.

I asked why not.

Dad answered, “No chance for advancement.”

Pope Benedict XVI stunned the world on February 11. In a surprise announcement at a Vatican Consistory of Cardinals, he declared he would resign the papacy as of February 28.

“After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, “ said the pope, “I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry… For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005, in such a way, that as from 28 February 2013, at 20:00 hours, the See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant and a Conclave to elect the new Supreme Pontiff will have to be convoked by those whose competence it is.”

The 1917 Code of Canon Law, and the 1996 regulations of Pope John Paul II allow for the resignation of a Pope.

An unprecedented modern announcement such as Pope Benedict’s immediately launches a tsunami of speculation. Was he forced to resign? Did he simply give up?

Conjectures such as these are of little worth, especially when we look at what Benedict himself said on the subject in his 2010 book, *Light of the World.*

When asked about the possibility of a Pope abdicating his office, Benedict said “Yes, if a Pope clearly realized that he is no longer physically, psychology and spiritually capable of handing the duties of his office, then he has a right and under some circumstance, also an obligation to resign.”

Pope Benedict went on to say he believed it would be wrong to resign the papal office simply because of the crushing burden: “One must stand fast and endure the situation … one must not run away from danger and say someone else should do it.”

There have been at least 10 popes who resigned their office, the last being Pope Gregory XII in 1415, who stepped down in order to help heal the great Western Schism.

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Other popes resigned under troubling circumstances, such as Pope Benedict IX (1032-45) who resigned after allegedly "selling" the papacy to his godfather Gregory VI. This was followed by Gregory VI (1045-46) who resigned when it appeared he may have received the papal office by means of simony.

The most unusual case was Pope St. Celestine V, a holy hermit who reluctantly accepted the papacy after a conclave of cardinals unanimously elected him to the papal office in 1294. Celestine was a contemplative with no interest or knowledge of worldly affairs. Due to his own sense of inability, he resigned six months after his election.

After Celestine resigned he requested that his successor, Pope Boniface VIII, allow him to return to his cell on Mt. Marrone. Boniface, however, noting the simplicity of his predecessor and the grave danger of schism, ordered Celestine confined to the castle of Monte Fumone where he died shortly after on May 19, 1296.

This story leads us to the crucial question: what will Benedict XVI do after February 28? What does an ex-Pope do in a media age?

Celestine V simply disappeared from view. The world no longer heard of him. It appears he did not exercise any influence whatsoever over his successor.

But this is no longer 1296 but 2013. It is an age where popes court interviews with the press. Entire books, such as Pope Benedict's *Light of the World* and *God and the World* are extended interviews with a secular journalist.

We can expect journalists to hound Benedict after he steps down from office. What do you think of your successor's policies? Is this how you would have arranged things if you were still Pope? What is your opinion on your successor's Vatican appointments?

It will be fascinating to see what sort of access a post-papal Benedict allows the press. And what will be the weight – or the *perceived weight* – of Ratzinger's new writings after February 28?

Granted, Benedict will probably not answer questions from journalists about the strengths and weaknesses of his successor, but this will not stop the media from asking them. It will not stop endless speculation. I believe this new situation will further add to the instability of today's Vatican in its exercise of authority.

The issue of Vatican appointments is an interesting one. Every Cardinal who holds a Vatican post, whether it be Cardinal Bertone, Cardinal Koch, Arcbishop Müller, derives his authority

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to hold the post from the Pope who appoints him, and immediately looses it when the Pope dies.

A new pope is free to make a clean sweep of the Vatican Curia if he wishes. Though it appears unlikely, many of us would be glad to see Koch and Müller shipped back to Germany and replaced with more Catholic, less ecumenical prelates.

With Benedict still living, however, a new Pope may be unwilling to make a clean sweep. Resigned or not, silent or not, a kind of rival papacy is established with Pope Benedict coexisting with his successor.

We can only guess if and how Benedict would influence those who succeed him. I remember Archbishop Lefebvre noting that Cardinal Baggio of the Vatican Congregation for Bishops still exercised enormous power on that Discastery years after he resigned as its head.

We still need to learn what we will call Pope Benedict after February 28. Do we still call him "Your Holiness" in the manner that we still refer to George Bush as "Mr. President". Does he return to being addressed as Cardinal Ratzinger? And what is the ceremony in the Pontifical for a Funeral Mass of Cardinal who is no Longer Pope? When the time comes, the world will witness the unprecedented spectacle of a reigning pope burying his predecessor.

Of course, with the new Pope comes a whole new chapter in the SSPX's relations with Rome. After a stormy year, many of us hoped there would be a little more time to catch our breath. The next twelve months are guaranteed to be fraught with interest.

Meanwhile, *oremus*!

Feb. 11 update: One question answered:
Pope to Retire to Monastery after Resignation – Click Here.

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