

BENEDICTUS

THE POPE WHO RESIGNED -- OR DID HE?

A FULL-LENGTH PLAY

BY TOM ATTEA

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ACT I

Opening theme, "Benedictus," set to the music of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." If the arranger likes, he may use "Laudámus te!" as a second theme, or the English version of it, "We praise you." It can be used at various dynamic levels throughout but preferably only when it appears that Benedictus may be dreaming.

A balcony, rear, facing the audience. Pope Benedictus, an elderly pontiff in white attire with gold trim, stands on it. He raises both arms. Sound of crowd, as if in St. Peter's Square, expresses their appreciation. He lowers his arms and slowly exits.

Below the balcony, downstage, are two cardinals, in black and crimson dress. One is Cardinal Fiore, later Benedictus XXI. They have been observing the Pope above.

CARDINAL FIORE

Truly a wise and good pope.

SECOND CARDINAL

A saint. No doubt one day he will be canonized.

(Lights fade down on the two Cardinals, as they come up on the

Pope's study. The door is opened for him by a priest, and he enters. His personal secretary, Father Devoto, a youngish priest in a black cassock, awaits him and moves toward him, arms out)

FATHER DEVOTO

(as he helps him with his pontifical hat and cape)

An inspiring speech, your holiness.

BENEDICTUS

Thank you. Big audience today.

FATHER DEVOTO

I don't think there was a cobblestone in Vatican Square that didn't have a worshipper's foot on it.

BENEDICTUS

(sighs)

Ah, so many of the faithful, in such spiritual need. I told them what I could.

FATHER DEVOTO

Your homily was inspiring.

BENEDICTUS

I might have told them more.

FATHER DEVOTO

More, your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

Forgive me, an errant thought.

(a trace of weariness)

Tell me, what have we on the schedule for today?

(Lights fade down and slowly come up on the papal bedroom. There is a small altar there with a rail in front of it. Benedictus, now dressed in his bedtime raiment, is on his knees, praying. He seems troubled.)

BENEDICTUS

(aloud)

Why me, dear Jesus? Why me? Why have you chosen to afflict me with my present thoughts? I begged you, please, bless me with the stigmata. Pierce my hands, my feet, my side, as yours were pierced, and I shall gladly suffer them, as you did.

(looks at hands)

But no stigmata comes. Only questions new to me and, God forgive me, the last thing I expected ever to wage war within me -- doubts. I am assailed by doubts. Why at my age, after a lifetime of devotion to you, why dear Jesus?

(He lowers his head and begins to pray silently, as the lights fade. Lights come up slowly. He is asleep. Tosses restlessly. A light seems to suffuse the room; in it appears a man who looks like Jesus. Benedictus awakes and looks. Surprised, he sits up)

BENEDICTUS

Jesus, is that you?

JESUS

I am who I am.

BENEDICTUS

I know, I know. But is it really you?

JESUS

Come and touch my wounds.

BENEDICTUS

I can do that?

(Jesus raises his arms, as if in submission to the Pope's inspection. Pope gets out of bed and walks toward Jesus. Sticks out his hand, as St. Thomas is portrayed to have done, and touches the wound in Jesus' side. Draws back, startled)

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

It is you.

JESUS

The last time I checked.

BENEDICTUS

In answer to my prayers?

JESUS

Yes.

BENEDICTUS

Despite my doubts? Oh, forgive me! How could I have doubted -- I, who have devoted my life to your service. Am I forgiven?

JESUS

Am I not merciful?

BENEDICTUS

Oh, yes, yes, you above all others. But do I dream?

JESUS

Did you not touch my wound?

BENEDICTUS

Yes, yes, I did. You are my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, one of three persons of the Holy Trinity, at one with the Father.

JESUS

I am here.

BENEDICTUS

To talk?

JESUS

About you. I know your thoughts.

BENEDICTUS

I know, I know. You see inside of me. What can I do?

JESUS

Resign.

BENEDICTUS

Resign? The papacy? I am your humble servant and will obey your every word. But how can I resign?

JESUS

Rather, ask why you must.

BENEDICTUS

I must?

JESUS

I'm afraid so.

BENEDICTUS

Because I have doubted?

JESUS

Because you know what is right for your flock.

BENEDICTUS

To resign?

JESUS

It will be your most sacred achievement. I would not ask if I did not trust your saintliness.

BENEDICTUS

My saintliness, still?

JESUS

More each day. That is why you have been afflicted.

BENEDICTUS

With doubt?

JESUS

You know you have been troubled by far more than doubt. You detect a contradiction. You see a new vision of holiness. I know, because it is I who have so blessed you.

BENEDICTUS

Blessed me?

JESUS

Do not feign ignorance with me. You know of what I speak. Yeah, I say unto you, it is only because of your holiness

that you have been so chosen! Trust! I need you to trust your new thoughts -- and act upon them. They have been instilled in you by me. But enough. Enough for now. I await your actions.

(Light around Jesus fades and he seems to disappear. Benedictus looks at the place where Jesus stood. Goes to it slowly and reaches out. Finds nothing. Clenches his fist in agony and draws it against himself. Lights fade down. Gradually come up on the Pope's study. Benedictus is seated at his desk, signing papers. Father Devoto stands beside him, and he hands him the last paper that he signs. Pope rubs his eyes, as if tired.)

FATHER DEVOTO

Are you all right, your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

Fine. Quite a lot of paperwork.

FATHER DEVOTO

I think you made the right decisions.

BENEDICTUS

Thank you. Complex issues. Sometimes I feel that tradition hems us in, like ancient walls. Let me ask you something.

FATHER DEVOTO

Of course.

BENEDICTUS

Have you ever dreamed?

FATHER DEVOTO

Why, your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

Oh, just wondering. How do you suppose we tell the difference between a dream and ... never mind.

FATHER DEVOTO

And what?

BENEDICTUS

Let me put it another way. Let us say you were restless one night and you thought, imagined, perhaps, that when you opened your eyes, you saw something unexpected.

FATHER DEVOTO

In what way?

BENEDICTUS

I have always believed in miracles. I assume you do, too.

FATHER DEVOTO

Of course, Pope Benedictus.

BENEDICTUS

Among them visions, for instance, the appearance of the Madonna at Lourdes?

FATHER DEVOTO

When they have been investigated by us and found to be authentic, yes.

BENEDICTUS

Good. Did you ever think you might be so blessed?

FATHER DEVOTO

As to have a vision? Oh, I don't think so. Such things are more likely to occur to others more -- someone, for instance, as saintly as you.

BENEDICTUS

To me? Now you flatter me. But what if somehow one day I was so blessed? I wonder what I'd do.

FATHER DEVOTO

Why, I would think you would feel that our Heavenly Father chose to bless you with one.

BENEDICTUS

I see. I thought perhaps you would think my advancing age had affected my judgement?

FATHER DEVOTO

I know better than that. You're as sharp as the day you were elected.

BENEDICTUS

And what would you think if I told you that last night I had a vision?

FATHER DEVOTO

I would beseech you to share it with me.

BENEDICTUS

Do you think others might be like minded?

FATHER DEVOTO

I don't see why not? Did you have a vision, your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

Good question. Last night, I --

FATHER DEVOTO

What?

BENEDICTUS

Never mind. I was merely letting my mind wander, perhaps as a relief from the diverse pressures for change. Or, as its advocates call it, modernization. Anymore business we must attend to before dinner?

FATHER DEVOTO

No, your holiness. All issues have been dealt with, in so far as we can address them at this point. You should get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow you have quite a lot on your schedule. The President of the United States has an audience with you at one o'clock.

BENEDICTUS

Yes. What do you tell the most powerful man in the world when you know he is powerless to do what is required.

FATHER DEVOTO

Powerless, Benedictus, or unwilling?

BENEDICTUS

Unaware, I suppose.

FATHER DEVOTO

Of what?

BENEDICTUS

What must be done, if we are to save ourselves.

FATHER DEVOTO

You can only advise him.

BENEDICTUS

Yes. Or set a good example.

FATHER DEVOTO

You do that every day.

BENEDICTUS

I do what I can. Oh, well, shall we eat?

(Lights fade down; come up on
Benedictus, now in his bedroom
again. He is feeling the area
where he touched Christ's wound)

BENEDICTUS

(withdraws hand)

Ah, it cannot be. I am not so holy as to merit a visit from
our Lord, Jesus Christ. But am I sure? Am I doing a
disservice to a true vision that has been granted to me?

(removes rosary from pocket;
goes to altar, kneels, and
begins to say the rosary)

"Hail Mary, full of grace ...

(breaks down)

... help me, Mary. I want to do what is right, but I am
weak.

(A glow appears before the altar.
Out of it materializes what
appears to be a vision of the
Blessed Mother; he starts)

BENEDICTUS

Is that you? Holy Mary, mother of God? Is it?

BLESSED MOTHER

It is I.

BENEDICTUS

You, too? Is my mind failing me? Or is what I behold real?

BLESSED MOTHER

Real.

BENEDICTUS

Truly?

BLESSED MOTHER

(smiles)

Truly. I have come to succor you and give you strength.

BENEDICTUS

Strength?

BLESSED MOTHER

To do as my son has commanded you.

BENEDICTUS

To ...

BLESSED MOTHER

Resign! And devote yourself to what you know is right. You can change the world, but you must suffer to accomplish it, as my son suffered in his time on earth.

BENEDICTUS

But to resign?

BLESSED MOTHER

It is the greatest message you can give the world. The time has come, as Jesus has told you.

BENEDICTUS

But the faithful, what about them?

BLESSED MOTHER

Most will lose faith in you. A few will follow. And if you persevere, more will. Or all may be lost. You must act now. The world teeters and cries out to you. Humanity has become a blight upon the earth. It is time for the great change that can save them. Only you can affect it.

BENEDICTUS

Only me?

BLESSED MOTHER

Only you. I pray you, resign. Resign and devote yourself to the new thoughts my Son has shared with you. Will you do it? Tell me you will.

BENEDICTUS

I will.

BLESSED MOTHER

Bless you, my second son.

BENEDICTUS

I am that to you?

BLESSED MOTHER

I feel it in my heart. Begin now. And bless you, my dear son, Benedictus.

(The glow where she has stood begins to fade and she disappears with it. Benedictus sags under the weight of what he must do. Lights fade down. Lights come up on the papal throne. Benedictus is seated in it. Father Devoto enters)

FATHER DEVOTO

The President of the United States has arrived for his private audience.

BENEDICTUS

Admit him.

(Father Devoto goes to get him.
Benedictus turns his head upward)

BENEDICTUS

Holy Mary, Mother of God, give me strength. Strength!

(Father Devoto shows the President
in)

FATHER DEVOTO

His Holiness awaits you.

PRESIDENT

Thank you.

(Benedictus comes down from his throne and holds out his hand. President kneels and kisses his ring.)

BENEDICTUS

Welcome.

PRESIDENT

(rises)

It's a great honor to be here.

BENEDICTUS

(motions to chair)

Please, be seated.

PRESIDENT

Thank you, Pope Benedictus. You first.

BENEDICTUS

(sits in another chair)

At my age, one never stands longer than he has to.

(takes a seat)

Ah, the honors of office.

PRESIDENT

Yes. At least, there are some rewards for the pressures we find ourselves under.

BENEDICTUS

Thankfully. How is your family?

PRESIDENT

Wonderful. They're here with me. Perhaps they can say hello after our meeting.

BENEDICTUS

It will be my pleasure. I would like to talk to you about many things. But most especially, a matter of ultimate urgency. What do you think it will take to save the human race?

PRESIDENT

You mean, spiritually?

BENEDICTUS

I mean from themselves -- incessant wars, the ever-present nuclear threat, religious and political terrorism, other forms of murder, global warming --

PRESIDENT

-- overpopulation?

BENEDICTUS

(thinks for a moment)

Restraint would help. It works for me.

PRESIDENT

Of course, but --

BENEDICTUS

-- I could say more, but perhaps in time. What do you suppose is the source of the persistent destructiveness of the human race?

PRESIDENT

Oh, many things, I suppose.

BENEDICTUS

Yes, of course. But what is the root of it?

PRESIDENT

If I knew that, I --

BENEDICTUS

-- I will tell you. It's because the human race has never been taught to appreciate the earth, as its sacred home in the universe, and God's greatest gift to us, its blessed life.

PRESIDENT

No, I wouldn't say that subject is emphasized in the schools.

BENEDICTUS

Worse yet, is it emphasized anywhere?

PRESIDENT

You --

BENEDICTUS

-- Cannot quite do what I ought. But that's another matter. Another matter entirely. Words. They comes so easily but affect little. Every time I speak, I feel they are inadequate to our peril. What can you do?

PRESIDENT

All I can.

BENEDICTUS

A noble goal. May we all.

(President looks at Benedictus questioningly. Lights fade down. Lights come up. Benedictus in his study. Father Devoto is with him)

FATHER DEVOTO

How was your audience with the President?

BENEDICTUS

Productive. His intentions are commendable -- within the sphere of his vision, as we often hear from politicians.

FATHER DEVOTO

What do you mean, your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

He is concerned about immediate problems in a practical way. But such actions will not save us.

FATHER DEVOTO

Spiritually?

BENEDICTUS

In the flesh. But first we must save ourselves spiritually.

FATHER DEVOTO

Of course.

BENEDICTUS

What if I told you?

FATHER DEVOTO

What?

BENEDICTUS

Never mind. I want to return to the discussion we had yesterday ... regarding visions. Do you think they can ever come, truly come to people who must deal with the problems of the world on the scale that, say, the President of the United States must?

FATHER DEVOTO

I don't know that he's religious enough to be favored by heaven, your holiness.

BENEDICTUS

Perhaps not. I wonder, though, if visions could really be vouchsafed even to such a one as myself?

FATHER DEVOTO

If to anyone.

BENEDICTUS

Ah, I wish I could believe that. And what if I told you I had, not one, but two visions? Ah, but it's nonsense. Forget I mentioned the subject. Children and other innocents may have them, but not a man besotted with the everyday concerns of the world.

FATHER DEVOTO

Lately, you seem preoccupied by thoughts of them.

BENEDICTUS

Maybe it's my advancing age. I sometimes think, if a vision seemed to come to me, would I believe it was really happening? And after it had passed, would I be skeptical? What do you suppose takes more strength -- to believe in a vision or to dismiss it?

FATHER DEVOTO

Why, to believe, I suppose.

BENEDICTUS

And why is that?

FATHER DEVOTO

The skepticism one must inevitably face, I think.

BENEDICTUS

Yes, I'd say that's true. So, what if I told you that one night I thought Jesus Christ appeared to me and the very next night, the Blessed Mother?

FATHER DEVOTO

I would think you had been inordinately blessed.

BENEDICTUS

And maybe senile.

FATHER DEVOTO

Oh, come now, Pope Benedictus. You're as mentally healthy as a young man. You know that.

BENEDICTUS

But would I still be so even if I believed what I just mentioned?

FATHER DEVOTO

Do you?

BENEDICTUS

Of course not. I was just ruminating. Funny how the mind can wander.

(Lights fade down; come up in Benedictus bedroom. He is asleep. Jesus appears and goes to his bed. He places a chair beside it and sits down. Benedictus senses his presence and opens his eyes; sits up)

BENEDICTUS

Jesus, is it you again?

JESUS

Good evening.

BENEDICTUS

Is it truly you or is it my mind? The advent of senescence?

JESUS

(puts out hand)

Take my hand.

BENEDICTUS

Touch you, again?

JESUS

Take it.

(Benedictus reaches out slowly;
touches hand with fingertips;
Jesus grabs it)

JESUS (CONT'D)

Feel my presence. Feel it! I am God made flesh. Is my hand
not warm and firm like yours?

BENEDICTUS

Yes. Yes, it is.

JESUS

(pulls him toward himself)

I see you are still Pope. To paraphrase myself, why have
you forsaken me?

BENEDICTUS

Forgive me.

JESUS

Why?

BENEDICTUS

I cannot resign.

JESUS

You must.

(lets his hand go)

It is necessary for your new calling.

BENEDICTUS

But when daylight comes, I doubt my dreams.

JESUS

Dreams?

BENEDICTUS

The authenticity of your appearances to me.

JESUS

And will you doubt them even after tonight? Or will you resign tomorrow?

BENEDICTUS

Tomorrow?

JESUS

No later.

BENEDICTUS

(almost crying)

But, my Savior. How can I be certain --

(Thunder and lightening. God appears out of it -- an aged man in a white gown)

JESUS

(stands)

Father! Why have you come?

GOD

To move the matter ahead.

JESUS

I was handling it.

GOD

I know. I am only here to make certain that tomorrow is the day.

(to Benedictus)

This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased. And this is my Pope, with whom I am not well pleased.

BENEDICTUS

(rubs forehead)

Can it be? God? God himself has come to me?

GOD

Who else would he call Father? I command you, resign -- tomorrow!

BENEDICTUS

I --

GOD

-- harbor doubts. Cast them aside. I command you, in the name of heaven, resign -- resign tomorrow!

BENEDICTUS

Why me? Why has this happened to me?

GOD

Hearken unto me, Benedictus! The time has come for a new Gospel. You know it. My Son has instilled it in you, so that you may breathe it forth. It is time to act.

BENEDICTUS

But what you want me to do --

GOD

-- requires the saint that you may yet become in my most particular eyes. But that demands of you extraordinary goodness -- and uncompromising devotion to the will of heaven. I will test you. Repeat to me enough of the new Gospel that has been entrusted to you. Tell me about Original Sin.

BENEDICTUS

(with difficulty)

It is a misinterpretation of your word. You intended it to be communicated as an Original Blessing.

GOD

Why?

BENEDICTUS

Because you labored hard to make the universe and to endow the atoms with the capacity to evolve animate life under the right conditions. You meant intelligent creatures to see your Creation -- most especially, life itself -- as your greatest blessing.

GOD

Why is that?

BENEDICTUS

Because it is the only belief that is consistent with your goodness.

GOD

Thank you. Life! The glory of the universe. And what do I feel when I see it taught that the reason you're here is Original Sin?

BENEDICTUS

You feel insulted.

GOD

Highly. And I need you to rectify the matter. You have not been banished to the earth. You are privileged to have evolved here. This life-graced earth was, is, and, hopefully, will remain the Paradise that has blossomed here. What else has been instilled in you?

BENEDICTUS

What else?

GOD

Out with it.

JESUS

You know it well. Speak my new Gospel. I will not be insulted.

BENEDICTUS

(to Jesus)

You made a mistake.

JESUS

Not exactly. But go ahead.

BENEDICTUS

You told people that they should primarily live for the next life.

JESUS

Why was it merciful, at the time?

BENEDICTUS

Because life was harsh, more uncertain, and often brief.

JESUS

And even more urgently?

BENEDICTUS

It wasn't threatened on a global scale.

JESUS

And now? I want to hear the words exactly as I have put them in your mind. Speak out!

BENEDICTUS

Life has had time to reveal its promise. Humans can improve their lot.

GOD

And what is the great convergence I have programmed into the history of every planet that can evolve complexly sentient life?

BENEDICTUS

That the inhabitants with the intelligence to destroy themselves ought to be able to see that life is actually a blessing, instead of a curse, just at the time --

GOD

-- Go on, go on -- let me hear it!

BENEDICTUS

-- Just at the time when they develop the capacity to destroy it.

GOD

And why does their development so threaten it? Tell me, Benedictus!

BENEDICTUS

Because they have not yet learned to appreciate your precious gift of life and to take good care of it as their principal form of worship.

GOD

Excellent. As you know, my beloved Son performed miracles. He walked on water, transformed water into wine, and raised the dead. Not to take away from what he did, but what are these compared to the miracle of life itself?

JESUS

I admit it, I admit it. No more than paltry tricks. But the comparison is not entirely fair.

GOD

True. But still true. What could you have done if you had not lived?

JESUS

You are right, Father, as always.

GOD

Thank you. It's a generous Son who will compliment his Father.

(to Benedictus)

Now, we come to why you must resign. What do you still preach? Come on, tell me the contradictions that afflict the dogma you have inherited.

GOD (CONT'D)

Since they grow out of humanity's early innocence, I will not call them sins, only untenable infractions.

BENEDICTUS

I teach the doctrine of Original Sin.

(puts hand to mouth)

God, forgive me. I knew not what I did.

GOD

You may yet find forgiveness. And what else do you teach?

BENEDICTUS

That this life must be viewed as a preparation for the next.

JESUS

And what, pray tell, is the effect of that?

BENEDICTUS

People treat this life like a stopover on the way to a better place.

JESUS

And what do they do in such a place?

BENEDICTUS

They treat it like dirt.

JESUS

When they should begin to treat it like home.

GOD

My sentiments exactly.

BENEDICTUS

But they are afraid of death; they need to hope for another life.

JESUS

Do not relapse, Benedictus. You know the answer. What is the best way to earn another life?

BENEDICTUS

To take good care of this one first.

JESUS

(to God)

I told you I taught him well.

GOD

Yet he will not act.

(to Benedictus)

O, ye of little faith! After all we have entrusted you with, how can you continue to stand for the old ways?

JESUS

The change we need is urgent. The human race could disastrously diminish or utterly destroy itself and much, if not all, of the life on this planet at any moment. You must teach them the new devotion that has been entrusted to you. Faith in life!

GOD

Above all else, faith in life, as I have created it!

BENEDICTUS

But will they listen? Or dismiss me as addled?

JESUS

I will give them a sign that says you speak for my heavenly Father and for me -- yea, for all the host of heaven.

BENEDICTUS

A sign? What sign?

JESUS

(sticks out his hand)

Behold -- your wish has been fulfilled.

BENEDICTUS

(holds hands up; looks at
them; sees wounds)

The stigmata!

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

I have been blessed with the same terrible wounds inflicted on you. At last, you have blessed me as I have so prayed. Oh, Jesus, thank you! Now I know I have truly been chosen for the mission you have demanded of me.

GOD

Then you will resign -- and begin to preach our new message.

BENEDICTUS

What if I try to enlighten the Catholic Church, so that it begins to preach it?

GOD

You cannot hope to change it. There are many Popes, but only one tradition. They will protect it.

JESUS

Certainly, you cannot accomplish it in time to avert catastrophe.

GOD

Resign! Show the world a new way! You must! Heaven demands it!

JESUS

(takes Benedictus' hands)

And now you have living proof that you do not dream. Wounds like mine!

(as he kisses Benedictus'
hands)

Resign -- or be damned for eternity!

BENEDICTUS

Damned? Even such a devout soul as I?

GOD

Damned, now that you know better! Remember -- devotion to the care of life must be the foundation of your new sanctity.

JESUS

Chosen, as I was -- you have been chosen by heaven to effect this momentous change on earth!

(God and Jesus begin to back away and then they seem to evanesce; Benedictus observes; then he looks down at his hands)

BENEDICTUS

Chosen? I, Benedictus, have been chosen by heaven? Are not these wounds inarguable proof?

(falls on his knees)

Grant me strength, my Savior, that I may do your will.
Grant me strength! Strength!

(Lights fade down, as he doubles over and begins to weep. Extra beats of silence and then the lights come up. It appears to be the next day. Father Devoto is sorting papers. Benedictus enters)

BENEDICTUS

My prayers have been answered.

FATHER DEVOTO

In what way, your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

I have received a great blessing from heaven.

(holds up hands)

The blessing for which I have so long prayed!

FATHER DEVOTO

(stunned)

The stigmata!

(falls on his knees; places his hands in a prayerful position)

You are a living saint. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned!

BENEDICTUS

(as he makes the sign of the
cross)
In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

FATHER DEVOTO
*Deo gratia! Deo gratia! St. Benedictus! You are a living
saint!*

BENEDICTUS
(changes to Italian)
*Per favore. But please do not refer to me as one until after
I am dead. Arise!*

FATHER DEVOTO
(rises)
May I look more closely.

BENEDICTUS
Si.
(holds out hands)

FATHER DEVOTO
(examines them with awe)
It is a miracle. A new miracle from heaven, Pope Benedictus.
We must announce it to the world.

BENEDICTUS
In due course. First, summon a conclave of the College of
Cardinals.

FATHER DEVOTO
But why? That is to elect a new pope?

BENEDICTUS
Call it a special conclave.

FATHER DEVOTO
As you say. What about the others who interact with you in
the Vatican?

BENEDICTUS
How well can you keep a secret?

FATHER DEVOTO
This, a secret?

BENEDICTUS

Then we shall not have to wait very long for everyone to know. Arrange a staff meeting to take place in one hour. I will announce the miracle myself.

(Lights fade down; come up on the Benedictus, seated on his throne, facing the theater audience; muffled crowd sounds)

BENEDICTUS

(holds up both hands)

Behold, the stigmata!

(Cardinal Fiore and Second Cardinal enter. Kneel before him, one at a time, examine his hands, briefly pray, kiss them, and then depart. Lights fade down; come up on Pope's study. Newspapers piled on desk. Father Devoto stands by with a copy of the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*)

FATHER DEVOTO

The world is breathless with the news. The pictures of your heaven-blessed hands are everywhere. It is the greatest thing to happen for the Catholic Church since the Ascension of Christ into heaven!

BENEDICTUS

I'm not sure I would go that far, but thank you. When I give my homily on Sunday, I will walk in Vatican Square and let the faithful observe my wounds.

FATHER DEVOTO

It is too dangerous. You are too important to risk it. Ride in the Pope mobile.

BENEDICTUS

No. The faithful must see and bear witness. I am not afraid. I have lived; therefore, I cannot die.

FATHER DEVOTO

What?

BENEDICTUS

A vagrant thought.

FATHER DEVOTO

I am concerned. All it takes is one madman.

BENEDICTUS

Heaven will protect me. I have much to accomplish among the faithful and all of God's children.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, Pope Benedictus. But first you must address the College of Cardinals. They continue to arrive with unprecedented excitement.

BENEDICTUS

Excitement? They will not be disappointed.

(Lights fade down; come up on a convocation of the College of Cardinals. Benedictus is on his throne, facing the audience. Muted crowd sounds)

BENEDICTUS

(holds up hands)

Behold, the miracle, granted to me by heaven!

(Hubbub increases; quiets them)

BENEDICTUS

But before you all file by to observe this miracle of God closely, I have an announcement of great consequence for the Church. These wounds are not only a gift from heaven; they come with an obligation. They are a sign -- a sign that I have been chosen to carry out a grave obligation. Heaven has demanded that I resign.

(Hubbub of alarm and objections)

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

Hear me out! I have been called upon by our blessed Savior, Jesus Christ -- yea, and by God, the Father, himself, to teach a new sanctity -- a sanctity that, unfortunately, is at odds with many foundational aspects of Christian dogma. There is no way to reconcile them.

(more hubbub; speaks over it)

So, my fellow members of the clergy, I must leave you -- and go about my new business, the business I have been commanded to do by heaven itself! Do not be so quick to object. When you know what I must do, you may well be glad that I am gone from among you.

(Lights fade down; come up on Pope's study. Pope is looking out the window. Father Devoto enters)

FATHER DEVOTO

Your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

(turns to him)

You would still call me that?

FATHER DEVOTO

Of course, Pope Benedictus. At least, until things are final. The delegation from the College of Cardinals is here.

BENEDICTUS

Show them in.

(Father Devoto turns and goes to the door; returns momentarily, with Cardinal Fiore and the Second Cardinal)

BENEDICTUS

Welcome.

CARDINAL FIORE

Thank you, your holiness.

SECOND CARDINAL

Good to see you, Benedictus! May we look more closely?

BENEDICTUS

You saw them once.

CARDINAL FIORE

But, your holiness, how could once be sufficient?

BENEDICTUS

Come then and behold them.

CARDINAL FIORE

(examines Benedictus'

wounds; falls on his knees
and crosses himself)

Forgive me, holy Father, for any doubts I may have harbored. This is a surely miracle -- a miracle from heaven!

SECOND CARDINAL

(same business)

Truly a miracle! Bless us, Father!

BENEDICTUS

(perfunctorily raises hand
and makes Sign of the Cross
over them)

I bless you, in the name of Christ, our holy Savior, who has granted me this great blessing. Now, please, be seated.

(These rise and sit)

CARDINAL FIORE

Holy Father, we beg you to reconsider.

SECOND CARDINAL

You must, for the good of Mother Church.

CARDINAL FIORE

Think what it will mean if you, who have been selected by heaven for such a miraculous blessing, resign.

BENEDICTUS

I must do what Christ himself has called on me to do. Not only Christ, but our Heavenly Father, and the Blessed Virgin.

CARDINAL FIORE

Christ and God himself will such harm for their own church? Surely, you misunderstand the significance of the miracle.

SECOND CARDINAL

Your resignation would shake the faith of millions.

CARDINAL FIORE

Unless, of course, you explain that now that you have been so blessed you wish to devote the remainder of your life prayer and thanksgiving?

BENEDICTUS

But such an silent exit would be at odds with my heavenly calling. I have been chosen to preach a new sanctity.

CARDINAL FIORE

A new sanctity? What is this new sanctity?

BENEDICTUS

The holiness of this life.

CARDINAL FIORE

Of this life?

SECOND CARDINAL

Surely, you cannot be serious. What about Christ's own words, "My Kingdom is not of this world?"

BENEDICTUS

I have not had the courage to announce it publicly yet, for fear of being judged to have sunk into senility. But Christ himself appeared to me and instructed what I must do.

CARDINAL FIORE

Christ appeared to you?

BENEDICTUS

And granted me the stigmata in person. Not only Christ, but when I resisted his demand that I resign, the Blessed Virgin.

CARDINAL FIORE

The Virgin Mary appeared to you as well?

BENEDICTUS

To plead with me to do her Son's bidding. Yet I still did not have the strength. And then God himself appeared, when his Son was still present -- appeared to me in anger and commanded me to resign.

SECOND CARDINAL

Where did they appear to you?

BENEDICTUS

In my bedroom.

SECOND CARDINAL

When you were asleep? Perhaps you dreamed.

BENEDICTUS

When I was awake.

(holds up hands)

You cannot doubt these wounds.

CARDINAL FIORE

I would never do that, your holiness.

SECOND CARDINAL

To do so would be a mortal sin. But the manner of it ...

CARDINAL FIORE

... that you were so blessed, along with the demand that you resign -- that is what I question.

SECOND CARDINAL

As do I. Perhaps you misunderstood the significance of your blessing.

CARDINAL FIORE

After all, it was at night when you could have been too tired to hear correctly.

BENEDICTUS

I did not only hear it once, but thrice. Make no mistake. I have been commanded to quit my holy office.

CARDINAL FIORE

(softly)

Why not simply retire?

BENEDICTUS

Resign! As Christ said, "I must be about my Father's business." And his business, as I have been vouchsafed, has taken a new direction, more suited to the times.

CARDINAL FIORE

How can that be? Christ's own words are enscribed in the Bible. They cannot change or be changed.

SECOND CARDINAL

Immutable! They are immutable for all time!

BENEDICTUS

Except they be changed by the will of Christ himself.

CARDINAL FIORE

Please, be so kind as to give me an example of this new direction.

BENEDICTUS

If you will hear it, I will.

SECOND CARDINAL

If we are to lose a pope to it, we must.

BENEDICTUS

Then, let me ask, what do you suppose is the true way to earn another life?

SECOND CARDINAL

Why, to follow the teachings of Christ's own Church to the letter.

CARDINAL FIORE

To devote yourself to them and to Jesus Christ, absolutely.

BENEDICTUS

There was a time, in fact, most of my life, when I believed as you do. But now I know better.

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

And I heard this truth straight from Christ himself and God himself. The best way to earn another life is to take good care of this one first.

CARDINAL FIORE

But, Benedictus, do we not teach the care of life? Are we not against killing and abortion?

BENEDICTUS

But, Cardinal Fiore, what is our primary teaching -- the care of this life or the hope of the life to come?

SECOND CARDINAL

Surely, all is balance.

CARDINAL FIORE

You know even better than I, Christ gave us a charter to care about this life when he said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

BENEDICTUS

And I shall always love Christ for saying that, tenuous a commitment to this life as I now see it to have been, as I respect Moses for having written, "Thou shalt not kill." But these teachings have been the foundation of our religion for millennia. And have they proved adequate to remaking humanity? Hardly. Do you know why?

SECOND CARDINAL

Why do you think?

BENEDICTUS

Because the beliefs are obviously not sufficient. It is not to preach love; every love song does that. Not enough to be against killing. What is needed is an all-out effort to rescue life from humanity's obsession with death. And a fundamental aspect of that is to change our religious

beliefs from a devotion to otherworldliness to the primacy of what has been created and placed in our trust: this world and this life! I know it now, and I must preach it. Preach it without compromise -- and that calling means that I must sever myself from allegiance to the otherworldly devotion of the Holy Catholic Church. I have no choice. God himself has commanded me to do so.

CARDINAL FIORE

But, Benedictus --

BENEDICTUS

No choice! I must do what I must do. Heaven commands it! Proceed, I command you, and elect a new Pope!

(Lights go down on the meeting;
come up on the two Cardinals,
walking by a wall of the Vatican)

SECOND CARDINAL

What are we to do? He will not be dissuaded.

CARDINAL FIORE

We must find a way.

SECOND CARDINAL

He is old. Do you attribute the change to dementia?

CARDINAL FIORE

But for the stigmata. It is hard to argue with the wounds. They are as real as blood.

SECOND CARDINAL

What if we vote to retire him before he can resign?

CARDINAL FIORE

A thought. We must find a way.

SECOND CARDINAL

Even if we contravene the will of heaven?

CARDINAL FIORE

What will? As he interprets it? The question is, is he of sound enough mind to have understood why he was blessed with the stigmata? I suggest not.

SECOND CARDINAL

I alluded to that question myself.

CARDINAL FIORE

Then we have a way.

(takes out notebook; writes
and tears out sheet)

When I speak, ask me this. Now, let's go. Time prompts that we be quick.

(Lights fade down; come up on
representation of Conclave.
Cardinal Fiore is at a podium,
facing the audience; Second
Cardinal is seated beside him)

CARDINAL FIORE

Do I look pale? If I do, I have cause -- the burden of my present duty. It weighs on me, and momentarily must weigh on you as well. It concerns Benedictus, a saint among us, chosen by heaven to bear, in his lifetime, the very marks of Christ. Yet age and infirmity spare not even Christ's highest representative on earth. The burden I must share with you today is the mental decline of Benedictus. Yes, sad to say, he has lately fallen into decline. That he is saintly in any state of mind I need not affirm. That heaven has selected him to bear the stigmata speaks more eloquently to that point than any mere human ever could. But, chosen as he has been, there have been many popes, but there is only one church. Blessed as he is, he remains mortal, and the Church eternal. So our first thought must now be for the overall wellbeing of Mother Church. Even more regrettably, it is precisely because of his saintliness that we must act -- and swiftly. Heavy as the duty is, we must immediately announce, as the result of his mental decline, his retirement and select his successor. I know, I know. Many of you object. Many others will urge deliberation. But each day we wait devout Benedictus could misjudge his duty and announce his resignation to the world -- not only announce it, but even worse, use it to embark on teachings that contradict the very foundations of our faith. Catastrophic! I need not tell you that the effects of such a misjudgment would be catastrophic for the Church.

CARDINAL FIORE (CONT'D)

So, fellow members of the College of Cardinals, I urge you, think not of your disinclination to vote for this saintly Pope's retirement, but of the consequences of inaction for our holy Mother, the Church. Think, too, that our intention is merely to speed him to a tranquil retirement, so that he

may devote the remainder of his time on earth to prayerful solitude.

SECOND CARDINAL

(raises hand)

But, even if we retire him, what are we to do about his inexplicable proclivity to preach, as he himself told the two of us, a new sanctity -- a sanctity so misguided it would throw into doubt even our foundational devotion to the hereafter?

CARDINAL FIORE

What else can it be but confirmation of his decline -- and of the need for us to do what we must.

CARDINAL FIORE (CONT'D)

We have neither choice nor time to contemplate one. We must promptly proclaim his mental incapacity and his retirement. But the decision must finally spring from our collective wisdom. I merely explain the dilemma. The answer -- and a new pontiff -- lies with you. I invite your comments.

(Lights go down; come up on Benedictus, sitting up in bed, reading; a voice without a physical presence startles him; it is the Holy Spirit)

HOLY SPIRIT

Hail, Benedictus, living saint, chosen of heaven.

BENEDICTUS

A voice? Do I hear a voice?

HOLY SPIRIT

You do.

BENEDICTUS

But who are you -- and where? How can I believe what I cannot see?

HOLY SPIRIT

You believe much you cannot see.

BENEDICTUS

But even that which I hear in the night, without a presence
my eyes can see?

HOLY SPIRIT

I am here, by your beside.

BENEDICTUS

(turns to right)

Here?

HOLY SPIRIT

On this side.

BENEDICTUS

(turns to other side)

But where?

HOLY SPIRIT

I am he who is unseen and seldom heard! I am the Holy
Ghost.

BENEDICTUS

The Holy Ghost?

HOLY SPIRIT

Yes, recently renamed the Holy Spirit by those who were
haunted by my former name. But, frankly, I had gotten used
to being the Holy Ghost. How would you like, after two
millennia, to be renamed?

BENEDICTUS

I was renamed when I became Pope.

HOLY SPIRIT

So you were. Then we have that in common. I am here on an
urgent matter.

BENEDICTUS

The same as the others?

HOLY SPIRIT

Less urgent overall, but more so in terms of your freedom
to act. The College of Cardinals has resolved to block your
resignation -- and retire you.

BENEDICTUS

Retire me? But I have said I will resign.

HOLY SPIRIT

They will not allow it -- for the same reason we demand it.
The attention it will call to your new mission.

BENEDICTUS

How do you know?

HOLY SPIRIT

I am here and everywhere. What don't I know? Yea, I say
unto you, I was among them when they deliberated, as I am
at your side, even when you doubt, and shall be there when
you triumph. You must act tomorrow -- when you deliver your
Sunday sermon to the faithful.

BENEDICTUS

Tomorrow? I had not planned to do it so precipitously. I
prefer an orderly transition to my successor.

HOLY SPIRIT

The Cardinals will not permit it while you preserve your
freedom. Tomorrow then?

BENEDICTUS

Must I?

HOLY SPIRIT

It is the will of heaven. Thus you must.

BENEDICTUS

I will.

HOLY SPIRIT

Then behold. A celebration.

(Holy Spirit points. Lights come
up on dinner table. Jesus is
seated in the middle; God is at
the head of the table. The Blessed
Mother is pouring wine for Jesus)

JESUS

Thank you, Mother. Sit. Join us.

BLESSED MOTHER

I wouldn't miss it.

HOLY SPIRIT

Arise. It is in your honor.

BENEDICTUS

Mine?

HOLY SPIRIT

Arise, I say!

(Benedictus gets out of bed and
crosses to the table, where Jesus,
God, and the Blessed Mother are
seated)

BENEDICTUS

All of you, here on my behalf -- my triune God, complete,
and Christ's own mother?

GOD

Here and come to celebrate the dawn of a new age on earth -
- the age of life, abundant life!

JESUS

(holds up glass of wine)

Come. This wine is for you. We shall celebrate your triumph
over doubt.

BLESSED MOTHER

And your resolve to do as my Son and his Heavenly Father
have demanded.

JESUS

(gives him the wine)

Drink of my blood.

BENEDICTUS

(takes wine)

Truly?

JESUS

What?

BENEDICTUS

When I bless it, does it truly change into your blood?

JESUS

Did I not say it does?

BENEDICTUS

Yes.

JESUS

Then it is. Drink. We shall celebrate a mass in your honor.

BENEDICTUS

A mass?

JESUS

Even as the first. A Passover dinner, only this time to commemorate our passage over the earth with a new revelation

-- life itself, as the ultimate goal the entire universe, as it was spun from my Father's hand!

(points to other head of the table)

Sit there.

BENEDICTUS

Oh, no. You sit there.

JESUS

I always prefer this position. Leonardo's famous painting of the Last Supper was not accidental. I was his personal advisor and, when he finished it, I was so pleased I also offered him my blood.

GOD

(impatiently)

Sit down! Do you not realize I have a universe to superintend? How much longer can I dally about one planet?

BENEDICTUS

Yes, yes, of course.

(takes wine from Christ and sits at the other head of the table)

Where is the Holy Spirit?

GOD

Just to my left. As you know, my Son is always seated at my right hand.

BENEDICTUS

Of course, of course, as every catechumen is taught. Does the Holy Spirit have wine, too?

HOLY SPIRIT

A goblet like yours but invisible, as becomes a ghost.

JESUS

(raises glass)

May I propose a toast? To Benedictus! Living saint, chosen of heaven, to redeem life from the ancient grip of devotion to death -- redeem it so that human life can live out its allotted time on the life-blessed earth, fulfill its God-given potential, and merit our eternal laudation.

GOD

To Benedictus! Second Son of heaven!

HOLY SPIRIT

Benedictus, we praise you!

BLESSED MOTHER

We're depending on you, son.

BENEDICTUS

I know, Mother.

BLESSED MOTHER

And can we?

BENEDICTUS

I will do as you have commanded.

JESUS

Tomorrow?

GOD

Is not soon enough but will have to do.

BENEDICTUS

Tomorrow, then, and bless me now, that I may not falter.

ALL OTHERS

Bless, Benedictus!

GOD

Second son of heaven, destined to achieve humanity's new salvation!

(They raise their glasses as the lights fade down. Lights come up on Father Devoto in the Pope's study. Benedictus enters with urgency)

FATHER DEVOTO

Good morning, your holiness.

BENEDICTUS

Good morning. We have much to do.

FATHER DEVOTO

As always.

BENEDICTUS

More than that. Today, after I say mass, and, when I give my sermon to the faithful, I will announce my resignation.

FATHER DEVOTO

Your resignation, Holy Father? I thought --

BENEDICTUS

-- What? As I have openly confirmed, I have been commanded to do so by heaven.

FATHER DEVOTO

But the College of Cardinals is just now arranging for your retirement.

BENEDICTUS

That destiny is not what has been prescribed for me. If I told you what happened last night, you'd be certain I've sunk into senility.

FATHER DEVOTO

What happened, your holiness?

BENEDICTUS

Enough to determine my course of life. Last night I was invited to drink wine with Christ.

FATHER DEVOTO

With Christ himself?

BENEDICTUS

Not only Christ. At the same table were seated the other two members of the Holy Trinity.

FATHER DEVOTO

God and the Holy Spirit?

BENEDICTUS

None other. And the Blessed Mother served wine.

FATHER DEVOTO

She was there, too. Where did it take place?

BENEDICTUS

The festal table appeared in my bedroom. Christ himself gave me my glass of wine and told me to drink of his blood.

FATHER DEVOTO

Then he affirmed the transubstantiation?

BENEDICTUS

He did. So, you see, how can I not obey? All the host of heaven is depending on me to preach a new holiness. Do you understand why I have no choice? Well, do you?

FATHER DEVOTO

I do, if all you say --

BENEDICTUS

(holds up hands)

-- Doubt it and offend heaven!

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, yes, of course.

BENEDICTUS

Then let us take care of what business we may -- and let the day proceed.

(Lights fade down; come up
on a desk, where sits
Cardinal Fiore. Second
Cardinal is also present,
looking over some

paperwork. Father Devoto
enters hurriedly)

CARDINAL FIORE

Ah, there you are, Father. Welcome. What is it that you
cannot even discuss on the phone?

FATHER DEVOTO

A matter of too great an import and fraught with urgency.

CARDINAL FIORE

Tell me.

FATHER DEVOTO

Benedictus plans to announce his resignation today.

CARDINAL FIORE

Today?

FATHER DEVOTO

And publicly.

SECOND CARDINAL

When?

FATHER DEVOTO

During his homily.

CARDINAL FIORE

Are you certain?

FATHER DEVOTO

He told me so.

CARDINAL FIORE

But why?

FATHER DEVOTO

I'm afraid his mental condition degenerates daily. He told
me that last night he had wine with Christ.

CARDINAL FIORE

Wine with Christ?

FATHER DEVOTO

Transubstantiated into blood, by Christ's own avowal. And hear this. At the same table were God, the Holy Spirit, and the Blessed Mother.

CARDINAL FIORE

Extraordinary. Then there can no longer be any doubt. His mind is gone.

SECOND CARDINAL

Lost to the years!

FATHER DEVOTO

Much as I serve his saintliness, I'm afraid so.

SECOND CARDINAL

But what if his visions, absurd as they sound, are somehow real? After all, he bears the marks of Christ.

CARDINAL FIORE

Real as they appear, could the tissue of our certitude support the weight of permitting his resignation? Even more persuasively, can we allow him free rein, given the unsoundness of his judgment, as we have lately witnessed it?

FATHER DEVOTO

If I thought we could, would I be here?

CARDINAL FIORE

He must be stopped, even if we countermand heaven itself.

FATHER DEVOTO

But how, Cardinal Fiore?

CARDINAL FIORE

You have access to the wine he will drink when he celebrates his morning mass.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, I prepare his chalice.

CARDINAL FIORE

Bring it to me.

FATHER DEVOTO

That's risky.

CARDINAL FIORE

Bring it! Unless you yourself will do what is required.

FATHER DEVOTO

What?

CARDINAL FIORE

An aid to sleep. The act saves the church.

FATHER DEVOTO

I will do it.

CARDINAL FIORE

(referring to Second
Cardinal)

Then he will bring it to you. Return, be watchful, and expect it. Make haste, let your absence stir suspicion.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, Cardinal Fiore.

(Father Devoto turns and hurries
off; Cardinal Fiore picks up the
phone)

CARDINAL FIORE

(into phone)

A pharmacy, a trusted pharmacy, do you know one? Connect me.

CARDINAL FIORE (CONT'D)

I am much disturbed and in need of a sleep aid.

(to Second Cardinal)

And so good night, good Benedictus. And heaven forgive us.

(Lights fade down; come up on the
Benedictus at an altar,
celebrating mass. Father Devoto,
Cardinal Fiore, and the Second
Cardinal are seated. Benedictus
consecrates the goblet of wine,
raises it heavenward, and then
brings it down and drinks. He puts
the chalice on the altar. Stagers
and turns to the prelates. They
hurry to him and catch him as he

collapses. Lights fade down; come up slowly on Benedictus, who is lying in bed. He wakes with a start; sits up)

BENEDICTUS

My, God, what have I dreamed? And what is real? What is at the gates of my mind -- heaven or madness? And what have I done? I will feel out Father Devoto.

(suddenly holds up hands)

The stigmata! Still there? Oh, Heavenly Father, help me to divine my true destiny.

(gets up on his knees in bed)

I beseech you, Jesus, help me. I know not what I think or do

-- or ought to do.

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT I

ACT II

Later the same morning.
Benedictus' study. Father Devoto is gazing out the window.
Benedictus enters.

BENEDICTUS

A fine day.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, your holiness. The sun is out.

BENEDICTUS

(cautiously)

About the conclave.

FATHER DEVOTO

What conclave?

BENEDICTUS

Of Cardinals?

FATHER DEVOTO

The one that elected you?

BENEDICTUS

(tentatively)

The new one?

FATHER DEVOTO

New one? Why would there be a new one?

BENEDICTUS

(considers)

Ah. Yes. Well, then, call one. And do so immediately.

FATHER DEVOTO

But why, Pope Benedictus? You are in wonderful health and can still lead the Church for many years.

BENEDICTUS

You will know soon enough. Summon it without delay.

(looks at wristwatch)

Almost time for my Sunday sermon.

FATHER DEVOTO

I was just observing the crowd of the faithful, gathering in the square. It's quite a turnout -- an expression, I think, of the esteem in which they hold you, especially since heaven blessed you with Christ's own wounds.

BENEDICTUS

(looks at hands)

Yes, since then my popularity has gone way up ... a necessary precondition.

FATHER DEVOTO

For what?

BENEDICTUS

I must do. It is the will of heaven.

FATHER DEVOTO

You have a much better connection with the Almighty than I do.

BENEDICTUS

And have no choice but to obey.

(Lights fade down. Come up on Benedictus on the balcony, facing the audience. Crowd hubbub. He raises his hands to quiet them. Hubbub diminishes.)

BENEDICTUS

And so today I address you with a sad heart and a new message, a message of hope for the salvation of all who will hear it. A sad heart because today, before you, the Catholic faithful, whom I have served with all the dedication of which I am capable, I must announce my resignation from the papacy.

(crowd objects; he quiets them)

Forgive me, but my decision is final -- and decreed by heaven.

(same business)

No, no, I have already called for a conclave of the College of Cardinals to elect a new pope, and, God willing, I will serve until their task is accomplished. Now, let me turn to my reason for doing so. I can no longer devote my life to much of the fundamental dogma of the Church.

(uproar; attempts to quell it)

Hear me out! I beg of you, hear me! Christ and the other members of the Holy Trinity have commanded that I go among you and teach a new Gospel -- a Gospel that is much different than the one you know, but the good news -- for, as you may know, "good news" is what the word "Gospel" means -- that I will communicate to you has been instilled in me by Christ himself.

(holds up hands)

The proof is present before you. These wounds, with which heaven has seen fit to bless me, are to serve as a sign that I speak, not for myself, but for Christ himself, our Heavenly Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Blessed Mother. All have appeared to me in person and told me what I must do. The good news of Christ's new Gospel is a message that is right for these treacherous yet hopeful times, so fraught with danger, yet graced with promise -- a new Gospel that, heaven hopes, will be sufficient to save us from ourselves, as our ancient beliefs have not.

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

From this day forth, I will come among you and preach, not the doctrine of Original Sin, but of Original Blessing -- that we humans evolved on the earth as a great blessing from God, a demonstration, not of his displeasure with us, but of his benevolence toward us; that our purpose is not to dismiss this life as inadequate to our hopes, but to devote ourselves to it as a blessing -- yea, a very miracle! -- from the hands of God; that to earn another life we must not retreat for this one, but do our very best with it -- so that each of us may strive to fulfill his or her finest God-given potential, which includes the appreciation and care of, not only of our own lives, but the lives of all the other members of the family of humanity and, in fact, all the other forms of life that God has so generously prepared the groundwork for the evolution of. Yea, I say unto you that your greatest sanctity is not to be found in preparing for death but in living in ways that are worthy of God's miraculous gift of life, by striving to fulfill the finest potential of your mind, your body, and your spirit, by which I mean the life energy that sustains you, your personal share of the energy with which God has suffused the universe. Now, I will even come among you to preach, not that death is an occasion for mourning, but for the celebration of the life that has been so generously granted, be it long or ever so brief; and to recognize that, once you have lived, you do not die. All of your acts and achievements become part of the eternal tapestry of human fulfillment, and, as such, they will live forever. Because, as Christ Jesus explained to me, once something has happened, it has happened forever. It becomes an eternal part of the great unfolding of the universe. So I say unto you that if you live, you will not die. Yes, your life will, in time, complete its span. But, if you will but appreciate what a blessing it has been, you can be satisfied

-- grateful you were born and able to experience the miracle of life! Satisfied even if this life were, in God's wisdom, the only table He has set for us. For part of life was, is, and always will be a mystery, whose answer lies, not within our ken, but within the mind of all that is divine. But now I have said enough.

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

Soon, I will come among you and reveal more of what heaven has willed me to tell you. But now I conclude with my final papal blessing. Bless you, dear living body of the Holy Catholic Church, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Lights fade down, as he waves to the faithful; some hubbub, applause mixed with boos. Lights come up on Pope's study, as he enters, followed by Father Devoto)

FATHER DEVOTO

Benedictus, my Pope, what in God's name have you done?

BENEDICTUS

Only what wise heaven has entrusted me to do.

FATHER DEVOTO

But how could heaven entrust you to contravene the most fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church, to which you have devoted your entire life?

BENEDICTUS

I speak not for myself now but heaven's own words. I can no longer sin against life; but serve it. I can no longer be dissuaded. Convene the conference!

FATHER DEVOTO

As you say. Yes, obviously you are right. It has become a necessity. I rue this day. Oh, how I rue it! And I believe that one day you will, too.

BENEDICTUS

Rue it? How? Behold, Benedictus is no more. What you see is only the remains of a Pope. I am already gone from my office and must be about my Father's business. God grant you hear my new message yourself -- and take a wife.

FATHER DEVOTO

A wife, your Holiness? But --

BENEDICTUS

-- Part of the promise of your life, instilled in you by heaven itself, is your capacity to love and reproduce. We preach against abortion. But think, my good secretary, how many devout Catholic lives we have caused to go unborn by forbidding normal love and marriage to our priests and nuns. Oh, what a sin we have committed against all those unborn babes! No longer, no longer can I entertain any teaching that contravenes the potential of life as it has been gifted. We did not create its design; ours is only to accept, love, and serve it. And so, I say unto you, from now on I live, as Christ has commanded me to, in the service of life -- and find a greater sanctity in that devotion than ever I did in the service of death-devoted dogma. Bless you, Father, long-faithful Devoto, and, if you will, bless me and my new religion.

FATHER DEVOTO

Your new religion?

BENEDICTUS

Verily. The religion of life itself, God's own devotion, evident in the evolution, capacity, and beauty of life, vibrantly true in our very beings and in all the other life we are privileged, within the span of our own lives, to behold!

FATHER DEVOTO

(puts face in hands and
weeps)

Oh, holy Father, dear Benedictus, my Pope, whom I have held in such esteem, what has happened to you?

(Lights fade down and come up on
Pope's Chapel. He is on his knees
before the altar)

BENEDICTUS

Have I not, my Savior, done as you commanded? I beseech you, bless me and give me strength for the tribulations and, I hope, the successes that lie ahead. What? Will you not appear to me now and confirm that I have set my course aright? Now that I have launched my ship on an uncertain sea, will you desert me? *Miserere! Miserere mei, Deus!*

(looks at hands)

And yet I see your mercy in me, your ever-present confirmation that transcends all doubt. Enough! I, a blessed creature of finitude, but of finitude nonetheless, can never know everything I wish I could but enough to know my way! I must act now on my own, as all humanity must in the knowledge of its own God-granted gifts. Now let me remove my Papal vestments, never to drape myself in them again. Henceforth, I will go among the people of the wide and troubled world in simple dress, as Jesus did, and be his new Apostle, not as Pope, but under my original name of Vitorio, Vitorio Benedetto. I will be a fellow acolyte of the wisdom and splendor evident in God's Creation and a voice of its worthiness for our awe and reverence.

(takes off papal hat and places it on the small communion rail; removes ornate robe and places it there, too. Takes off papal ring, kisses it, and puts it down. He is now dressed in a plain white gown)

God bless me if I am right -- and forgive me if I am wrong!

(Lights fade down; come up on Pope's study; Father Devoto is there, as Cardinal Fiore and Second Cardinal enter in an urgent state)

CARDINAL FIORE

Has the man totally lost his mind?

SECOND CARDINAL

We must meet with him immediately.

FATHER DEVOTO

I don't know what to make of what has happened. I leave that to heaven -- and a new pope to you.

CARDINAL FIORE

And we shall have one. The question is, what shall we do with this former one?

SECOND CARDINAL

The urgency is extreme, Father Devoto.

CARDINAL FIORE

He must be silenced. Pronounced unfit to serve, due to the ravages of age on his mind and compelled into a blessedly silent retirement.

SECOND CARDINAL

A very blessedly silent one, if Christ will protect his church.

CARDINAL FIORE

The duty is ours. We will execute it.

(Pope enters in his simple white gown, wearing, as Christ is represented to have done, leather sandals)

BENEDICTUS

Welcome. God's blessings be upon you.

CARDINAL FIORE

Benedictus -- what have you done?

BENEDICTUS

Only as Christ has commanded me.

CARDINAL FIORE

Would Christ command you to deal all but a mortal blow to his own Holy Catholic Church?

SECOND CARDINAL

Surely, you cannot believe he would. You are its head, its very head, Christ's Vicar on earth!

BENEDICTUS

(holds up hands)

Do the stigmata not substantiate the truth of my calling?

CARDINAL FIORE

They are of your hands, not of your mind. Obviously, the years have had their way.

BENEDICTUS

In what way? Am I not as mentally acute as you've known me to be -- facile with logic, sudden with insight, prolific with comment, a friend of wit?

CARDINAL FIORE

With all due respect to your Holiness, obviously, not.

BENEDICTUS

Have I not had the soundness of judgment to have summoned you?

FATHER DEVOTO

He did that and peremptorily.

BENEDICTUS

Thank you. I'm grateful for your endorsement.

(to Cardinals)

Please, proceed to elect a new pope as soon as possible. I'm eager to leave the Vatican and begin my new mission among all the people of this life-blessed earth.

CARDINAL FIORE

But, Benedictus, how can you ever devote yourself to undermining the Church you have so devoutly served?

BENEDICTUS

My goal is not to undermine it, but to provide its faithful with a new foundation for their beliefs and their salvation.

SECOND CARDINAL

The effect would be the same. Holy Father, cannot you see that your ability to make complex decisions has become incapacitated?

BENEDICTUS

Has it? I do not hear it within the corridors of my mind. The implements therein seem to me working as effectively as ever.

(to Father Devoto)

You work with me daily. What think you? Am I sunk into a silly senility?

FATHER DEVOTO

Not as I had detected, until your most recent proclamations. God forgive me, but I cannot understand them and worry that our well-intentioned Cardinals' explanation may be the only one.

BENEDICTUS

So you will not affirm my cogency?

FATHER DEVOTO

No, Father, I can no longer.

(holds up newspaper)

How can I, given the worldwide disaster your recent sermon has precipitated. The only answer can be as they have said. I urge you, Holy Father, agree to a peaceful retirement -- a life of easeful prayer, say, at your summer residence, sun-graced Castel Gondolfo.

BENEDICTUS

And betray the calling that has been vouchsafed to me by the heavenly host? God, the Father, Christ, his Son, the Holy Spirit -- the Holy Trinity entire -- and Blessed Virgin herself -- all have come to me in visions, proclaiming a new Gospel that I must preach to --

CARDINAL FIORE

-- Is not the sudden appearance of these nighttime visions sufficient to convince you that you are no longer of as sound a mind as you believe?

BENEDICTUS

I have doubted them, as any sane man's judgment would caution him to, only to have them recur and assert their incontrovertible tangibility. Tangible! They are as tangible as the wounds in my hands, my side, and my feet. Please, I beg you, go about the business for which I have summoned you.

CARDINAL FIORE

Regrettably, we must. May I ask that until we have accomplished it that you remain in the Vatican and refrain from further public speaking?

SECOND CARDINAL

Otherwise, how can we proceed in the peace of heaven that we require in order to make the correct decision in the sacred matter with which we are trusted?

BENEDICTUS

How promptly can you arrange a ballot?

SECOND CARDINAL

Who can tell in a matter so vital to the future of the Church?

BENEDICTUS

I will grant you a week. Not a day more.

CARDINAL FIORE

A week? But --

BENEDICTUS

-- I have no more time to dawdle. When I see the first puff of smoke arise that signifies a new Pope has been elected, I will fly from here with it. Now, in the name of Christ, go about your business.

CARDINAL FIORE

Yes, your Holiness.

SECOND CARDINAL

Good day, Benedictus, and Christ be merciful to you.

(Cardinal Fiore and Second Cardinal exit. Benedictus holds onto edge of chair and sags his shoulders)

BENEDICTUS

Exhausting times.

FATHER DEVOTO

For all of us, Holy Father.

BENEDICTUS

But surely you know I am acute?

FATHER DEVOTO

So I thought.

BENEDICTUS

And have I given you reason to believe otherwise?

FATHER DEVOTO

I believe that question is best answered by you. Observe your own words and deeds. Do they not bespeak enough?

BENEDICTUS

(puts hand on Father
Devoto's shoulder)

Dear God, what in heaven's name will I do if I am in error
-- and you are right?

(Lights fade down; come up on
Cardinal Fiore and Second
Cardinal, walking along together;
ancient wall in background)

SECOND CARDINAL

Who would have thought, such a sudden decline?

CARDINAL FIORE

Into a profound dotage.

SECOND CARDINAL

What are we to do, Cardinal Fiore?

CARDINAL FIORE

Elect a Pope. And imprison another.

SECOND CARDINAL

Imprison?

CARDINAL FIORE

Well, then, isolate. Or persuade. Perhaps, in Christ's
grace, he will become amenable.

SECOND CARDINAL

Pray God he does. A troublesome time.

CARDINAL FIORE

And by surprise. I was not prepared.

SECOND CARDINAL

Who could be, even with heaven to guide us?

CARDINAL FIORE

But the uproar among the faithful that he has already
precipitated -- how shall we ever quiet it?

SECOND CARDINAL

Let's trust that heaven will provide the new Pope with an
answer.

CARDINAL FIORE

If there was ever a time to be infallible, his will be it.

SECOND CARDINAL

Infallible? I'm glad the burden only falls on the Pope. I find it enabling to know that I make mistakes. I make them every day, but somewhere among them, I seem to do a few things right.

CARDINAL FIORE

But then you are not the Pope, when he is a Pope of sound mind. Let's see how the conclave goes. We have a week.

SECOND CARDINAL

And could use more.

CARDINAL FIORE

A lifetime of weeks, if you get my meaning.

SECOND CARDINAL

I do and agree. Perhaps he will realize his own incapacity and save us from steps I know neither of us relish.

CARDINAL FIORE

From your lips to God's ears.

(Lights fade down; come up on
Benedictus, in his bedroom,
holding up a cassock)

BENEDICTUS

How shall I dress in my new calling? Nothing ornate. It would contradict ecology. In a simple cassock? Or a business suit? Dear me. Never thought I'd wear one of those again. A cassock, then. But black? Does it not too much reek of death? White then? An ensign of life? Does it suit heaven's own herald of a new Gospel? Then white it is, like a babe, about to be baptized, new as my message. And my shoes? Should I imitate Christ and strap on sandals? No, no, I was overzealous. I am not worthy of them. The imitation embarrasses me.

(takes off sandals)

Modern shoes it will be.

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

They suit, I suppose, a modern message -- at least, until Christ himself unties these strings and slips poor sandals on my feet. But first I must merit such an accolade. His commendation will not come easy. I will, I suppose, not always find willing ears among the public. Ridicule? I already heard some and expect more. Praise? I hope for some but do not require it. Assassination? Always a possibility. Pray, let it wait until I have said what I must and helped save what of the world I may. The all-important act is to speak and enable the Gospel I have been entrusted with to be written down by many hands, so that it will serve as a testament for all time. A new Gospel, a Gospel worthy of life. God, what a calling I have been summoned to! May I prove a sturdy vessel.

(looks at wristwatch)

Now, I wonder how the conclave goes.

(crosses to the window and
looks out)

When will I see the gray waft of burnt ballots that tells me my wait is over and a new door has opened? Can I be wrong? Can it be wrong to serve Christ? God? The Holy Spirit? The Blessed Mother? Such a wrong would, I think, be more sacred than any other right.

(looks at his watch and then
out the window again)

Hurry, I say! Let's have a new Pope! I must be about Christ's new business.

(Lights fade down; come up on
Pope's study. Father Devoto is at
the window, making the sign of the
cross, as Benedictus enters)

FATHER DEVOTO

Have you seen it?

BENEDICTUS

What?

FATHER DEVOTO

(points out window)

The smoke, just now. Ah, and the cheering in the square. We have a new Pope!

BENEDICTUS

A new Pope?

FATHER DEVOTO

Just this moment, thanks be to God.

BENEDICTUS

I pity him, but will stay to confer my blessing.

FATHER DEVOTO

I'm sure he will want it. Your hands are a sign that all we believe is true.

BENEDICTUS

Was true. He inherits the past. I go to help make the future.

FATHER DEVOTO

May I do anything for you while you wait?

BENEDICTUS

My business here is through.

FATHER DEVOTO

But you will wait?

BENEDICTUS

As a courtesy. Then I must be on my way. I have much to do.
(goes to window; looks out)
Soon, I'll be free of all that could detain me. A world of hope and new challenges awaits me.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, of course. I wonder who has been chosen.

BENEDICTUS

Chosen?

FATHER DEVOTO

As our new Pope. I can't wait to hear. May I enquire?

BENEDICTUS

Please. I'm curious myself.

(phone rings)

FATHER DEVOTO

That must be the news, now.

(goes to phone; picks it up;
on phone)

Yes, yes, who is it? Fiore?

BENEDICTUS

Cardinal Fiore?

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes. An inspired choice, I think. Don't you agree?

BENEDICTUS

May heaven bless him.

FATHER DEVOTO

(on phone)

Has he decided what name he will take? Benedictus, the
twenty-first?

BENEDICTUS

Benedictus? He would be Benedictus, too?

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, in number immediately after you. What other pope could
he better emulate? Perhaps he hopes one day to be blessed
with the stigmata, too.

BENEDICTUS

A question, not for me, but for heaven. Please, let him
know I wish to offer my blessing as soon as possible.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, your Holiness. But certainly you wish to participate
when he is inducted?

BENEDICTUS

Must I?

(Father Devoto turns back to
phone, as the lights fade
down; come up on the Pope's
quarters; he is kneeling in
his private chapel)

BENEDICTUS

*Pater de caelis Deus, Fili redemptor mundi Deus, Spiritus
Sancte Deus, Sancta Trinitas unus Deus, Sancta Maria -- I
have done as you have bid me. I am no longer Pope. I thank*

you for the sacrifice you have asked me to make and for the new calling you have bestowed on me. I will labor with all of my strength to be worthy of your blessings. Soon I will embark on my new pilgrimage, and I pray you will guide me and protect me.

(looks up)

Will you appear to me tonight? One more time, now that I am no longer Pope, to console and assure me? One of you? Not even one? No? Very well then. A well-made universe doesn't come with a mechanic, just as a well-made man should function without constant assistance. I am prepared for the burden you have granted me. I am ready to go forth from here and find a new destiny. Ah, Benedictus, brave talk for a weak will.

(He drops his face into his hands and begins to weep. Lights fade down; come up on the Pope's study; Benedictus is seated, with Father Devoto standing beside him. Commotion in the hallway just beyond the door; then the door opens and the Second Cardinal enters)

SECOND CARDINAL

Good morning, your Holiness. I trust the day finds you well.

BENEDICTUS

It does.

SECOND CARDINAL

May I present our new Pope-elect, Benedictus, the Twenty-First.

(Enter Cardinal Fiore, now attired as close to the garments of a Pope as pre-induction permits)

BENEDICTUS XXI

I come to pay my respects, Benedictus, and to express my appreciation for the glorious opportunity that has been granted me by heaven.

BENEDICTUS

Welcome, Cardinal Fiore. I congratulate you. Come. Let me giving you my blessing.

(Benedictus XXI looks about, as if he is not certain he wants to accept the blessing. Then he moves forward and falls on his knees before Benedictus)

BENEDICTUS XXI

(kisses papal ring)

Bless me, Holy Father, my way will not be easy.

BENEDICTUS

(makes the sign of the cross)

I bless you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Arise, Benedictus, the twenty-first.

BENEDICTUS XXI

(stands)

Thank you. But only a cardinal until after my formal induction. Surely you will be there?

BENEDICTUS

I may, as God commands me. I have much to accomplish in my new calling.

BENEDICTUS XXI

Yes, yes, of course.

(takes Father Devoto aside)

Listen to me. Under no circumstances is he to be allowed to leave his quarters.

FATHER DEVOTO

I will do what I can, my Pope, but --

BENEDICTUS XXI

I will provide the help you need at all the exits.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, Holy Father. And after your induction?

BENEDICTUS XXI

No need for concern. The manner of his retirement has been agreed upon.

FATHER DEVOTO

Will I be going with him?

BENEDICTUS XXI

The choice is yours. You might find a more active life here with me. I would welcome you as my own secretary.

FATHER DEVOTO

Thank you, Holy Father. I think you know I am greatly saddened by his decline, but I thank God for your offer and gladly accept.

BENEDICTUS XXI

Very good. But for now your only duty is to persuade him that his place is here.

FATHER DEVOTO

I will perform it, as best I can.

BENEDICTUS XXI

The most and the least you can do. Now, I will take my leave.

(goes back to Benedictus)

I have much to do myself. I look forward to receiving your blessing at my induction. What more can I hope than to be blessed by your own heaven-graced hands?

FATHER DEVOTO

I'm sure we'll be there.

BENEDICTUS

We will?

(to Benedictus XXI)

Then arrange the matter quickly.

BENEDICTUS XXI

The process has been set in motion and soon the event will soon be upon.

(He turns to leave, as the lights fade down; come up on Benedictus' bedroom. He is kneeling beside his bed, in a plain white cassock, praying. He makes the sign of the cross and rises. He bends over and picks up two suitcases. He heads

off, as the LIGHTS fade down.
 Lights come up on Pope's study.
 Benedictus XXI bursts in with
 Cardinal Fiore)

BENEDICTUS XXI

Gone? What do you mean, he's gone?

FATHER DEVOTO

Slipped out, sometime during the night.

BENEDICTUS XXI

How is that possible? All the exits were guarded.

FATHER DEVOTO

I have no idea but was concerned it might happen. But he
 did wait until after your induction.

BENEDICTUS XXI

With a plethora of protestations.

FATHER DEVOTO

What are we to do?

BENEDICTUS XXI

What else? We must find him -- and before he does anymore
 harm. Dangerous! He's a very dangerous man, to be freely
 afoot and speaking pernicious nonsense. Heaven knows what
 damage he might do!

CARDINAL FIORE

Should we inform the police?

BENEDICTUS XXI

Not unless it becomes public knowledge that he has left the
 Vatican. Summon everyone to a meeting. We'll conduct our
 own search. But, for God's sake, be discreet.

(Lights fade down; come up on
 Benedictus, standing on a hill,
 with his suitcases on the ground
 beside him. Hands raised, as he
 preaches)

BENEDICTUS

And so, my children, I say, come unto me and hear the new Gospel of Christ Jesus -- the Gospel of this life, this life as God's greatest blessing ...

(CROWD, OFF)

Possessed by the devil -- surely, he is possessed!

BENEDICTUS

(tries to calm the crowd and talk over it)

... and how the love and care of this life is the true way to show your reverence for Him ...

CROWD (OFF)

No, no, listen. What he says is good!

BENEDICTUS

... and save life from the ravages that our former death-devoted beliefs have been inadequate to deter!

CROWD (OFF)

Anti-Christ!... He has become the anti-Christ!

(Objects are hurled at him, as he attempts to continue)

BENEDICTUS

Come, hear the new Gospel that Jesus Christ has instilled in me -- the new word of God, become flesh, in my person!

(More objects are hurled at him, and he is driven off the stage; Lights fade down and come up. He is now preaching on a street corner)

BENEDICTUS

(holds up hands)

Notice God's blessings in the wounds of my hands, as symbols of the truth of what I have been called upon by heaven to go about and teach!

CROWD (OFF)

Fake! His wounds must be fake! Would Christ ever truly bless such a blasphemer? But what if they are real? If they

were, would he talk against what is written in the Holy Bible?

BENEDICTUS

(trying to go on)

Come unto me, my children, and hearken to the new Gospel of life sanctified, not death ...

CROWD (OFF)

Somebody silence him! Senile! He must surely be senile! A pity. He was a great pope, once.

BENEDICTUS

(attempts to continue)

Hear me! For life against death is the great struggle of our time and the conversion of the human race from devotion to death to life is the pivot of history ...

CROWD (OFF)

What if he's right? Can it be right to speak against the teachings of Christ's own church? Go back to the Vatican! Seek retirement!

BENEDICTUS

... Harken unto me, all ye faithful, a historical moment is upon us, which will determine no less than whether we, the human race, will flourish or perish!

CROWD (OFF)

Boo! Rubbish! Insanity! But are you certain of that?

(Lights fade down; come up on Benedictus, seated on a park bench)

BENEDICTUS

Suffer the little children to come unto me.
(extends arms)

CHILDREN (OFF)

My parents said to stay away from you! Mine think you're crazy! Leave us alone, old man!

(Lights fade down; come up on Benedictus, walking along, now

with the support of a cane and
hunched over from exhaustion.

ASSASSINS (OFF)

Here he comes now. Carrying himself as if he were Christ incarnate! He must be silenced! Let's give him what he deserves!

(Shadowy figures make a move on him; lights fade down; hammering sounds; Benedictus screams with agony; Lights come up; we see Benedictus crucified. A shadowy figure sticks a spear in his side; Benedictus sags; looks up)

BENEDICTUS

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

(He drops his head, apparently dead. Lights fade down; come up on an open casket. It is tilted toward the audience, so Benedictus is visible inside of it. He is dressed in his white cassock, with his hands folded across his chest. A rosary is in his hands; Jesus enters and walks up to the coffin.)

JESUS

(reaches into the coffin and
touches Benedictus' face)

Ah, Benedictus! Second son of heaven and of my own Mother. Dead now, as I was, having experienced my own agony -- the agony I went through for the forgiveness of sins! But like me, heaven will raise you from the dead! Only this time the privilege is my own.

(raises hands)

JESUS (CONT'D)

Arise, Benedictus! Arise! For thou art no longer dead, but brought back to life! Arise! Thy brief slumber is over!

(Benedictus opens his eyes and slowly sits up)

BENEDICTUS

Alive, again? Forgive me, Jesus, but why could I not remain dead? I would have preferred it to the torment that has befallen me. Let me die and take me up into heaven.

JESUS

Not yet, Benedictus. You have much more to communicate. Like me, you must arise from the dead and preach again -- and then, as I did, you will ascend into heaven.

BENEDICTUS

Heaven? Is it still up there -- even though today we fly right through the clouds where we thought old heaven was? I know not where it is.

JESUS

Of course, it is still there. Invisible, but there, for all eternity!

BENEDICTUS

But the peace of the grave -- I was at ease. Must I live again?

JESUS

Heaven wills it. But only for forty days -- as I did, when I arose from the dead. Arise now, and preach the new Gospel of life! Arise, I say! Arise from the dead and go forth once more, Benedictus!

BENEDICTUS

I will obey. I submit to your will, dear Jesus, and can do no other.

JESUS

Take my hand, then, and arise!

(Benedictus takes Jesus' hand.
Jesus helps him stand in the
coffin, as the lights fade down.
Lights come up on Benedictus,
preaching again)

BENEDICTUS

I have been rejected by the general populous, so I come unto you, my fellow clergy, out of my own death, crucified like Christ, and brought back to life, raised by Christ as

he did Lazarus and God him, as a mercy from heaven, so that I might go about heaven's new business for a period of forty days before I, like Christ once did, ascend into heaven to sit beside my heavenly Father.

(crowd shifts restlessly)

I turn to you because of your goodness and say no longer devote yourselves to the hope of life after death, but convert to faith in this life, to life before death! Convert to faith in life and devote your goodness, not to death, but to God's greatest gift, so that you may help save it.

(as he talks, shadowy figures close in on him)

There is no truer way to serve God himself, the Creator of the Universe and all of its sacred life -- and no truer way to merit any other life there may be! Convert, I say! Convert to life now!

(Shadowy figures grab hold of him and take him away, as he protests. Lights come up in the Pope's study. Benedictus XXI paces nervously, as Father Devoto looks out the window. Noise outside the door; Second Cardinal enters, with Benedictus held by the arm.)

BENEDICTUS XXI

Ah, so there you are! How in God's name could you --

BENEDICTUS

-- Free me! I must be about the wide world again, teaching Christ's new Gospel!

BENEDICTUS XXI

Of course.

(goes up to him; puts his hand on his shoulder)

My dear, dear Benedictus, don't you see what has happened to you? You have become -- not through your own fault, but because of advancing age -- an embarrassment to the church -- a blight, a cancer, eating away at it. What other explanation can there be but that your mind is gone? Do you hear me? Your mind is completely gone!

BENEDICTUS

Gone? My mind is as alert as it ever was. Look at me. Look into my eyes. Do I look addled by age?

(holds up hands)

See the wounds in my hands and feet. Feel the wound in my side. Are they not evidence enough that I have been chosen by Christ himself to save God's Creation from man's insensitivity to its greatness? Answer me!

BENEDICTUS XXI

I have no answer but I do have a remedy. Castel Gondolfo! I beg you, in the mercy of Christ Jesus, please, consent to a peaceful retirement there -- or choose any other papal residence that you wish. Only, for the preservation of the Holy Catholic Church, doubt your presence of mind enough to stop your errant ranting. I beg you, Benedictus retire with grace, and release the Church from the great burden you have placed on it.

BENEDICTUS

Can I defy heaven and reject my calling? Can you defy it?

BENEDICTUS XXI

I do not. But I defy your right to shame heaven and its sole representative on earth, the Holy Catholic Church, to which you yourself have devoted the most productive years of your life. I plead with you, Benedictus. Consent to retirement.

BENEDICTUS

It is not my calling.

BENEDICTUS XXI

Then, with love, mine must be to effect it.

(to Second Cardinal)

See that he's comfortable.

SECOND CARDINAL

Please, Holy Father, come with me, for the good of the Church.

BENEDICTUS

I must be free to continue my new work!

BENEDICTUS XXI

I'm afraid that's impossible. We have prepared temporary quarters for you, until you choose the final place of your retirement.

(to Second Cardinal)

Show him there.

SECOND CARDINAL

Come with me, Holy Father. Please.

FATHER DEVOTO

It's for the best, Benedictus.

BENEDICTUS

My goal is straightforward and unchanged. Hear me! I will be about my heavenly Father's business again!

BENEDICTUS XXI

Your heavenly Father's business is now with me, Vitorio. Slip into the comfortable arms of age and ponder eternity in your dotage, I beg you.

(to Second Cardinal)

Show him to his quarters.

(Second Cardinal takes Benedictus' arm as thoughtfully as he can, as the lights fade down; come up on Benedictus in his bedroom. We see shadows of two guards. Benedictus sits in a wooden chair, holding a metal plate and eating ordinary fare from it. Stops and lets plate fall from his hand to the floor; puts hands over eyes)

BENEDICTUS

Ah, what a misery my life has become! And who has made it so? Heaven or myself? What does it matter? My tribulations exceed my capacity to bear them.

(stands; turns eyes upward)

Merciful heaven, let me escape this punishing world now and ascend into your eternal bliss! Elevate me, Jesus. Elevate me, now!

(Glow and Jesus appears above him)

JESUS

Benedictus, blessed of heaven, come to me. Your time to join me in eternity grows near but is not yet here. I have come to arrange your escape.

BENEDICTUS

I do not want it, for I am tired and filled with pain.

JESUS

What, you will defy my word and all of heaven's?

BENEDICTUS

My spirit is broken, my life is in ruins!

JESUS

Yes, suffering is your lot, as was mine. But like me you must go on!

BENEDICTUS

I'm sorry, dear Savior. I just can't. I have been broken on the rack of my service to you. I have no more to give. Take my hand and lift me up into heaven now!

JESUS

Soon, Benedictus. But first, you must spend a bit more time among my earthly children.

(The Blessed Mother appears beside Christ)

BLESSED MOTHER

Benedictus, my second son, hearken to your dear brother, Jesus.

BENEDICTUS

Oh, Blessed Mary, I would that I could, but I am weary. Exhausted -- and of no further use to heaven or earth, even to myself.

(Thunder and lightening. GOD appears)

GOD

What's this I hear, Benedictus?

BENEDICTUS

You, too, God, the Father?

GOD

It is I, here to command you, listen to my Son and his Virgin Mother, and go back into the world. I must save my human children, and you are my only hope!

GOD (CONT'D)

Without you, peril will proceed to have its way without even a breath to hold it back.

BENEDICTUS

How can I, locked away here, an outcast, imprisoned by my own church, and my will, broken?

GOD

I will give you a way. The Holy Ghost will make you even as himself -- invisible!

BENEDICTUS

Invisible?

GOD

For your escape.

BENEDICTUS

How?

GOD

Question not the power of heaven.

(speaks as if to the Holy Spirit, who remains unseen)

Grant him the grace of your invisibility.

HOLY SPIRIT

(voice only)

Yes, Holy Father. I am at your side, Benedictus.

BENEDICTUS

(looks left and right)

Already? Where?

HOLY SPIRIT

You will see me in a moment, when I make you even like myself. Vanish, Benedictus -- and meet me!

BENEDICTUS

(to the Holy Spirit)

Ah, I see you now. Bless you.

(to Jesus)

But what of me? Am I still visible?

JESUS

Only to us. But to no human eye.

GOD

Walk now, toward the door, with the protection of the Holy Spirit, and escape!

BENEDICTUS

But the world will not listen! Most people mocked me and, in time, some crucified me!

JESUS

Fear not! Now they will hearken to you. For I will give you a tongue of flame, so that you may speak in ways that will open their minds!

BENEDICTUS

A tongue of flame? Like the Apostles?

JESUS

Verily. I will grant you speech that can burn through steel itself.

(raises hand over him)

Tongue of fire, come down from on high and endow our beloved Benedictus with your irresistible might! Come down to my brother Benedictus and instill in him your heated eloquence! Behold, you have now been gifted with a tongue of fire!

BENEDICTUS

I sense it. A new eloquence. White-hot and adequate.

JESUS

Then use it. Go ye forth, back among the people -- reappear, risen from the dead, and when they see you and are astonished, speak -- speak to all the people of the world with your holy tongue of fire. You have become like me -- the way, the truth, and the light -- but, yea, even better for today, a new light, the light of life as it has been created by my heavenly Father! You are now life's own voice! Its most eloquent hope! Go now, and preach this new Gospel!

GOD

Go, Benedictus, and when you have preached for forty days, I will bring you to your heavenly reward -- life everlasting, at my very side with my other Son, Jesus! Go ye now, and preach the Gospel of salvation through the appreciation and care of life, my greatest gift! The very end for which I opened my hand and set the universe on its expansive course!

BLESSED MOTHER

Go now, my second Son. I will, like them, await you in the eternal peace and grace of heaven.

BENEDICTUS

I will do it. I go as you will me, to do your will. And trust heaven will protect me as I do.

(He turns and walks toward the
guards, as the lights fade down;
Lights come up on Benedictus,
bathed in light)

BENEDICTUS

Hear then, all ye people of the earth, these twelve beautiful thoughts from Christ's own new Gospel -- the Gospel of life itself! Bless Creation, it is God's own handiwork. Bless the earth, this paradise of life; it is your holy home in the universe. Bless life, the ultimate goal of God's Creation and your greatest gift, placed in your trust. Bless humanity, God's most intelligent beings on earth, destined to be its devoted and joyful caretakers.

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

Bless each life, in the God-given freedom to choose, but wish each the wisdom to choose aright. Bless your minds -- they allow you to do your work, love, and contemplate the wonders of Creation, what is within your knowledge and what may be beyond it. Bless your bodies, the very tabernacle of your lives, that allow you to be active, to love, and to procreate. Bless your spirits, your own precious share of the energy of the universe, transformed into the miracle of animate life by the grace of God. Bless all the other creatures of the earth; they, too, are God's creations and your companions. Bless time, it is your opportunity to live. Bless your hope for eternal life, but know that even the great universe has a life span and all within it or outside of your experience of it has been created and is

sustained by the will of God. Bless you all but especially you who have heard my words and will act upon them and bless me, for I have, in the time of my life, done my best to bring you to the wisdom heaven has instilled in me, so that I might help you find salvation from self-destruction and go on to enjoy, amidst life flourishing at its full potential, your allotted time upon this life-graced planet.

(Lights fade down and come up on Benedictus bedroom. He is lying in bed. He opens his eyes and raises his hands. Turns them to examine them. Sits up, startled)

BENEDICTUS

What? No stigmata? Where have they gone? I see no sign of them. A dream? Could I have only dreamed that I was blessed with them by heaven? What else? I am here, in the comfort of my usual bed, not locked away in a dark, bare, unknown place of enforced retirement. Or escaped with the Holy Spirit into the world, to preach the new message of Christ. Could it be -- oh, could it be -- that I have imagined everything? Can a mind, still sane, so deceive itself? Let me put my feet upon the floor and feel its solidity.

(gets out of bed)

BENEDICTUS (CONT'D)

It is a floor, and I am, I think, awake. Yet Christ was, I swear, before me a moment ago. Where is he now? And God, the Father? Were they but phantoms of my own imagining? And the Blessed Mother, where is she, who called me her second Son and Christ my brother? And the Holy Spirit, still invisible? Ever unseen. Oh, Benedictus, mark this night. Mark it, Benedictus, as the night your mind began its downward spiral toward confusion and on to conscious oblivion and finally death. Dust to dust, Benedictus! But no, not dust! Now I see better. Not dust to dust, but electric, living atom to atom, molecule to molecule, cell to cell, life to life, cycle established and sanctified by God -- and dust to dust but an ancient insensitivity to the miracle of life! But, wait. Tread lightly. If I know that, have I really been deceived by my own mind? I am confused. Worse than confused. I tremble at the new and uncertain proclivities of mind. But can confusion -- confusion compounded with uncertainty -- be sufficient reason to denigrate my beloved Church and, in the effort, destroy my own life's work, as well as my place and comfort? Such an

invitation ought to have more substance. Yes, yes, that's it! I would need more certain evidence to embark on such a perilous course.

(looks at hands)

What more credence need I? I lack even what I thought I had so surely been blessed with -- the sign of heaven's favor in my fervid flesh. The stigmata! Either the wounds have vanished or they were never there. Never mine, though they seemed as affixed as my own fingernails.

(goes to small altar and
falls on his knees)

Christ, my only Savior, forgive me. God, heavenly Father, forgive me. Holy Spirit, unseen but beloved, forgive me. Mother Mary, forgive your humble second son. I cannot, even if what I seemed to dream was real, do your will. I am not resolute enough. But what if it's too late to turn back?

(stands)

I must determine what damage has been done and, if not too much, what can be rectified.

(He makes the sign of the cross hurriedly and then is on his way. Lights fade down and come up on his study. Father Devoto is riffling through some papers as Benedictus enters, casually)

BENEDICTUS

Good morning, Father, faithful secretary!

FATHER DEVOTO

Good morning, your Holiness.

BENEDICTUS

What think you of the day? The sun is out again.

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, the sun. The day looks like a busy one. But do you feel up to it?

BENEDICTUS

Why do you ask?

FATHER DEVOTO

You look pale. Do you feel all right?

BENEDICTUS

A restless night. Perhaps something I ate.

FATHER DEVOTO

We can put some of the work off until tomorrow.

BENEDICTUS

No, no, we have much to do. Am I not Pope Benedictus, with a Church that requires my every attention?

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, holy Father.

BENEDICTUS

Then let us begin. Today I will also start a new encyclical.

FATHER DEVOTO

A new encyclical? God grant you the strength. Have you decided on a theme?

BENEDICTUS

Yes. The theme any good Pope would choose. Tradition! I want to affirm tradition! It is the very foundation of the Church, and we must never waver. Strong buildings never do. Only weak ones. And if the walls once falter, who knows what wild ideas will assail us? Even to initiate reform based on the decay called modernization would lead to certain ruin.

FATHER DEVOTO

Of course, your Holiness. But do you suppose there might be an infrequent exception?

BENEDICTUS

Such as?

FATHER DEVOTO

Oh, perhaps the ban on the use of condoms -- I mean, by consenting males. As you know, the usual argument against birth control doesn't apply. And making an exception would save lives.

BENEDICTUS

A chink in the wall -- any exception would be. But I do understand the basis for your suggestion.

(mulls the matter)

I have reconsidered a great many things lately, but, as I should, privately. I will go this far. Perhaps we can revisit the subject at some point. But **the fashions of the times will pass, while the Holy Catholic Church must stand like a rock in the current, for, as Christ said of St. Peter, our heaven-blessed first Pope, "Upon this rock, I will build my church."**

FATHER DEVOTO

Yes, Holy Father. You are quite a rock yourself. By the way, Cardinal Fiore requested an audience for this afternoon.

BENEDICTUS

Fiore? What for?

FATHER DEVOTO

To pay his respects. He's in Rome for a week.

BENEDICTUS

A week, did you say? No other business with me?

FATHER DEVOTO

Not that he mentioned.

BENEDICTUS

I am not quite in the mood today. If he has a week, another day won't inconvenience him. Schedule him for tomorrow.

SECRETARY

Yes, Pope Benedictus.

BENEDICTUS

(looks at his hands)

Last night I prayed again for the stigmata. Obviously, I have not been blessed with them.

SECRETARY

Well, not yet.

BENEDICTUS

And likely never will be, I'm afraid. It's hard to save a saint from the everyday dross of the necessitous world -- the outer, as well as the inner, tumult it may afflict us with. Now, tell me, what is the first order of papal

business? We'll put in a good day -- and hope for better sleep tonight.

(Father Devoto looks at his handful of papers and then back at Benedictus, as the lights fade to black.)

THE END