

And he shall be called . . .

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We've been living in an ecclesiastical tsunami this week. The election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the position of Pope Benedict XVI has had all the force of a universal avalanche. The questions never end.

Journalists are rushing from source to source trying to determine the future of a church led by a theologian considered by many to be both doctrinaire and dogmatic. The apparent answers to their questions leave many in more darkness than light, in search of some kind of spiritual security that their church still includes them, too.

The questions may be difficult but the answers are even more unsettling. They read like an inquisition—and a conviction-- of their own. Is there any possible hope to be had here?

Did anyone really think such an election could happen at a time when the church is apparently more in need of openness than intransigent resistance in the face of so much new information and emerging new questions? Answer: No.

Does anyone know why the Cardinals of the church elected as Pope one of its most polarizing personalities? Answer: No.

Is anyone sure what will happen to church unity now if the oppression of thinkers and the suppression of questions becomes a papal norm? Answer: No.

Is it possible for a disciplinarian of the church to become its universal pastor? Answer: God willing.

And therein lies my hope.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI is said to have taken the name 'Benedict' to indicate that the model of his papacy would be the great Patron of Europe, Benedict of Nursia. If that's really the case, I can't think of anything more hopeful for the church.

As a Benedictine, I state my case for hope in any leader who sees Benedict of Nursia as the measure of his leadership.

The Rule of Benedict, a document now over 1500 years old and the basis for the lifestyle of monastics around the world, is based on four major concepts that are totally incompatible with authoritarianism or suppression of the human spirit.

Listening is at the center of this Rule for those who live in community. "Listen...with the ear of the heart," its Prologue counsels. Listen, in other words, not so much for what is canonically right but for what is spiritually true, for what speaks to the deepest part of the human being. Listening to the Word of God, to the tradition, to one another, to the circumstances of life becomes the cornerstone of spiritual growth. It is questions, not answers, that guide this life.

Humility, the second major concept of Benedictine monasticism, requires that each of us come to realize how limited is our own understanding of the universe. It demands that we let God be God. It's not for any of us, Benedict teaches, abbot or monk, to think we can bend the world to our own designs. After precisely defining the mode of community prayer in twelve separate chapters, Benedict ends the chapters dealing with the most important aspect of monastic life by saying, "If any brother knows a better way, let him arrange things differently." We cannot look to the Rule of Benedict to legitimate authoritarianism in the name of God.

Community, the third dimension of Benedictine spirituality, brings us to realize how bright and good and essential to our own growth is everyone else around us. We learn from the community. We serve the community. Benedict is clear: "Whenever weighty matters are to be discussed," the Rule requires, "let the abbot call the community together and, starting with the youngest, ask each their advice." No thought suppression here. No smothering of fresh thought here. The abbot does not come to the community with answers. The abbot comes with questions and finds his answers there.

Hospitality, the fourth dimension of Benedictine spirituality, takes everyone in. No one is excluded from the Christian community. No one is too bad, too poor, too useless, too unimportant to be part of the community. "Let the Guest be treated as Christ," the Rule says. Treating one another as Christ becomes the norm.

Finally, St. Benedict had a sister, St. Scholastica, whom he treated as an equal. They came together yearly 'to speak of holy things together.' She learned from him, yes, but he learned from her as well and her monastery was independent of his. In Benedictinism lies a holy model of male-female relationships and the authority of women.

Each of us has a piece of the truth, Benedict shows us; no one has all the truth. We need to learn from one another.

Believe me, if this pope really takes Benedict of Nursia for a model, this will be a very healthy church.