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Should the Next Pope Be a Theologian?

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 1, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

It is fascinating to me that the two leading candidates to become Pope ? Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan and Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the Prefect for the Congregation for Bishops ? are both theologians. And, not just theologians, but both men served on the editorial board of *Communio* at some point in their careers. So, if you cancelled your subscription to *Concilium* back in, say, the mid-80s because you thought the theological winds were blowing in a different direction, you have no need to re-think that decision. On a more serious note, the cardinals need to ask themselves what the possibility of electing a second theologian as pope might mean for the Church? What does it illustrate about how the Church views its challenges and opportunities? Is it a good thing?

It is certainly not a common thing. Pope John Paul II was more of a philosopher than a theologian, but nonetheless his intellectual giftedness was part of the reason he was chosen in 1978. But, Pope Paul VI had spent most of his career in the Vatican curia, and the years before his election as Pope in 1963 as the archbishop of Milan. Some of his writings show evidence of theological significance, but he was not a theologian but a diplomat by training. Pope John XXIII was a church historian by training and also served most of his days in the Vatican diplomatic corps before becoming Patriarch of Venice a few years before his election. Pope Pius XIII had only served in the diplomatic corps and came to the office of the papacy with precisely no pastoral experience. And so on. The idea that a pope should be a profound theologian is of very recent vintage.

Additionally, I wonder if the fact that +Scola and +Ouellet would be following Benedict would help or hinder their papacy. Obviously, they are from the same theological school. There would be no major theological shifts if either man were elected. But, Benedict?s great gift as a theologian was to not only survey the entire landscape and make connections that others missed, he was able to synthesize ideas in ways that made them accessible to average readers. +Scola has reputation for being somewhat difficult to understand, his prose can be opaque. +Ouellet earned the sobriquet ?the alien? among the priests of his archdiocese in Quebec because he was aloof in demeanor and incapable of translating his theology into a vision his priests could understand. One has a hard time imagining either of them penning the best-selling trilogy that Benedict wrote or, indeed, anything that would work for your local parish book club.

Even if both men had the combination of accessibility and profundity that Benedict displayed in his writings, it is a mistake to view the office of the papacy as that of a ?theologian-in-chief.? The Pope?s job, following the commission to Peter, is to confirm his brothers and sisters in the faith, not in any particular theology. Indeed, it is arguable that the role the Vatican took on overseeing theological disputes has not been ideal. Its assumption of that role was certainly unintentional at the beginning: It was only when Napoleon shuttered most of the theological faculties of Europe that people turned to Rome to adjudicate theological disputes.

Theology is not the same thing as faith and, in our day and age, theology has become too academic a discipline, too divorced from the living faith. Theologians are subject to the same needs as other academics, the need to get published for example, which as often as not encourages them to lean into their arguments. Your average Catholic theologian is not, at least not yet, a Fox News or MSNBC commentator, but like those commentators,

they play an outsized role in the life of the Church today. Their gifts should be seen ? and embraced, especially by themselves ? as at the service of the Church, just like the rest of us must put our gifts at the service of the Church.

I value the work theologians do, to be sure, and in this age of ours, it is undoubtedly the case that we need a rigorous intellectual explication of our faith. But, modern methods of analysis have their limits. Pope Benedict XVI touched on this in the second volume of his trilogy, when he called attention to work of the German exegete Joachim Jeremias who tried to determine with scientific precision which words in Scripture were actually spoken by the Lord Jesus and which were added on by later writers. Benedict writes: ?Even though Jeremias? results are still relevant and of considerable importance in academic circles, there are well-founded critical questions that show at least that there are limits to the certainty he attained.? The danger of confusing the faith with theology is evident: Faith must be certain.

Certainly, the cardinals understand that they can no longer elect a career diplomat as pope. The commonplace ?after a fat pope, a thin pope? derived from the back and forth during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between popes known as zelanti, the zealous ones, and the diplomats, those inclined to find an accommodation with modern ways. Things do not always turn out as planned. When Pope Pius IX was elected as a reformer, pictures of him walking arm-in-arm with Cavour and Victor Emmanuel and Garibaldi appeared. Pius announced major reforms but these set of a revolution in which his prime minister was killed and Pius was forced to flee Rome. Needless to say, when he returned with the help of foreign troops, his reform agenda was shelved and he became one of the more reactionary popes of all times. But, enough cardinals now are not members of the curia, but local pastors, the college as a whole will never elect anyone without demonstrated pastoral experience. This is a good development.

In a way, Benedict also turned out differently from what many expected. I remember being at a birthday party a couple of days after his election in 2005. The nuncio was there, the late Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo, and he said something to the effect that, ?Remember, Ratiznger the cardinal and Benedict the pope are not the same thing.? How true this proved to be! Benedict proved himself to be far more pastoral than anticipated. He did not start looking the other way in the face of theology he thought dangerous, to be sure. But, he reminded the world ? and hopefully his fellow bishops ? that a pastor should follow the example of the Master and never be stern. Alas, some were not listening. To cite an obvious example of the difference, before his election to the papacy, who had ever seen a picture of Joseph Ratzinger with children? Benedict understood the difference between being the Prefect of the CDF and being pope. The cardinals who are gathering in Rome to select his successor should contemplate that fact.

Who will sit in the chair of Peter? I wish there was a jovial, grandfatherly Italian in the mix, but that appears not to be the case, although Cardinal Scola certainly is a jovial person! Obviously, whomever the cardinals chose must have a proven track record of confronting crises effectively. He must be squeaky clean on the issue of child sex abuse: There is nothing I can imagine that would harm the Church more than to elect a man who will instantly be the object of enormous scrutiny, and find out two weeks later that he was shuffling around pedophiles or obstructing police work. Most of all, however, the Church needs a pastor of souls, someone who can make his person as accessible as Benedict made his thoughts. Benedict?s writings are filled with a sense of ecclesial solidarity, amongst ourselves and with the Lord. We need a pope who communicates his holiness, his solidarity with other pilgrims and with the Lord simply by walking into the room. This is not about celebrity. It is about reminding us all ? and reminding the world ? that true liberation is found no on the shelves of a store nor in any laws passed by a legislature, but in self-surrendering ourselves and following the pilgrim?s path to an ever greater communion with the Lord and, just so, with one another. That is what we need in a new Pope.

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