My take on the historic renunciation of the papacy by Pope Benedict XVI is that it reveals a consummate intellectual who sees the world and the papal office for what it really is, and a man of prayer who humbly acknowledges who he now is -- precisely the coupling of faith and reason that characterized his ministry and that shapes his theological legacy.

In an earlier posting, my colleague, Dr. Larry Chapp, also reminds us not to overlook an aspect of the pope’s declaration that reflects a continuing theme in his papacy, namely, the “grave crisis” currently facing the Church. Postulating that Benedict’s position is not “just some pious rambling about the need for faith” or “an empty devotional gesture,” he notes that Benedict “has been insistent that so many ‘issues’ in the Church today ... are the product of a lack of faith among members of the Church.” As usual, Dr. Chapp is onto something here.

To be blunt, the Christian faith appears to be dying! Oh, it will never be extinguished. But its liveliness, its vibrancy, its enlivening effect in people’s lives today is losing force due to a fundamental flaw in our religious understanding. That flaw emerges more clearly from reading between the lines of the pope’s post-renunciation reflections on the Second Vatican Council as he saw it and lived it.

Speaking to the clergy of the Diocese of Rome, the pope offers a first-hand analysis of the development of the Council, particularly in terms of the reform of the liturgy, the conceptualization of Church, the problem of Revelation, the socio-theological trilogy (religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and the Church in the modern world), and the hermeneutics of politics set forth by the “Council of the media.” The current that runs through, or underneath, all of this is the Council’s collective search for intellectus.

For Benedict, that understanding is to be found in a “living” sense of faith, precisely what is at risk of loss today. For him, faith is not primarily a set of doctrinal ideas, a coherent system of thought. Nor is it a political ideology, at perpetual conflict with the ways of the world. Nor is it the practice of ecclesiastical customs, no matter how popular such devotions may be. Yes, faith is a matter of conviction, as in the profession of the Creed. Yes, it has socio-political implications, as we see in the current controversies about religious freedom. And, yes, faith is well-expressed in both devotional practices and charitable deeds.

But for this pope, faith is to be, first and foremost, a living reality, an experience of encounter with a person, the very person about whom he has most recently written, Jesus of Nazareth. To explain the difference, consider Paul’s lesson to the Romans (10:8-13) on this year’s First Sunday of Lent: “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart ... for if you ... believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”
“Nearness” is not an attribute of a concept or a custom; it characterizes a presence, in this case the divine presence of Jesus as Lord. “Believing in your heart” is likewise an unusual turn of phrase, but it strikes the chord that Pope Benedict aims to make us hear. The heart is the realm of feeling, not fact; it’s where a person is “touched” not “taught.” And each of us knows, from varied personal experiences, that matters of the heart are what matter most.

When someone special, even beloved, is near to us – in body or in consciousness – that presence affects us. It has an emotive power. It makes an impact. It enables us to see differently. It excites or energizes us, often in ways that bear no intellectual explanation but are nevertheless very real to us. THAT is the faith of which Benedict speaks, an encounter with the One who alone has the power to transform life and death into eternal joy.

That is the faith by which he understands the still needed reform of the liturgy to express as “its real purpose”, an encounter with the Risen One that “create(s) a world which is a response to God’s love.” That is the faith by which Church is to be understood not as a collection of individual believers but as the body of the faithful that “requires my inclusion in the great ‘we’ of believers of all times and places.” That is the faith by which Revelation is rightly appreciated as a continuing expression of Tradition, for “Only and ever in this communion of the living Church can one really understand, read the Scriptures as the Word of God, as the Word that guides us in life and in death.”

That is the faith that Pope Benedict seeks to renew in this Year of Faith (which, together with the synods on the Bible and on the New Evangelization, form a triad that distinguishes his papacy). The Lenten season that we have now entered is, thus, not merely a time for self-examination in terms of the quality of our deeds and the confession of our faults. Rather, to avert the current crisis of faith, we need instead to re-experience the living presence of the divine Word in our lives and in our world, a Word that challenges us toward conversion, to be sure, but a Word that remains so near to human persons in calling each of us to a living and loving relationship with the God in whom we believe.

REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.
Director

“Believing means entrusting oneself in full freedom and joyfully to God’s providential plan for history .... Faith, then, is an assent with which our mind and our heart say their ‘yes’ to God, confessing that Jesus is Lord. And this ‘yes’ transforms life, unfolds the path toward fullness of meaning, thereby making it new, rich in joy and trustworthy hope.

(Pope Benedict XVI, 10/24/12)

BOLD BELIEF is a daily blog from the faculty at DeSales University, whose mission as an institution of higher education in the tradition of Salesian Spirituality is to foster vital dialogue between Roman Catholic faith and human culture.