

## New Pope, New Church?

Leading up to and following the election of a new Pope much of the commentary centered on internal affairs of the Catholic Church, touching upon the usual topics of married or women priests, teachings on homosexuality, the effects of clergy sexual abuse scandals, the status of divorced people, and the tension between progressives and conservatives in the Church.

While the public attention to these subjects is understandable, the focus on internal Church matters is misdirected. The Church does not exist for its self-preservation. The efforts of the Church miss the mark if they are driven by maintaining its structures, whether they be physical or organizational. The “usual topics” are not central to the core beliefs of the Catholic Church nor its principal purpose.

This public discussion, especially at the election of a new Pope, obscures the reason why the Church exists at all. The Catholic Church offers salvation. Its creed and worship, teachings and practices exist so that people might be saved. Saved for eternal life with God. Saved from brokenness. Saved for wholeness.

However, the *raison d'être* of the Church is not simply to save you and me. Your and my sanctification is just an intermediate step, a first payment on the greater purpose of the Catholic Church. The Church doesn't exist so that Church members can improve themselves. Self-improvement is not the principal function of religious experience or of church membership. Rather, it is to be in the service of God's plan of restoring creation to God's original intent.

In the words of Paul VI, the Pope a few popes ago, the great purpose of the Catholic Church is *to evangelize, that is to say, to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace*, “grace” being the presence of divine life. Paul VI went on to say that “evangelizing” means *bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new*. (see Paul VI's encyclical, “On Evangelization in the Modern World.”)

Particularly at the occasion of electing a new Pope, the Church needs to stop looking internally and, instead, direct its focus outside of the Church. There is a wide world out there in desperate need of redemption, very far away from what God intended it to be. It is not the Eden of Genesis. It is not the Holy City of Revelation. There is a catalog of ills plaguing the world that cry out for healing and redemption: materialism, damaged relational lives, war and violence, confusion about what is worthy of our trust, the devaluation of human life, and the gaping inequality of the haves and have-nots. These disorders beg for a Savior. There is a Savior, but he lives on this earth through those who claim to follow him. Can the Church be there that community of Jesus' followers willing to take on these evils?

Once the Church fixes its gaze outside of itself, the internal life of the Church can be considered from a proper perspective. Ever since they wrote “see how they love one another,” the community of believers, the Church, has been not just the means of spreading Jesus' message, but also the message itself. The shared life of grace, here and now, is what people are invited to. How the members of the Church confront and overcome the wrong in the Church not only determines the effectiveness of the Church's witness to its beliefs, it also measures how much the

Church reflects the divine life it is called to share. God's Love is made tangible in the life of the Church, so it matters very much that all members of the Church struggle with and resolve its imperfections, its problems, and its sin. The Church is not only the means of bringing salvation to the world; it is also the end product. If the Church is preaching love, it makes that message real in the love shared by members of the Church. If the Church is preaching justice, it actualizes that in the relationships of believers within the Church. The life of the Church puts flesh on the very things we hope for. When this particular group of people, the Church, overcomes jealousies and hatreds, dishonesty and selfishness, the life of grace comes alive. Those "usual suspects" of popular discussion mentioned above now take on some significance. If women are not allowed to be ordained ministers, if gay people and their unions are not recognized and blessed, if the disorders of a closed clerical culture are not erased, if the economic and political structures that cut across the worldwide Church and that cause suffering are not confronted, if the message and life of Jesus are not the most prominent features of the Catholic Church, then the Church cannot fulfill its mission of making the world holy.

Will Leo XIV be able to turn the eyes of the Church toward the world that needs the life-giving gifts it can offer? Will he be able to mold a Church that gives credible witness to Jesus' presence in the world? On these first days of his pontificate all that is unknown. The Church's hierarchy is not revolutionary. Only rarely do the Church's leaders break new ground. In many ways, the nature of a worldwide church that includes every nation and culture resists radical or rapid change. We have seen, though, a pope in John XXIII who surprised everyone by convening the Second Vatican Council that initiated sweeping changes in the life and understanding of the Church. Even the "Leo Pope," Leo XIII, whose name Robert Prevost took upon being elected, provided the intellectual underpinning of workers' rights movements and the rise of trade unions while critiquing both capitalism and socialism in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. So, "new" things can happen.

History has witnessed the promise and transforming power of the Catholic Church and from those occasions, we receive the blessed assurance that God's saving grace lives within this many times mediocre and disappointing institution. The election of a new Pope revives the hopeful determination not to let this Church stand still and fail its mission.