

Perhaps church will someday find its democratic roots

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As the conclave draws near, the billion or so Catholic lay people will watch with varying degrees of interest. Some will find the process either archaic or boring. Others will watch with mild interest the TV clips when the white smoke rises above the Sistine Chapel. Still others will be deeply concerned about the outcome -- either because it will confirm that the Second Vatican Council has been relegated to the trash can of history or it will promise that the spirit of the council may still be alive.

Is it equitable in an age in which democratic government is slowly and erratically but inexorably spreading around the world that six score men should make a decision that will affect, for better or for worse and most likely for worse, the religious lives of a billion people?

The Catholic Church, some cardinal electors and their admirers and supporters will tell you, is not a democracy. That is simply not true. Decisions about faith and morals are not made by lay vote though for a long time it was said that the consent of the whole Christian people was required.

The end of old practices

For a thousand years and more, the church was a democracy in the selection of leaders. A democratic ethos pervades the election of the pope by the College of Cardinals. Theoretically, they are the parish priests of Rome come together to elect their bishop; just as every diocese elected its own bishop in those first thousand years. There is unfortunately not even a symbolic nod of the head to the equally ancient custom that the people of Rome had to consent to the election of their bishop. Popes Leo the Great and Gregory the Great laid down the law that the one who presides over all should be chosen by all would be shocked and indeed scandalized at the oligarchic and secret sessions in the Sistine Chapel. Doubtless at that point in the future, when democracy is restored to the church (which, after all, brought democracy to the Western world), historians will marvel at the patent abuse that this conclave and the many others before them represented. They will perhaps blame the conclave system (along with the temporal rule of the pope) for most of the problems the church experienced during the 2nd millennium.

Illiterate peasants and townspeople once participated in the election of the pope. Now, the well-educated Catholic people all over the world are told that the election of the pope is none of their business. They must trust the wisdom and virtue of the cardinal electors and the power of the Holy Spirit to guarantee them that a wise choice will be made.

Those who know even a little bit of papal history might want to ask why then were so many monstrously unwise choices made in ages past.

Why is it true, indeed almost self-evidently true, that those who are to be affected by the outcome of an election should have some participation in it? Why did Saints Leo and Gregory not feel called upon to defend the wisdom of their dicta on the subject?

There are two answers to this question. The first is that it is an elementary human right to participate in the selection of your leader. The present mode of papal elections violates that right. Second, accordingly to Catholic theology, the Holy Spirit is at work among the ordinary faithful just as She is at work among the leadership elite. Why shut off the Spirit's influence wherever it might be decisive?

Paul VI's lost opportunity

Pope Paul VI considered a reform in which the heads of the national conferences of bishops from around the world would be added to the Sacred College for voting purposes. Such a reform, minor and modest,

would have nonetheless broadened enormously the democracy of papal elections. Nervous and neurotic man that he was, however, Paul VI permitted himself to be talked out of the reform.

By cardinals, of course.

According to the standards of the ancient Catholic tradition and practice, the present system of selecting popes is immoral and corrupt. Worse still, by the evidence of history, recent and not so recent, it doesn't work very well. Owen Chadwick, a historian of the papacy, has written that there have been no bad popes since 1700 but many incompetent popes. Perhaps the reason is that the tradition of democratic election has been lost.