

In the past couple of months I have been going through boxes, which I had carefully marked : "To Go Through Someday" in which I have put stuff over the years... It was time to purge, organize and throwout.

In the process of doing so I was gently forced to review the past 20 or so years of my life by being confronted with various memorabilia and, mostly, junk. Much of what I have done I have been proud of. Some of the things "just happened." And some of the events that happened I realized could have just as easily been disasters in my life but for some reason turned out well. There, but for the Grace of God, I could have gone in the wrong direction.

During the past couple of months we have also, as Catholics, had a momentous event. Two events, actually. We not only have a new pope, Pope Francis, but also Pope Benedict XVI became the first pope in 600 years to resign.

That raised my curiosity -- what were the circumstances the last time a pope resigned?

That pope was Gregory XII. And his resignation also involved a Benedict -- Benedict XIII.

The scene was the Middle Ages. The Papacy was more than the seat of spirituality; it was the seat of great temporal power. As such, the French King Philip IV helped elect a frenchman to the Papacy who chose many of his cardinals from France and moved the Papacy to Avignon. It was Catherine of Siena who implored the Pope, in 1377, to return to Rome and he did.

But an Italian (Urban VI) was subsequently elected Pope and came in conflict with the french Cardinals who then regretted their choice to elect him and tried to nullify the election and elect another french leaning pope, Clement VII. Each pope excommunicated the other and, to make matters worse, a Church Council at Pisa decided to depose the two rivals and elect another pope, Alexander V. Now there were three popes!

Clement was eventually succeeded by Benedict XIII and Urban was succeeded by Gregory XII. The matter of who was really Pope was resolved at the Council of Constance in 1415: it decided that Gregory XII was the rightful pope and, in order to end The Great Schism in the Church, he voluntarily resigned to give the Church “a fresh start,” if you will.

Wow.

It was not the end of problems in the Church. Abuses and scandals were frequent. The Protestant Reformation was just around the corner. It was the Church in the Middle Ages and, in some ways, it reflected the opening lines of Dante’s Divine Comedy where he finds himself in the middle of his journey of life in a dark forest having lost the straight path. Many, at that time, had visions of the end of the Church.

But, as we know, it didn’t happen. Some of the Church’s resurgence was due to great men and women. But most, I believe, was due to the Holy Spirit. It was almost as if the Church was to succeed in spite of itself. On an ecclesiastical level the words can be heard again “There but for the Grace of God...”

So I look back on my life, am proud of some things, wish I would have done other things better, and realize that the only reason some things turned out OK was due to the Holy Spirit. I have had some successes in spite of myself.

By the way, I noted that one of my boxes is marked “Go Through This Last.” I haven’t opened it yet.

I have no idea what’s in that one.