

Papal Non-Politics

A Blog Entry in GordonTalk

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As I, Doug Drenkow, your humble guest-blogger, am a practicing (but very liberal-minded) Catholic, I thought it only fair to share with you on the outside looking in what is going on during this most crucial turning point for the Church ... and judging by the incredible interest and turnout for the funeral of John Paul II (May he rest in peace), a historic time for the world.

Let me first give you a crash course in how the Church chooses a Pope (It's more than just smoke and biers).

Well, according to Church tradition, the first selection of a Pope was made by none other than Jesus Himself:

"And I tell you [Simon], you are [now called] Peter [a name meaning rock], and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." —Matthew 16:17-18

An all-around hard act to follow.

Note a couple things there. Once a Pope is chosen, he takes a new name. And although the Catholics translated the name "Peter" to mean "rock," a lot of Protestants would later claim the name just means "stone"; and since stones are smaller than rocks, Protestants apparently don't consider Peter anything more than just another

one of the twelve Apostles (which isn't too bad, of course, but doesn't get you the choicest accommodations at the Vatican).

Leaving the inter-faith conflicts aside (Haven't enough millions died already?), let's consider more contemporary selections of The Pope: Bishop of Rome, Patriarch of the West (Maybe that's why the Chinese sent no delegation to the funeral), Vicar of Christ, Servant of the Servants of God.

Talk about your high-pressure jobs! Seriously, John Paul's friends said it was painful watching him pray: His face would become literally grotesquely contorted, as he took upon himself and offered up to God all the problems of the world—a sense of compassion not lost upon the millions and billions of Catholics and others who mourned his loss, an exemplary quality for any world leader to possess and display.

Remember how well candidate Clinton connected with the voters by saying, "I feel your pain," when the first President Bush was seen as out of touch with the suffering of the common people in recession. Responding to that sense of compassion, half the Born Agains voted for Clinton the first time around, firm in the belief that in the Last Judgment, the King will say,

"Whatsoever you did to the least of my brothers, that you did unto me."

But enough of worldly politics; back to Papal (non-)politics ...

Contrary to popular belief, the Pope is not necessarily selected from among the cardinals who elect him. In fact, the only requirement is that he (No, not a she; give it a century or two) must simply be a member in good standing of the Church (Heretics and Schismatics need not apply).

Although I wouldn't bet heavily against the College of Cardinals, you still can't rule out the possibility of Pope Doug the First (although they'd first have to ordain me as a bishop ... and a certain place would have to freeze over).

The College of Cardinals is solely responsible for electing the Pope, and only those cardinals under the age of 80 may vote.

However—and here's the real kicker —"campaigning" is forbidden and "debate" is discouraged.

Imagine a presidential race run under those rules. What would've Bush and Kerry done? Just discussed each of their philosophies and not thrown mud? That sounds downright un-American to me!

Actually, the cardinals "are to rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit" as they are sequestered like a jury: During the daytime they meet, as a "conclave," in the Sistine Chapel (I

hear the interior designer had a nice sense of style); during the evening they retire to nearby guest accommodations.

And what exactly goes on inside the "jury room"? Well, all we know for sure is that there are a number of secret ballots cast each day—in accordance with quite specific rituals and traditions, of course—but beyond that, not much more is known: Communication with the outside world is strictly forbidden; and anyone who ever breaks his vow of secrecy is subject to "grave penalties according to the judgment of the future pope," including the possibility of excommunication.

Welcome to the world of church and state. Although I love my Church—particularly for its teaching that "God is love"—I realize it is fundamentally a monarchy, not a democracy; and I fear the Red State folks would gladly take our nation right down that path, preaching liberty every step of the way.

There is, of course, an element of democracy, as in a jury room: The cardinals do cast ballots. And here's where a new twist has been introduced, by Pope John Paul II, which at first seems like simply a procedural matter but upon further reflection poses very significant ramifications for the more than billion Catholic souls in the world and all the rest of you folks who put up with us.

Traditionally, a Pope can be elected only with a two-thirds majority of the ballots cast; however, John Paul modified the rule so that now if a Pope has not been chosen after 30 ballots, about

a week or so I believe, then he can be elected by a simple majority.

The strategy here was sophisticated in its simplicity (not unlike the Pope himself): Although John Paul, the third longest serving Pope in Church history, has "packed" the College with cardinals generally as conservative as himself, there is still the significant chance that with his no longer presiding over them, some of the cardinals will favor more moderate candidates over more conservative ones—thus making it more difficult for a conservative candidate to assemble a two-thirds majority, in early balloting, but still prevailing by a simple majority, in later voting.

In short, the sooner we see the white smoke, the more moderate the next Pope probably will be; the later the smoke, the more conservative the Pope.

So who are the leading candidates and where do they stand?

Although certain cardinals have been mentioned more often than others, allow me to "play the game" and dispense with the naming of names—after all, this really isn't about the elevation of an individual (and who could have the same charisma as John Paul?)—and consider the bigger picture.

Europe hosts the longest-standing population of Catholics in the world (although the Italians seem to be divided in their affinities).

Africa hosts the fastest-growing population of Catholics in the world, although another consequence of the "no condom" policy of the Church is the deaths of millions of Africans from AIDS. [At odds with almost every scientific study and public health recommendation in the world, the Church argues that distribution of condoms actually backfires, by encouraging risky behavior; they liken this alleged outcome to the increase in skin cancers with the increased use of sunscreens, in certain studies.]

Latin America hosts the largest population of Catholics in the world. And non-Catholic evangelical Christians are making great inroads down there.

So if I were to be foolish enough to predict the next Pope, I would have to choose oft-mentioned Cardinal Claudio Hummes of Brazil.

As the Latin Americans would say, we finally have an American Pope! (And don't hope, or fear, for a U.S. Pope: neither this nation—the most formidable worldly power on Earth—nor the Holy See—the arguably most formidable spiritual power on Earth—wishes to be seen as beholden to the other)

Although I am not so foolish as to predict what kind of Pope Cardinal Hummes (pronounced "HOO-mez") might be (answerable only to God, Popes often defy expectations), he has earned respect in Brazil "as a conservative on doctrine and a progressive on social issues."

And that, my dear friends, is Catholicism in a nutshell: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Faith in general is resistant to change. Reason in general is conducive to change.

A lesson worth remembering when living in a country of Red States and Blue.