

**Title: Agenda setting, framing and news interpretation of mass media coverage of the 2013 papal resignation.**

**Abstract**

On February 11, 2013 Pope Benedict XVI resigned his position as the Leader of the Roman Catholic Church. For the first time in the history of the Church, the resignation announcement was transmitted to the general public via mass media. This paper explores the agenda setting and framing roles of the press in the coverage of the events following the papal resignation. It also provides a conduit for lay Catholics to share their views on the impact of the resignation and weigh in on their interpretations of the event. Results from four focus groups indicate that participants acknowledge the mass media functions of surveillance, correlation, transmission, and entertainment as present in the papal news coverage. However, participants also believe that the press set undue agenda by prioritizing the story for several weeks and framing the story in a negative light. This raised the question of the legitimacy of Agenda Setting and Framing influences in today's society. Several alternative interpretations of factors that led to Pope Benedict XVI's resignation were proffered by participants and those factors were oppositional to the mainstream media interpretations.

Keywords: Agenda Setting, Framing, Pope Benedict XVI, Papal Resignation, Mass Media Functions.

## INTRODUCTION

The resignation of a Pope of the Catholic Church is an extremely rare occurrence. Very few Popes have resigned without outside influence. For instance, in 1415 Pope Gregory XII resigned but his resignation was, however, not a voluntary one. Rather, the tumultuous situation in the Church forced him to step down. This happened during a riotous time in the Catholic Church when three Popes claimed legitimacy to the papacy. They were Roman Pope Gregory XII, the Avignon Pope Benedict XIII, and the Antipope John XXIII. The last pope to resign without any outside influence was Pope Celestine V in 1294, which is over 700 years ago (BBC, 2013). This was the reason the whole world was amazed on February 11, 2013 when Pope Benedict XVI formerly known as Joseph Ratzinger relinquished his position as the Leader of the Roman Catholic Church. He addressed the College of Cardinals during a regularly scheduled meeting and said the following:

I have convoked you to this Consistory, not only for the three canonizations, but also to communicate to you a decision of great importance for the life of the Church. After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, 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...” (Vatican Information Service Website, February 11, 2013).

For the first time in the history of the Church, the resignation announcement was made via mass media. Due to the choice of communication medium, most Cardinals and Church leaders got the news at the same time as the rest of the world. On NBC’s *Today Show* that aired on February 11, 2013, Cardinal Dolan of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York characterized his reaction to the television coverage as “startled” and “sobered” after the confirmation of Benedict XVI’s resignation.

The aim of this study is twofold. First, it explores the role of mass media in the coverage of Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation. It specifically aims to explore the agenda setting and framing roles of the press in the coverage of the papal resignation news. Second, it provides a conduit for lay Catholics to share their views on the impact of the Pope’s resignation, providing their own interpretations of the story.

### **Brief History of the Catholic Church in Relation to Dialectic Nuances and Global Influence**

The Roman Catholic Church is the oldest and largest Christian institution in the world, with 1.2 billion members (Reuters, 2013). It is also a powerful organization that played an integral role in the world's civilization especially during the Christian colonialism in the middle Ages that began around 1095 and lasted over 200 years (McPhail, 2006). During this era, the Pope - the Catholic Church pontiff and its Patron, controlled a greater part of the world including Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East in the quest of spreading Christianity. Mercantile colonialism and its forces challenged and overthrew the Catholic Church as the world's super power. But the impact, reputation and power of the Catholic Church were not erased entirely. Moreover, some scholars aver that due to the hegemony and scandal that defined the Christian colonialism era, the Catholic Church has since been viewed from a negative prism both in the media and by other Christian denominations. McPhail (2006) recalls the actions of Crusaders who were spreading Christianity all over the world as her writes:

Relics and treasures from the Greek Orthodox Church were plundered and returned to the Vatican as gifts. For example, in 1204 the Crusaders sacked and desecrated Constantinople's holiest cathedrals and shrines. To this day much of the history and treasures of the eastern Greek Orthodox Church are locked in the Vatican's basement. In 2004 Pope John Paul II returned the bones of two early Greek theologians but many Greeks are still waiting for the plundered gold, silver, and art works from this era (p. 17).

While the Christian colonialism era was tarnished by sacrileges, hegemony, bloodshed, and property usurpation, its relevance here serves to provide an introduction to the hierarchy, importance, magnitude, and worldwide effect of any news from, by, and about the Catholic Church and its leaders.

### **The Role of Mass Media**

Mass media has been a part of our society for decades, serving several functions. Harold Lasswell (1948) was the first scholar to put media's functions in perspective. He listed three functions of Surveillance, Correlation, and Transmission. Scholars over the years have added other functions and furthered the three original ones. Among the scholars who modified media functions are Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao (2003). Some of the functions they listed are:

- (a) **Surveillance:** This involves the sentinel or lookout role of the media. That is, watching the society and horizon for threats to the established order and information on people or places of public interest and reporting these to the audience.
- (b) **Correlation:** This is the interpretation and linkage function of the media, which helps the audience to understand, interpret, and comprehend what is happening in and out of the society—and how these events affect each other—and to stay in touch with others in the society.
- (c) **Transmission:** Involves the socialization function of the media, in which the media define the society, its norms and values, to the audience and through their portrayals and coverage assist members of the society in adopting, using, and acting on those values.
- (d) **Economic:** This deals with the role of the media within the economic system of the society, which in the United States means that most media function as businesses serving the needs of shareholders and other corporations by selling a product that they either produce or attract.
- (e) **Entertainment:** The fifth function, this entails using media for diversion and entertainment purposes.

## **BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Three theoretical assumptions enlightened this work. Based on the fact that the inquiry entails news and media coverage of the story, the Agenda-setting and Framing theories are appropriate paradigms that provided structure for this work especially in terms of news media. Since the other aim of this study emphasizes the need to lend voice to a population who are not directly involved with the mainstream media or whose voice would otherwise be muted by the mainstream media, the Spiral of silence theory was equally employed.

Mass media are the purveyor of information as noted earlier. In their attempt to inform the public, media managers make a conscious effort to emphasize and amplify some stories over numerous others, thus setting the public agenda. This concept can be traced to Walter Lippman's famous *Public Opinion* (1922) where he asserts:

For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, and so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it (p. 16).

Baran and Davis (2012) explained that Lippman's assertion stemmed from the assumption that average people are not capable of protecting themselves, thus they need to be protected and information interpreted for them. In other words, press media need to feed the general public what media consider important news. Those selected news stories inadvertently become the dominant issues in society. For the current study, the resignation announcement by Pope Benedict XVI remained one of the top news stories for all major news networks for four weeks when his successor was elected. Agenda setting theory as we know it today was the idea of a political scientist, Bernard Cohen (1963). He noted that the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.

Ordinarily, people see the world from different prisms and their standpoint informs their perspective of any issue at hand. But, with Agenda setting the press media is telling people *what to think* about, and draws pictures for the society thus, providing some interpretation that may not necessarily align with the intended meaning of the story. McCombs and Shaw's (1973) research on the key issues of the 1968 presidential election between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey further validated Cohen's agenda setting hypothesis. They lend insight to this theory by explaining that "[I]n choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position..." (p. 176). McCombs and Shaw (1973) found that those issues that were heightened by media coverage eventually became the major issues that the 1968 presidential candidates talked about in their campaign speeches.

In the period between Pope Benedict XVI's resignation and the election of his successor, Pope Francis, all major press outlets had their representatives stationed in Rome. Many news outlets set up temporary studios while others arranged for live feed from established news outlets in Rome. The press was equally successful in telling its readers what to think about Pope

Benedict XVI's resignation through speculating some reasons other than failing health of the pontiff as the trigger for his resignation. Some of the key issues of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation as presented by mainstream media entail forces too great for him to bear, including sexual abuse by priests in the United States of America and Ireland, a scandal caused by the Pope's personal butler Paolo Gabriele who leaked sensitive documents from the Pope's desk containing information about corruption at the Vatican Bank; and developments in the world especially with regard to legalization of gay marriage in the US and some European countries (Reuters, 2013).

The problem though, lies in the presentation of the news, a concept known as framing. This is because the presentation of the news can affect how the news will be analyzed, accepted, and digested. Moreover, news stories and their various levels of importance trigger behavioral changes (Sparks, 2010). This was one of the reasons the current study seeks to explore the perception of Catholics towards Pope Benedict XVI's resignation and subsequent media coverage.

An addendum to Agenda setting theory is the Spiral of Silence theory furthered by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1991). She presented a different outcome that might emerge when some people's opinions on events do not necessarily conform to the popular view. The spiral of silence theory's assumptions hold that people often conceal their opinions, interpretations or views of an issue should they consider those opinions, interpretations, or views to be in the minority. She further stated that the decision to be silent is fueled by the fear of isolation or the fear of their opinions being rejected by the majority group. The "minority" opinions then will spiral into silence. But as the minority group continues to keep quiet, their views would disappear and the majority view will prevail. The detriment then is that those silenced views may in fact be held by a substantial number of people after all. Neumann (1991) indicated that this theory is prevalent in situations of morality and people often keep silent for fear they could be viewed as "bad" or holding a "wrong" view.

### **Research Questions:**

The following questions guided this study:

RQ1: What role did mass media play in the coverage of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation?

RQ2: What was the reaction of Catholics and adults, in the geographic area of this empirical study, to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI?

RQ3: How do Catholics in the geographic area of the study interpret Pope Benedict XVI's resignation in relation to (a) their Catholic faith, (b) the Papacy, (c) Ratzinger as a person, (d) the choice of mass media as a means of disseminating the news of the resignation?

### **METHODOLOGY**

A focus Group was deemed the best data gathering method because it allows for simultaneous interviewing of several people at the same time. Due to the nature of the topic, guided discussion was the best methodology because the group dynamic brings out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from individual interviews. Also, since participants were made up of people from a faith-based community who share similar values, this forum fits perfectly with their communal culture.

#### **Sampling**

The study used a purposive sample to ensure representation of the target population. Usually, focus group participant sampling does not require the rigorous, probability sampling because the goal of such studies is to explore a phenomenon rather than describe or explain a conclusive result (Babbie, 2007). In order to establish some validity to research results, Babbie (2007) suggested convening more than one focus group since a single group may not offer varied insights or provide a framework for comparing answers across the board. Bearing the foregoing in mind, the current study had four focus groups consisting of different categories of Catholics. With the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the permission of the priests and administrators of the location of study an invitation was extended to adult members of two Catholic Parishes located in the Midwestern region of the United States.

The solicitation and recruitment of participants commenced right after the IRB approval in Spring 2013. The researcher visited local churches and the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) weekly meetings to brief prospective participants of the nature of the study, and

assured them that their participation was entirely voluntary. Anonymity was also both assured and ensured, by the researcher. The focus groups were conducted between March 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 2013. Two of the focus groups were conducted before the election of the new Pope Francis and two were conducted after Pope Francis was elected.

Overall, thirty-one (31) people participated in the study. The four groups as indicated in Table 1 include:

Group 1 = Members of a predominantly White Roman Catholic parish located in the Midwestern region of the United States consisting of men and women between the ages of 45 and 75 years old. This group had a total of 5 white people, consisting of 4 women and 1 man.

Group 2 = Members of Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) which comprised of adults studying to join the Catholic Church. They included 12 white people, with 7 women and 5 men between the ages of 20 and 50 years old.

Group 3 = Members of a Catholic Students' organization affiliated with the same parish above and studying at a local university. This group consisted of 7 white people; 4 women and 3 men between the ages of 19 and 22 years old.

Group 4 = Members of a predominantly Black parish located in the same area, about 50 miles away from the first parish. This involved 7 people, 6 women and 1 man between the ages of 45 and 70. The racial make-up of this group was 4 White, 2 Black and 1 Hispanic.

**Table1: Participant Demographics**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
Parish 1	1	4	5	5	0	0	45-75 years
Parish 2	1	6	7	4	2	1	45-70 years
Catholic Students	3	4	7	7	0	0	19-22 years
RCIA	5	7	12	12	0	0	20-50 years
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>19-75 years</b>



## **Data Collection**

The focus group data was collected *in situ*, meaning, onsite for each group. The discussion lasted approximately 45 minutes per group producing a total of 3-hour discussions for the four groups. Each session was tape recorded to allow the researcher to cross-check her notes to ascertain that participants' opinions and responses were presented accurately. All participants consented to their responses being recorded. The researcher had a set of questions which were arranged in themes that corresponded to the research questions. While each question specifically sought to elicit information on a particular aspect of the research, they were worded broadly so as not to sway participants' responses. The questions that guided the discussions were as follows:

1. How did you hear (for the first time) the news of Pope Benedict the XVI's resignation?
2. What was your reaction to the news?
3. What impact (if any) could this unprecedented news (at least for the past 700+ years) have on your faith in view of the current Year of Faith for Catholics?
4. Does Pope Benedict XVI's resignation has any effect on your perception of the papacy as a lifetime commitment? If yes, what perception does it elicit? If no, why not?
5. What is your opinion on the resignation and the very means of transmission (mass media)?
6. What role (if any) did media play in the coverage of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation?
7. Some nicknamed Pope Benedict XVI (aka Joseph Ratzinger) "God's Rottweiler" due to his stern and tough positions on the Catholic teachings and traditions. Did this event reveal a gentle, humble, or even vulnerable side of Ratzinger?
8. What lessons of faith could be learned from Pope Benedict XVI's resignation?

Some follow up questions were used to elicit clarifications from participants especially when a brief "yes" and "no" answer was provided. For instance, in Question 7 participants were asked whether Pope Benedict XVI's resignation revealed a gentle, humble and even vulnerable side of Ratzinger whom people have in the past referred to as "God's Rottweiler". Most of the participants answered "No". They were asked to elaborate on their answers.

## **Data Management and Analysis**

The total length of interviews as mentioned earlier was about 3 hours and the transcript in its entirety produced 40 single-spaced pages. After the document was transcribed the data was

reduced using what Seidman (2006) referred to as *boiling down the data*. This process is done through several steps that include highlighting the relevant sections of the text, grouping similar ideas or information into categories making it easier to organize the material by themes. This was done using the eight questions, and themes were formed when two or more groups provided similar opinions. The data was further reduced through categorization as they conformed to and answered the research questions.

### **Validity**

For any empirical study of this nature, validity is important. Validity ensures that the research conducted was indeed what was intended; and the results provided were the accurate contributions of participants. The structure of an interview can easily undermine a researcher's validity since subjective influences can blur meaning inherent in the data (Seidman, 2006). So, to ensure validity for this study, the researcher applied several techniques including Rich Text, Self-Reflexivity, and Multiple Groups. Rich text or chunk of data style is a model that ensures accurate representation of participants' voice and meaning rather than the researcher's opinions. Very often, information reported in qualitative inquiry may be done out of context and so may provide a different meaning or interpretations that could lend itself to polysemy. In the current study, this was avoided by using a tape recorder and supplementing it with observation notes. To enunciate participants' voices and opinions, chunk data style and rich text (a technique that used participants' direct quotes instead of paraphrasing) were employed in the findings section. Similarly, the researcher's self-reflexivity further validated this research. Although the researcher is considered an outsider who mainly steered the discussion, her Catholic faith and currency provided an insider's advantage as demonstrated by her ability to understand the language and culture being studied. Finally, validity was established through four distinct groups. This provided an avenue for comparing participants' responses to the same question. This informed the themes as categories were derived from similar information provided by each group.

### **FINDINGS**

The empirical research results are presented in this section. The results are based on and informed by the three key research questions asked of the participants.

### ***Research Question 1: Role of Media***

The first research question (RQ1) asked: What role did mass media play in the coverage of the news of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation? Participants' responses corresponded with the established media functions of Transmission, Correlation, Entertainment, and Surveillance. Each of these is discussed below.

#### *(a) Transmission*

The instantaneous nature of communication transmission and the ubiquity of information outlets dominated participants' observation of the news transmission. They observed that these new media functions were not available when Pope Benedict XVI was elected. However, about 98% of the participants got the news of his resignation via various forms of media. By order of magnitude, these were: Television, Text-messages, and Website front pages. The remaining 2% got the news from word of mouth through their friends and family members. Most answers on news sources were generic such as "I heard it on television news" or "I got a tweet". Very few were specific about their sources, which included among others the MSNBC website, CNN, EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network), Matt Lauer on NBC local affiliates, BBC online, and tweets from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

#### *(b) Correlation / Interpretation*

The interpretive role of the media ensures that media help the audience to understand, interpret, and comprehend what is happening in and out of the society (and how these events affect the society). Participants acknowledged that media played the interpretive role in their following of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation. However, the nature of the role was grossly and negatively criticized. One of the criticisms was that the mainstream media capitalized on the resignation to portray the Catholic Church in a negative light. Some direct quotes from participants in this regard included: "You know the media really blew that out of proportion. They look for the negative in the Catholic Church." Also, "the media seized the opportunity to mention the sex scandal, the banking scandal and repeated these over and over and over. The secular network just took the opportunity and ran. But if you listen to EWTN, the Catholic station, it was all beautiful. The secular channels took the opportunity to run the Catholic Church down, instead of building it up."

Other participants criticized the media for pretending to understand the intricacies of Catholic Church doctrine when in fact some of the reporters of mainstream media lacked the proper knowledge to interpret the issues of the church. Some noted, “I have to tell you that I was a little bit embarrassed by the enormity of the coverage – it wasn’t the Catholic Churches’ fault but the ABC, NBC, CBS all of the people reporting who flew to Rome, they didn’t even understand our religion” and another concurred “It’s like what I would say, like I read a biology report and tried to tell someone about it when I’m not a biologist. I don’t understand it, I could tell you what was in the report but it will not be the correct or in-depth information.” The interpretive role of media in this case, according to participants, was inadequate because one still need to find out the correct information on their own because media personnel were ill-equipped for a high quality coverage. One of the participants recalled: “I go back to real journalists, like Walter Cronkite, now journalists are people who used to be weathermen, and now they are a host of other things – they don’t do their research, they just go on impulse”. Also, most participants felt that the media interpretation was more of speculation than informed interpretation. All four groups shared this notion but added that some media outlets engaged (albeit minimally) in expert coverage by inviting knowledgeable guests such as Cardinals, Catholic priests, and Theologians.

*(c) Entertainment/ Education*

Participants noted that the coverage of the Papal resignation was entertaining, but because of the nature of the story, they had expected to get educated as well. The coverage was continuous but lacked new and relevant information. One participant observed: “this is the second papal transition since the 24-hour news cycle. You get breaking news every 15 minutes. The media have opened our eyes and given history to even non-Catholics on traditions...more people now know about the process of electing a new pope.” However, other participants argued that some of the information was wrong and while it may have been entertaining to some, it failed to properly educate the masses. “I think we have to remember that certainly as people of faith, it is really up to us to have that moral rectitude, if you will, to hear a message and yet be willing to say, maybe not to believe the whole message”. Another concurred: “Because of this I got all my news about the Pope on two media outlets – The Catholic Channel on Sirius Radio and the National Catholic Reporter”. They further advised, “You need to be a critical thinker much more today than years ago. Quite frankly, I don’t think many people today are critical

thinkers or are prepared to be critical thinkers when it comes to something that is given to them on the internet, the news”.

*(c) Surveillance / Watchdog*

All four groups also noted that continuous referencing of the sex and money scandals in the Catholic Church by mainstream media was necessary. However, they also noted that the magnitude of the coverage was inappropriate to the extent that it overshadowed the main issue which was the papal resignation. Participants’ responses on the surveillance role of media aligned with the agenda setting, priming and framing effects of news media. The agenda setting role of media as noted earlier tends to tell people (the society) not what to think but what to think about and how to think about it. The priming effect ensures that media draw attention to some stories or aspects of stories at the expense of others. Framing, on the other hand, deals with the manner in which the story was presented. One participant observed, “Twitter got the word out there quick. They set the precedence right away. The first thing you hear is from them. Whether it is right or wrong, they came out with the first things. They set the seed, the agenda”. Another participant observed, “The scandals are already out there. Yes, it should be part of the [media] discourse. The Catholic Church is not doing what it’s supposed to do, that’s taking care of the problem instead of sweeping it under the rug”. On the other hand, another added: “some of the media jumped on the scandal. We all know that they’re trying to sell their paper and boost their ratings.” Still others wondered: “media coverage was kind of over the top. They emphasized the scandal more than I would’ve guessed. I think they seized the opportunity to tear the Catholic Church down. The media played more of a negative role”. Participants believed that the media intentionally focused on the Catholic Church because other sex offenders are not accorded the same level of media coverage: “If you research other formal denominations like the Episcopalians, the Anglicans, you would find there’s a lot of sexual abuse in those denominations too but I’ve never been able to find out why only the Catholics have gotten bad publicity... I spoke to a lawyer who said well the Catholics have a deeper pocket...40-50% of people who have jobs in public sectors, school teachers, people who work for local, state and federal governments filed a sexual harassment claim... why should the Catholic Church be constantly bludgeoned over this issue?”.

***Research Question 2: Response from Catholics and Adults preparing to join the Catholic Church***

Participants presented varied reactions to the news of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation. Their feedback was categorized under these themes: Pleased/Impressed, Surprised, Afraid, Understanding could relate, Acceptance, Concerned, and Upset/Disappointed. To lend voice to these categories, some elaborations are provided below.

*(a) Pleased/Impressed*

A majority of participants (95%) expressed a pleasant reception toward Pope Benedict XVI's resignation. They drew inference from the experience of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II who remained on seat until his death despite his failing health. Some indicated that Pope Benedict XVI's health was already deteriorating albeit not to the extent of his predecessor. One of the participants observed "you could already tell watching him... what I saw was that he was already getting close to being like Pope John Paul II who could have quit before he died". Another concurred, "I think he saw Pope John Paul [II]. That was pitiful." Others commended his action as being "heroic and courageous", "wise," a "selfless act" and "an act of humility." One of the participants puts it succinctly: "I was really impressed actually, because he has the highest power and position in the world. It seems to me that the courage to resign is a huge deal that takes a lot of gut. I was impressed that he had the wisdom to do that. I respect that the Pope [Benedict XVI] felt his health was failing and wanted someone else to take over." With reference to selflessness, one of the participants added "he did what is best for the Church. He put the Church first while staying humble". Another commented "I admire Pope Benedict because he did something that has never been done for over 700 years. The thing that really struck me was when they [media] said that the Pope had been in prayer, did an examination of his conscience and decided to resign. I thought, God, those are the most important things and I hope they [media] play that over and over again".

*(b) Surprised*

The announcement surprised quite a few participants especially the RCIA candidates who are not versed in the Catholic faith and doctrine. Some RCIA candidates had to rethink their decision of joining the Catholic Church. One candidate admitted, "when I first heard it, coming from a split of Catholic/non-Catholic background, making a decision to join the Church, to go

that route, midway through it, and see that happen, it kind of make you take a couple of steps back. What the heck is going on, this leader of the church? I am getting into a religious sect now, could possibly go a different road, depending on the monarchy. It kind of made me take a few steps back and look at it from a different angle to make sure I am making the right decisions. But I don't think it will take just one person on top for the Church to disintegrate.”

*(c) Concerned/Afraid*

The announcement induced a sense of fear in some participants. Their fear stemmed from the realization that the Catholic Church would now face greater scrutiny and criticism from both non-Catholics and the media. Some feared that a revolution has occurred in the Church. One participant stated “when I heard it at first, I was really afraid that the Pope has been pushed out of office by the Curia, because the Curia has been a demanding presence in the church for many, many, years. I was afraid that there had been a coup [d'état] in the Church, that was how I felt for the first time”. Another participant indicated “I wondered how people who are non-Catholics were going to take it, you know, talk and find a way to make it bad. I got all kinds of questions as I was wondering about that”.

*(d) Understanding*

Respondents demonstrated empathy and were able to relate to Pope Benedict XVI's situation. One woman compared it to her mother's situation: “I likened it to my mom who has been very ill. I had a hard time taking it because when I received the news in the media, for me it was like, oh my God, I know what my mother is going through. I came to the realization that people get sick and we want to cling to the old people not letting them go. You have to let go especially if they cannot handle it any more. I was sad.” Another participant stated “I am 71 myself and at my age you have an appreciation for things as they change when you grow old. I just admired him. He had some courage. Very courageous on his part. He felt a great need to do it, more power to him.”

*(e) Acceptance*

Some participants were neutral about the resignation because there is nothing they could do about it. They simply accepted it. One participant, a student said: “I think I was just okay. It happened. It's something we'll go through, it's not going to make me not go to church or anything of that sort. I was like ok it's happened let's pray over it.”

*(f) Upset/Disappointed*

While a majority of the participants (92%) praised the Pope for acknowledging his limitations, the rest were surprised. A small percentage (8%) was upset and disappointed with the announcement. They were upset because the news was not shared with the Catholic community first. Also, the announcement rekindled the sex scandal in the media. One participant narrated: “I was a little disappointed not over him resigning, but that this has such a magnitude effect in the Catholic Church in our community. Why was no announcement made to our Catholic community first before the media got a hold of it?” Another added “When I saw it first on CNN I was upset about the fact that it was presented with the scandal...the media were saying that it was the scandal that was making him ill”.

***Research Question 3: Participant interpretation of Pope Benedict XVI's Resignation***

The third research question examined how Catholics in the geographic area of the study interpreted Pope Benedict XVI's resignation in relation to (a) their Catholic faith, (b) the Papacy, (c) Ratzinger as a person, (d) the choice of mass media as a means of disseminating the news. Each of these is discussed next.

*(a) Impact of Papal Resignation on Participants' Faith*

The general consensus was that the resignation had no negative effect on participants' faith because it was a noble act. This was interpreted in several ways. First, one participant felt that it is the Holy Spirit and not the Pope that is the true leader of the Church; therefore, whether or not the pope is active or retired, it had no effect on his faith. In his own words: “the pope does not lead the Church but the Holy Spirit. When I heard he was stepping down, it was a shocker but for 10 minutes, whatever... You know the Holy Spirit is there. They're going to pick a new Pope I may not even meet him just like I did not meet John Paul II and Benedict XVI”. Another participant felt that the resignation has a positive effect on her faith and the Church because she feels the resignation made the Church stronger.

*(b) Notion of the Papacy as a lifetime commitment*

A preponderance of the participants (65%) stated that prior to Pope Benedict XVI's resignation they thought the papacy was a lifetime commitment with no provision for resignation or retirement. Many felt that Pope Benedict XVI's resignation “put the papacy in human



condition, removing the mystery”. However, referencing Pope John Paul II’s state of health and performance during the last few years of his papacy, they fully support any Catholic Pope’s resignation should the person’s health fail. The caveat though, is that resignation should not be the only choice especially in cases where the pontiff is still able to carry out their duties. One participant noted, “I think as a good leader, you need to know when to quit but that doesn’t mean that every Pope now can go for two years and say, hey, I can’t do this anymore, thereby creating a retired pope club.”

*(c) Ratzinger as a strong/tough person (God’s Rottweiler)*

The Catholic Legate website noted that “God's Rottweiler” is a disdainful, despicable name by the anti-Catholic press for Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. Recently, many media outlets have used this term. For instance, on February 11, 2013, *US News and World Report* had this headline: “Pope Benedict XVI, 'God's Rottweiler,' Filled Church Reformers with Dread in 2005”. Also, on February 12, 2013 the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* website had a similar headline: “Pope Benedict XVI: “God's Rottweiler or the Church's German shepherd?”” Likewise, the *Telegraph* website had a similar headline on February 11, 2013: “Pope Benedict XVI: profile of 'God’s Rottweiler”. Participants weighed in on this phenomenon and discussed the impact of Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation on such reputation. Some participants, especially the college students, thought the nickname is very disrespectful and offensive. Others construed it a positive attribution by indicating: “I saw him more as God’s Rottweiler in relation to Pope John Paul being so frail in the late years of his papacy. And I saw Cardinal Ratzinger being the protector, the stop guy, someone who’s there to protect, to take care of things and he gave a full service to the Church...I think he became Pope to protect the previous Pope’s legacy.” Another agreed: “his strength is a quiet strength. He thought long and hard and decided to step aside. In my opinion, he didn’t do this out of weakness but out of strength as a humble man. It can be a hard thing to do”. Still others thought that only a courageous person could break the trend of over 700 years. Another participant saw the Rottweiler reference on a rather positive note: “If you think of a Rottweiler, a dog, Rottweilers are very loving animals, they are protective and they are very demanding of the person that they have attached themselves to. By comparing him, yes, you can see he is strong and demanding but he is also very loving and gentle. Rottweiler’s do attack when told to attack.

He attacked with his resignation but he prayed about it, discerned it, and made a choice for those he loves and love him.”

*(d) Mass Media as the Choice of transmission*

Some 98% of the participants appreciated and approved of mass media as the preferred choice for the announcement. They provided various reasons. One of the major reasons was that mass media are appropriate for the current generation with the omnipresence of communication technologies. Participants also believed that such news cannot be kept confidential once it is communicated to the Church’s hierarchy. Others offered that the Pope, while a Pontiff for the Catholic Church can impact both the Catholics and non-Catholics worldwide. Therefore, such news should be disseminated far and wide. Some participants feared that if the news were to be shared with the cardinals first, they may have dissuaded Pope Benedict XVI from resigning. Another participant believed that it is a step toward a good direction for the Catholic Church for transparency: “The Catholic Church has been shrouded in mystery and non-communication for so long that it needs to be opening up a lot about the Vatican, the workings of the Vatican and the Pope needs to be opening up not just to Catholics but to everyone.” Another participant added: “I was a little fussed that the cardinals didn’t get the message first. I wonder why that is. The priests and cardinals found out the same time we all did. You would think there would be a memo to priests.” But others countered that with the available communication technologies, the media would have gained access to the news once a memo was sent to the Church administrators.

*(e) Lessons of Faith*

Participants indicated that the papal resignation taught them some lessons of faith and this resonates with the current Year of Faith that is observed by Catholics. Participants’ reflections include “Pope Benedict will remain a very great example of humility... for me, it has given me the sense of renewing my ability to be humble. In a society that promotes doing things on your own, Pope Benedict XVI realized that he was unable to fulfill his obligation and asked for help. This taught me to seek help when I am overwhelmed. Pope Benedict XVI made the decision for the benefit of others, the Church. It taught me to put others first. I was impressed that he discerned the situation, prayed over it and sought God’s enlightenment. This taught me not to rely on my human will but God’s will for me by submitting to the kind of discernment that

comes with prayer before making a decision. Finally, Pope Benedict XVI was true to himself: he thought me to be true to myself”.

### **Other Issues that emerged from the study**

#### *(a) The Church's overt ostentatious exhibit*

Several concerns outside the research focus also emerged. The adult parishioners voiced their concerns about the overt ostentatiousness in the Church. They expressed their disapproval for the flamboyant exhibition present in the Catholic Church, a church which should be catering for the poor. One of the older participants relayed that she is a born-Catholic who has experimented with several other Christian and alternative religions and has made a full circle decision and returned to the Catholic Church. She cited the affluent Sistine Chapel and other examples even with developing countries where several members of the Church are starving.

#### *(b) Youth Involvement / Pope Francis*

The Catholic students' group noted that there is a gross neglect of the Catholic youth especially with regards to programs that target the youth and on-going instruction of the Catholic teachings. It was somewhat challenging to focus the discussion on Pope Benedict the XVI without bringing in the new Pope, Francis, especially with the last two focus groups which were conducted after Pope Francis' election. Participants were very excited about the new Pope and expressed their astonishment that the College of Cardinals elected a Pope from a developing country. They, at the same time supported the choice since a majority of Catholics live in developing regions of the world and the new Pope seems to understand the needs of the poor. Finally, participants from the predominantly Black parish compared Pope Francis to the President of the United States, Barack Obama. One participant observed: “Pope Francis and President Obama both have humble beginnings, but well educated despite their marginalization in society. They took advantage of that, and I believe president Obama also is a man of great faith and it is absolutely breathtaking that both of them now bring open discussions and bring so many different people into discussions instead of the same under the table.”

## CONCLUSION

This project set out to explore the role of mass media in the coverage of the news of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation through exploring the agenda setting and framing roles of the press in the coverage of the papal resignation. It equally provided a voice for lay Catholics to share their views and interpretations of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation.

The Catholic Church's structure provided a hierarchically inverted pyramid whereby the power and the voice often lies with the clergy. It is not a common practice to seek the opinion and reactions of the laity especially in situations like a papal resignation. This is evident in several media appearances that only include theologians or members of the clergy. Meanwhile, the lay members are an integral part of the Church therefore their voice which was amplified through this study provides relevant interpretation. In sum, the unanimous opinion was that participants applauded Pope Benedict XVI's decision to resign his seat as the Pontiff because he could no longer perform his duties. His action was described as heroic, selfless, wise, humble, godly, and loving. While participants acknowledged several needed functions that mass media played in getting the news to the general public, they also felt that the media set undue agenda and framed the stories from a negative perspective. Finally, the unavoidable topic that emerged was the issue of the sex scandal in the Catholic Church. According to participants, although the media overemphasized the sex scandal, the Catholic Church has not properly addressed the scandal and continues to avoid it. They urged the Church to acknowledge the scandal and make amends where necessary so the Church could move on.

In the case of media role and coverage, the agenda setting function was present because the news of the Pope's resignation continued to feature as one of the most important news stories for several weeks. But the framing effect is arguable based on the interpretation proffered by the participants. It is evident that while the mainstream media was presenting alternative reasons that compelled Pope Benedict XVI to relinquish his position, participants were adamant and vehemently believed and provided oppositional interpretations. For instance, while the news media focused on the sex, money and Vatican Bank scandal as factors that compelled Pope Benedict to resign, participants in this study obviously disagreed and rather commended Pope Benedict the XVI as a hero who acknowledged his limitations due to illness and humbly handed over the seat. This raises concerns as to the legitimacy of media's framing function for a

particular news story and to a particular group of people. Going forward, *future research* may investigate the effect of news media framing among a different group of people, for instance non-Catholics or even a non-Christian group. Future research could equally seek the opinions of Catholics in other parts of the world to determine whether their cultural differences could influence a different result. It would be interesting to ascertain whether a different group may oppose the interpretations provided by mainstream media or even applaud the actions of Pope Benedict XVI.

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