

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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SELECTION OF A POPE

As I write this, it is three days before the conclave begins and, in a week, we will likely have a new Pope. What a contrast with the multi-year presidential election process in the USA! These Cardinal-electors don't know each other well enough to know who is who or how to spell their names, let alone how to pronounce them. But they will select a Pope. Wow!

They are having pre-conclave meetings to "get to know one another and discuss issues." Are they speaking in Latin? Good luck with that! It is the first time all 115 electors are in the same room together, and they are not all proficient in Latin. The Holy Spirit must work overtime to overcome all of those realities. Maybe the Spirit likes red and shows up with greater intensity when all that red is concentrated in the Sistine chapel.

What we do know is that the Spirit-in-the-People-of-God is locked out of Michelangelo's museum.

Enough sarcasm! Here's my question: what would you do if you were elected Pope?

I know, I know. That's impossible. So, why even ask it? My answer: why not ask it? If you were elected Pope (women included this time) in this very real, current day Vatican Catholic Church, what would you do?

Here's what I would do in my first year as Pope:

1. I would move the church into greater collegiality and subsidiarity, two major themes of Vatican II. I would mandate that each diocese would have representative Diocesan Pastoral Councils with membership

selected by parishes or regions. These councils would have primary consultative powers in the diocese, superseding curia groups and priest councils, though some pastors would also be elected to the Pastoral Council. I would maintain the hierarchy but with similar representative councils at every level, including regional, national, and Vatican levels. As Pope, I would preside over an international council of clergy, religious, and laity who would advise me on issues that affect the whole church. Other issues would be determined at lower hierarchical levels. Curia members would not be part of this council; their role would be to implement the decisions I make after consultation with the council. I would be inclined to decide with the majority opinion of the council members.

2. Simultaneously, within the first year, I would initiate wide spread discussion and seek opinions on many topics. Optional celibacy, ordination of women, and birth control would be some of the initial issues. Using the structure in #1, I would survey the opinions of the people. I would also commission qualified theologians and Scripture scholars of all opinions to recommend positions on these topics.
3. I would immediately create a Communications department at all levels whose mission would be to report on and present a theological basis for all of the actions of items 1 and 2. Transparency would be their goal and evangelization would be the outcome.

That agenda should keep me busy. And, I maintain, all of that is possible even within our current theological and scriptural framework. The Vatican Catholic Church could look like that and still remain the Vatican Catholic Church. There are no dogmatic teachings that prevent it. In fact, I submit that the church in the first three centuries functioned more like what I described than what we have experienced in the last three centuries.

If I were elected Pope next week, I would not call for a third Vatican Council. That would be a male, clergy council and would likely harden both the male part and the clergy part, given the profile of the Bishops created in the past 40 years.

Will these 115 strangers who are Cardinals elect someone who will even get close to what I said I would do? Not a chance. Do I hope that the Holy Spirit does in fact like the cardinal shade of red so much that he/she does

show up and move them in the direction I described? There is no realistic hope of that either.

I do believe that, in time, our current hierarchical structure will fail and fall. It may be gradual but most likely it will be dramatic. The medieval, secret, clergy dominated trappings will peel away and give rise to a new form of the church.

That transformation will happen. Probably not in my life time but it is coming. I want to be on record now as someone who supports the coming transformation, but I doubt that our next Pope will lead us toward that conversion.

The Church will remain because Jesus will remain. But the days are numbered for this form of the Church, and those days will still be numbered after we have a new Pope.

I just hope that the number is a little smaller.