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What we should look for in the next pope

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Benedict Resigns

I was a bit sleepy this morning when NPR announced the news: Pope Benedict XVI is resigning effective Feb. 28. That news jolted me to full consciousness. Wow! Resigning? When was the last time that happened? (Answer: 1415 with Gregory XII.)

The Vatican announced that the pope's health (and by implication, his aging -- he is 86) are the reasons for this resignation. And that's a service to the church. When the church (or any similar body) is solely dependent on an absolute monarch for conducting business, ill health keeps even essential functions from being done.

But now, speculation abounds about the next pope. So, sure, I'd love to see Joan Chittister or Elizabeth Johnson or a woman elected to that role. Short of that, someone like Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese would be promising. But I digress into dreamland.

More realistic speculation focuses on what qualities we would like to see in a new pope.

For starters, we need someone with a love of the Second Vatican Council and a determination to carry out especially its mandates for greater collegiality in the church (and hopefully inaugurate some truly democratic structures).

Ideally, the new pope would be someone who calls and convenes Vatican III, which would include elected representatives of the bishops, clergy and laity (both women and men) of the world. (We can learn a lot about such structures from our Protestant sisters and brothers.) This council would consider the next steps for worldwide Catholicism.

Then, we need a man (sadly, women are not really in the running -- yet) who understands the realities of the 21st century in its complexities and technologies. We need someone who can use all means of communication to speak out on behalf of the poor and oppressed and call for economic justice. We need someone sensitive to the needs of Planet Earth, someone who recognizes the moral imperative to act to stem the tide of climate change.

We also need someone who accepts and preaches the Gospel value of human equality for women and men, people of all races and ethnicities, and people of all sexual orientations.

So we need a "gutsy" pope: someone who would open up all roles in the church to anyone who qualifies spiritually and would not rule anyone out based on gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Such changes would likely mean standing up to lots of Vatican bureaucrats.

And while we're on the topic: We need someone who will "clean house" at the Vatican, call for general resignations and make some totally new appointments.

And we need someone with a sense of justice who would remove from office the prelates who have covered up for priests in the pedophilia scandal, someone whose "apology" for what happened would be made meaningful with concrete actions that deal with the negligence of the hierarchy.

Ideally, it would be great to have as pope someone who would eliminate much of the pomp and circumstance of Vatican ceremonies, simplify celebrations and invite lay participation.

And we need someone who understands and values solid interfaith relations with those of other traditions, someone who seeks to build relationships that will bear fruit in joint actions for world peace, justice and environmental sanity.

But you know, most of all, we need someone who can relate to people so well that he is willing to host a picnic in Vatican Square, or maybe a potluck somewhere. I'd bring some great hors d'oeuvres.

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