



In the minds of the vast majority of Catholics the idea of "Pope" still relates to John Paul II. The Polish Pope left to humanity an image that is still intensely preserved in the hearts of millions of people. His testimony in the last days of life, "at the foot of the cross", was a catechesis on suffering and giving for the love of God that can hardly be overcome. It is understandable that following the resignation of Benedict XVI, the "comparisons" arose: why did John Paul II not resign, and Benedict XVI did? Benedict XVI has said that he has "come to the certainty that, by the age of, I no longer have the strength to properly exercise the Petrine ministry" and also mentioned that to govern the Church and proclaim the Gospel "the vigor of both the body is also necessary as of the spirit, which, in recent months, has diminished in me in such a way that I must recognize my inability to exercise well the ministry entrusted to me." Recalling the last years of the pontificate of John Paul II one might be tempted to say, "But if anyone was diminished in his vigor it was precisely John Paul II!" What answer to give?

Two different contexts

Karol Wojtyła came from a socio-cultural context where resistance to communism forged his personality and also his ministry as a priest and bishop. The strength to resist came from faith: faith was, so to speak, resistance. It is understandable that the experience experienced in the youth and the early years of his episcopate subsequently affected how he copes with the last years of his papacy. Joseph Ratzinger suffered from Nazism but when Germany was liberated – and then divided – he lived in the part that the communists did not dominate and which, so to speak, facilitated the experience of the faith in which he had grown and deepened.

Various modes of government

In the last years of his pontificate, John Paul II delegated few functions of government to some of his collaborators. Benedict XVI seems to have wanted to follow a different modality, in which he managed, as part of the usual government, the Affairs of the Church. It can be understood that by not being able to continue to do so personally he considers it to demonstrate his "inability" to govern, as he pointed out in his abdication. They are two legitimate ways of governing: in one the Pope delegates; in another, he prefers to keep it for himself. In the second

case, because it cannot continue to do so, it is a factor to meditate on. Age John Paul II died at the age of 84. Benedict XVI is currently 85 (next April turns 86). It is understandable that, objectively, the current Pope is tired precisely because of age, as he alludes in his declaration of abdication. Needless to say, it is almost throughout the pontificate of John Paul II, the then Cardinal Ratzinger was always at his side as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. At the 8 years of the pontificate of Benedict XVI, we must add more than two decades of work in the Roman curia.

A question of conscience

Finally, you can also talk about a matter of conscience. John Paul II saw before God that, despite his state of health, he must continue his ministry as successor of the apostle Peter. That was what God asked of him. Benedict XVI affirmed that "After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that, because of advanced age, I no longer have the strength to properly exercise the Petrine ministry." That is what God asked of Benedict XVI.

In this regard, one of the most pertinent comments of these days has been that of Professor Norberto González Gaitano, of the communication faculty of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, in Rome, who has underlined precisely this factor. "In the face of the conscious decision, thoughtful and suffering of a man, also a pope, there is no other reaction than to express respect, deep respect. Any other judgment, if it is to be reasonable, can only be based on calculated or unpredictable effects of the action taken, and not on the person or the action," says prof. Gaitano.

The consideration of these elements allows us to orient themselves and better understand such an important decision and which, as you can see, has not been taken lightly.