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Arising issues for the theologian in chief

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 5, 2013
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According to customs ancient and modern, whoever is chosen as the new bishop of Rome will inherit dozens of other titles, formal and not.

For starters: vicar of Christ, successor of St. Peter, *pontifex maximus*, servant of the servants of God.

But there's another one, a bit more informal: global theologian in chief.

As the only person empowered to hand down definitive teaching to the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, and as inheritor of one of the only truly global bully pulpits, the next pope will almost certainly stand at the center of any upcoming prominent theological debates.

To get a sense of what theological issues might come to the fore in the first years of the new pontificate, *NCR* spoke with noted theologians from four continents in mid-February.

Three trends continued to surface in their conversations:

The local church

While the vast majority of popes have come from a European background, speculation continues to swirl that the cardinals this time may instead choose to elect a pontiff from the global South, perhaps from somewhere in Latin America or Africa.

That speculation, said Jesuit Fr. James Keenan, indicates that many questions about the overall shape and structure of the church throughout the world may bubble up in the next few years.

Particularly, said Keenan, a professor of moral theology at Boston College, it raises the question of whether focus will shift from thinking of the church as a universal entity to one that is also decidedly local, with very local concerns.

"Is the way of preceding as church ? the same in Berlin as it is in Nairobi?" asked Keenan, who is also the head of a global group of theologians called Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church. "To what extent do you attend to the needs of the local church so that a variety of things about life there are addressed?"

Focus on the function of the local church has emerged since the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), which said the structure of local communities serving "with one common aspiration is splendid evidence of the catholicity of the undivided Church."

That focus, said Fr. Emmanuel Katongole, a native Ugandan, is especially ripe now for those in Africa, where

he said Catholics are "poised at the intersection of a very exciting time of growth."

Katongole said the key question for the global church is, "How do we think of the African local church not just as an outpost of Western theological, administrative or bureaucratic framework, but as an indigenous part of a global communion of believers?"

Katongole, an associate professor of theology and peace studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, said that in the coming years, church leaders will need to consider how to ensure that Africa is not a "dumping ground" for expressions of church or theology that work in other contexts, but instead is a place able to "develop and encourage local forms of ministry in response to its own challenges."

Collegiality

If there's new focus on local churches around the world, questions of how those churches interact with the central church in Rome will almost certainly arise.

Susan Ross, chair of the department of theology at Loyola University Chicago, said that the Vatican II notion of collegiality among bishops "must be looked at quite seriously." To help local churches develop and grow, Ross said, Vatican officials must in coming years allow collegiality to also mean a certain amount of decentralization of authority.

"This increasing centralization, I just think it's not good for the church," said Ross, who is also the president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

Paul Murray, a professor of theology at England's Durham University, said in an email that church officials may also in the future consider creating a "more radical and fulfilled communion ecclesiology." This ecclesiology would be one that moves from "unilateral, top-down, authoritarian modes of decision-making" to "appropriate modes of mutual -- even if still necessarily asymmetric -- accountability and genuinely shared decision-making," said Murray, who also serves as president of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.

Essentially, Keenan said, a focus on issues of collegiality in coming years may mean a focus on ensuring that different parts of the global church are talking -- and listening -- to one another.

"If you start with the local church, then collegiality comes from the top and from the bottom," Keenan said. "Collegiality will mean that [the Vatican] will have to pay attention to the Koreans, and to the Indians, and to the Kenyans, and to the Brazilians, and on."

Beyond just paying attention, Katongole said, Rome may also find itself needing to relax its grip in order to allow local Catholic communities to find "theologically interesting ways" to address their own situations.

"That may involve mistakes, or experimentation," Katongole said. "But I don't think you can then develop a local theological expression unless you are willing to take some risk that it might actually go wrong."

Sacramentality

Several academics said that fundamental to coming discussions of empowerment of local communities and communication between them and central church structures is a separate discussion on the shape of the church's sacramentality, or how we perceive the revealing of God in the world.

Clear in that conversation, said Franciscan Sr. Mary Lou Wirtz, is the fact that a shortage of ordained ministers is limiting the availability of the Eucharist in many parts of the world.

"How will the Church deal with this in the future?" Wirtz asked in an email. An American who is not strictly a theologian but is president of the Rome-based International Union of Superiors General, Wirtz continued: "Will there be an openness to consider other options?"

Murray said that any discussion of a new communion ecclesiology means there also "needs to be a profound theological deepening ? of our understanding of Catholic Christian vocation and of the place of order and ordained ministry within this."

Such a discussion, he said, should not focus on "tired polarities" between emphases on the importance of either the laity or the ordained, but on the urgent need "to move to an integrated theology of vocation and ministry within Catholicism focused around sacramentality."

"The vocation of each and every baptized," Murray said, "is to be uniquely sacramental of the purposes of God in creating and to bear specific witness to this in ways that have profound priestly, prophetic, and kingly dimensions as each is variously called to show back to the world what the world's deepest calling is."

Calling Pope Benedict XVI's decision to leave the papacy an effort to allow for "the healthy exercise of the office and effective governance of the Church," Murray expressed a hope that it may "inspire us more widely to discern that which we as a communion need to lay down; that which we need to prioritize; and the changes of life and structure to which we are being called."

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