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A parish priest's hopes for the next pope

Fr. Peter Daly | Feb. 12, 2013 Parish Diary
Benedict Resigns

Like everybody else, I was surprised to hear that Pope Benedict was resigning. But I was also relieved for him. It has been painfully obvious that he is declining. At Christmas, we saw him wheeled around on that rolling platform. He looked tired. It was time to resign.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Benedict XVI's papacy will be his resignation. It has set a very healthy precedent. In an age when medical science can keep us living well into our 90s and maybe even past 100, it is important that popes should feel free to resign when they are no longer up to the task of their ministry. Pope Benedict showed true pastoral concern for the church when he recognized he could not carry on.

As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he lived through the final years of John Paul II's papacy. He saw his friend decline, and he knew the church was drifting for the last few years of that long reign. Yet John Paul II felt bound by tradition to carry on until the end. Benedict XVI has freed future popes of that burden and perhaps freed the church from a major problem of having a senile or incapacitated pope. He deserves our thanks for this precedent.

The Benedictines have a saying about the selection of a new abbot: The abbot should be *ne numis sapiens, ne nimis sanctus, et ne nimis sanus* -- not too healthy, not too wise and not too holy. In other words, they should select a regular guy. That's what I hope for: a regular guy.

What does that mean in the context of the College of Cardinals? They are 120 guys, all pretty much cut from the same clerical cloth. They are all older men and accomplished church politicians who have been serving in church offices, where everyone is Catholic and everyone deferential.

But I hope we get somebody who has at least some experience as a parish priest. I hope we get someone who has heard confessions and done marriage counseling, been on youth retreats and done marriage prep. It would be nice if he had the experience of being alone in a parish where he had to do all the liturgies, week after week, and struggled to inspire the same people with his preaching. I hope he has had to explain the teaching of the faith to skeptical youth and angry adults. I hope he has to deal with divorced people.

I hope we get somebody who had not lived exclusively in the world of chancery offices where people give him deference and obedience all the time. I hope we get someone who has dialogued with evangelicals, Muslims and atheists as equals. It would be nice if he has a few friends who are Protestant clergy and he has come to respect them as intelligent and sincere Christians, every bit as saved as he is.

I hope we get someone from a big family, with many brothers and sisters.

I hope he has a lot of nieces and nephews who have challenged him around the dinner table and in family gatherings. Maybe some of them have married outside the church or have left the church to join other religions. He has attended their weddings only as a family member. Perhaps one of those nieces and nephews has come

out to him as gay and he has had to love them still.

I hope he has several strong-willed and outspoken biological sisters who have more than a streak of feminism. Maybe they have told their brother that they use birth control. Maybe they have responsible and substantial careers outside the home where women are the boss.

I hope he is a man who has many old friends. That he has kept his friends since childhood and that some of the people on his Christmas card list still call him by his first name. Maybe some of them can still remind him of the stupid things he did or impetuous statements he made in his youth. There is nothing like an old friend to bring you down to earth.

I hope we get somebody who is in touch with his own humanity. It would be nice if he was a man who admits that he, too, is a sexual being who has struggled with human desires and impulses like everybody else.

I hope we get a man with a sense of humor. It would be nice if he was not too much of ninny. He might even be able to tell a joke once in a while and laugh at himself.

I hope we get somebody who puts on his pants one leg at a time. In fact, it would be nice if he would wear pants. Clerics should leave behind the silly affectation of dressing like they are still living in some Renaissance villa or a Baroque painting.

I hope we get a man who knows what it is like to be poor. It would be nice if he has dealt with the homeless and drug addicts and the sick for a few years of his life. It would be good if he has had to struggle like the rest of humanity for his daily bread. It would be nice if he has held a job and had to pay his own bills.

Maybe the cardinals could look around the room and perhaps even look outside the room for the new pope. There is nothing in canon law that says they have to elect a cardinal.

One thing is for sure: We need to try something new if the church is to be revived. What Yogi Berra said about baseball managers is also true about the cardinals' choice: "If you do what you have always done, you are going to get what you have always got."

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