

Sunday February 17, 2013

The horserace to elect a new pope

By Jim Taylor

When the news announced on Monday morning that Pope Benedict XVI had decided to resign, effective February 28, I said to my wife Joan, “Wow! Just imagine if they replaced him by electing a woman as pope!”

She snorted derisively.

I still think that Pope Mary I would be a wonderful idea. But I agree with Joan that any such event is highly unlikely. London bookmakers are already taking bets on the next pope. Bono apparently ranks 1000 to 1 – they offer no odds at all on any woman.

After all, consider who’s making the decision. A conclave of 118 cardinals. All men. Not one of them under 50. Not one who has taken a public stand in favor of female priests, let alone a female pope.

Even if there were a potential female candidate – personally, I’d love to see Sr. Mary Jo Leddy setting the Vatican’s agenda! – she couldn’t attend the conclave to promote her ideas.

The sheer inertia of past practice tells me that the possibility of choosing a woman will not even enter discussion.

One variable at a time

All large institutions resemble a complicated mathematical formula in which you can adjust only one variable at a time. Change two or more, and the formula collapses into nonsense.

The late Ted Scott understood that reality, when he was Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada. During the early 1970s, his Anglican Church faced three tectonic upheavals: the ordination of women, modernization of the historic Prayer Book liturgy, and organic union with the United Church of Canada.

Scott decided to abandon efforts towards church union. The Anglican Church survived the other two earthquakes.

The College of Cardinals made a similar decision in 1978 when they elected Karol Józef Wojtyła of Poland as the first non-Italian pope in 450 years.

Given the limitations on travel and communications prior World War II, choosing Italian popes made sense. For a Church headquartered in Rome, only Italian prelates had on-going involvement in its inner workings. A cardinal resident in, say, Mexico City would be effectively isolated from participation in the Church hierarchy.

Mere popularity was not enough. In the 1970s, Dom Helder Camara of Brazil was one of the best known Roman Catholic archbishops in the world. But he was an outsider, a burr under the Vatican’s saddle. He said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist.”

Camara in Recife had no more chance of being elected pope than Mother Teresa had in Calcutta.

Today, though, with air travel and Internet communication, anyone anywhere in the world can play the Vatican’s version of Monopoly.

Setting a new course

And so, in 1978, the cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church made a momentous decision. Pope John Paul I, an Italian committed to continuing the reforms begun by John XXIII, had died after just 33 days in office. By

selecting John Paul II, the Cardinals decided that the variable they were prepared to change was geographic, not theological.

It's possible that if the cardinals had perpetuated the status quo by electing yet another Italian pope, the reforms initiated by Vatican II might have continued. But they didn't.

In a sense, if the Church chose to install a feisty new horse to pull their wagon, they could hardly at the same time risk upsetting the applecart of doctrine and dogma.

The cardinals continued that globalizing policy in 2005 by electing the first German-born Pope, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

Sticking to the global agenda

Currently, London bookmakers offer the best odds on cardinals Peter Turkson from Ghana, Francis Arinze of Nigeria, and Marc Ouellet from Canada.

Other favourites include Odilo Scherer of Brazil, Leonardo Sandri of Argentina, Luis Tagle of the Philippines (at 55, the youngest candidate), and Timothy Dolan of New York.

You might note -- not a European in that list. Although the BBC includes two Italians and an Austrian in its list of front-runners, the bookmakers seem to favour representatives of the so-called Third World, where the vast majority of Roman Catholics now live.

Admittedly, bookmakers have no inside knowledge. They should not be considered authorities on the mind of the Church -- or any church. But if their odds have any validity at all, they suggest that theological modernization will again take a back seat to a globalized image.

So I would wager that the Cardinals meeting in secrecy in the Sistine Chapel will choose their new leader to reflect their desire to be seen not just as a Roman Church, but as the World Catholic Church. For the same reason, they will not choose someone likely to redefine what it means to be Catholic.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column about mental health was very personal, and so it drew a number of very personal replies. Thank you, both for sharing your experiences and your advice. I've passed those letters on to my daughter; I can't and shouldn't try to take over managing our grandson's health issues.

Several of the letters sympathized with my lament that our society is unwilling to throw its efforts into prevention, rather than into punishment.

Florence Dreidger wrote, "We experience these issues almost daily in our work with Circles of Support and Accountability. What is so sad is that when your grandson is an adult, he will be seen as a perpetrator rather than a victim. We so often are blind to the pain of the person who has so little or no control of their own behavior.

"And yes we can spend money to punish which has worse than no effect, and have no money for prevention through research and through people who care and support, etc. etc."

Charles Hill has dealt with a wide range of mentally disturbed people: "Your daughter is heroic beyond measure, truly children of God. That the psychiatrists' medication isn't working suggests that the problem isn't neurological in a physical sense. He apparently has no sense of pain in others because he has had to deny and shut out his own pain to survive. Mechanical things are safe because they don't involve people. Language can hurt you because it comes from people.

“Yes, you heard me mutter it, psychopathology, for which we currently have no cure. People are dangerous to him. He isn't a ‘bad’ child, he is a wounded child. Sexual or physical abuse very early could have done that to him.

“It sounds like barbaric thinking but his environment must [now] be such that the price is too high for him to act out against others. In a ‘primitive’ culture, he would probably have been exterminated by now.”

Bonnie Mulligan wrote, “I think it takes personal stories to make people sit up and listen, rather than thanking their lucky stars it doesn't affect them. But there's your point, ‘His mental health is not just one family's problem. It's everyone's.’ Mental health is going to have to be the next ‘difference’ to come out of the closet.”

Wesley White had similar experience: “The story you tell about your grandson is being echoed here with our 8-year-old grandson, adopted from Guatemala. We have made it to school suspensions with all the attendant acting out of violent language and action (all happening within the family before showing up in church, school, and store). He is currently being weaned off all but one medication, but there is no plan beyond that. I suspect that we will end up somewhere between the poles you identify of prevention and punishment, but just where is not foreseeable.”

Nora Borgeson wrote about four children, in two generations, having trouble. She concluded, “Mental health treatment has come a long way, but still has stigma which often is a deterrent for people to get help. People are so worried about addictions that they want to avoid drugs at all costs. Sometimes, even if not for life, medications allow the person to access and learn from cognitive therapy and other therapies or counselling, that without medication would be impossible.

“I say, never give up hope. There has to be an answer or solution to help our children and adults so afflicted. It's better than it used to be, but it still takes an extremely long time for diagnosis and treatment. Usually breaking the law or being dangerous to self or others is the only way someone will listen. Sad eh? My daughter's first access to a listening and supportive psychiatrist was while in prison.”

This from Marjorie Gibson: “The help today is as you say, very insufficient. Many long years ago I was a social worker in a diagnostic clinic where the clients had mainly psychiatric problems and most were children. Then, our psychiatrist could diagnose, but there was usually nowhere to send them for treatment. In almost 70 years we have made so little progress.”

Suzanne Edgar, like about a dozen others whom I won't name, promised to pray for our grandson. Then she put that into context: “that is, be still and send positive creative healing energy his way -- and also remember and remind that the work of the church is about salvation which is being whole, healed people who support each other in finding out who they are and what their gifts are and what they trip over -- support, support, support.... We have trouble with that. We can assess ‘til we're blue in the face, and it's ever a temptation to be critical and judgmental or apathetic, but to support each other in community in the living of our lives? That's a tough one... I hope your daughter has a holy community which is supporting her and her family.”

There were several looong letters. I'll acknowledge the amount of thought that Laurna Tallman and Judyth Mermelstein put into their letters, and quote only this bit of ‘rant’ from Judyth:

“Ashley Smith is by no means the only case where a person with a mental illness was incarcerated for a minor offense and treated with utter disregard for her basic human rights once in the hands of Corrections Canada. Much of the homeless population is on the streets due to mental illness; much of our frail elderly population is depressed, too, and many in care facilities are at risk of attacks by fellow-patients with serious mental illness....

“And the above is only the visible tip of the iceberg. Poverty and job losses add to the stress of merely trying to survive. ... And, as a society, we -- or at least those who make the decisions for us -- insist we must pay more and more for less and less of that social safety net we need”

Judyth noted, as I had also noted but didn't say, “that the promotion of this day consists largely of Bell ***ads*** offering 5-cent text messages in support, and pious lies to the media that people with mental illnesses are no longer handicapped when it comes to finding an apartment or job, and there is plenty of social service support to those who become homeless, etc.

“Until we as a society are capable of realizing that no amount of pious speech can replace actual caring, ‘Mental Health Day’ is just a way of saying ‘We don't want to hear your problems the other 364 days’.”

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
