

At a crossroads

Cardinals could end up making a strategic error if they set about looking for a clone of Pope John Paul II

By Eileen P. Flynn
Chicago Tribune

Professor at St. Peter's College and author of "Catholics at a Crossroads: Coverup, Crisis and Cure" and "Catholicism: Agenda for Renewal."

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People have absorbed the sad news that Pope John Paul II has passed on to the joy of the beatific vision, and our attention is turning to the issue of succession. Who will next carry the shepherd's staff and wear the fisherman's ring?

We are not accustomed to thinking of the papacy in functional terms. Instead, we tend to focus on the person who holds the office, the pope. Since Pope John Paul was such a strong and dominant person and since he held the papal office for more than a generation, we struggle to realize that the functions of the office differ from the officeholder and that they may be more important than the personality of the individual who sits on the throne at St. Peter's Basilica.

If the cardinal-electors want the next pope to be as interesting, energetic and influential as Pope John Paul, they will have an impossible task. And, they will be making a strategic error. Instead, as the Roman Catholic Church looks forward to the conclave to elect a successor to Karol Wojtyla, it would make more sense to consider the needs of the Catholic Church and the type of leader who has the strength to meet those needs. This leader need not be photogenic or silver-tongued; he could dislike air travel and feel uncomfortable with large crowds. No problem. Catholics will be fortunate if the next pope is open-minded, fair and totally dedicated to a clearly defined mission that is in line with the core priorities of Christianity.

Catholics would be blessed if our next pope has a good sense of history. While the Roman Catholic Church has been one of the foremost institutions in the world for the last 2,000 years, the most important elements of Christianity stand out in the witness of the early church.

The first generations of those who followed Jesus understood what they needed to do to bring about the kingdom of God. They cared for each other and they were zealous in their efforts to evangelize. Their evangelizing was probably less about increasing their numbers and gaining greater visibility and more about promoting the ideals of peace, forgiveness, generosity and authenticity that Jesus advocated. They were concerned about teaching people about Jesus and supporting each other as they tried to follow Jesus' message. In the early years, spirituality and dedication were the hallmarks of Christianity. Money was something to be used to do good and was not something to be hoarded by individuals or communities. Yes, there were disputes and issues for early Christians, and their communities were not utopias, but they knew who they were and what they were supposed to be doing.

Starting with the Middle Ages, the culture of Western Europe has had a pronounced influence on Catholic Christianity. The Catholic hierarchy appropriated ranks and signs of office from feudal lords and monarchs. Some of the things church leaders think important constitute a distraction from what we need to be about, while other accretions are obstacles that deter the church from doing God's work. Titles, such as "your eminence" and "your excellency" and wine cellars to die for have nothing to do with Christianity.

A challenge both theological and pragmatic that will face the new pope is to steer the church so that it acknowledges the need to divest itself of medieval practices that deter Catholic leaders from modeling the spirit of the apostles. A new pope who is familiar with historical and New Testament scholarship will know what changes are needed. An aim of the next pope should be to implement a culture and organizational structure that clearly demonstrate an orientation toward Jesus and his message.

The church's recent culture closed in on itself, and the hierarchy has been unable to credibly administer the church. The priest sex abuse scandal provides a tragic example of a church that lacked credibility and that refused to deal forthrightly with the crisis until leadership was dragged kicking and screaming by the media to listen to victim-survivors speak of their molestation. Bishops gave bureaucratic reasons for why they did not act decisively to remove priest abusers and Pope John Paul remained aloof from the crisis for as long as humanly possible.

How could this have been the case? For hundreds of years popes and bishops have considered themselves above the laity, a privileged class, leaders who were accountable to God, but not God's people, the church. This ingrained misconception needs to be abandoned, first by the next pope and, subsequently, by each and every member of the hierarchy.

The laity understands that our religious leaders need security and the pope has to ride in a bulletproof popemobile. We can accept the physical boundaries that separate us from church leadership, but we can no longer accord to them a status that puts them beyond personal accountability.

When the cardinals meet to deliberate on whom the next pope will be, they may use the term "servant of the servants of God." They will need to think that title through and acknowledge that, in order to function as a servant, the next pope will need to get rid of a lot of baggage and embrace the radical challenges at the heart of Christianity.