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Give Us A Pastor

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 4, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Friday, noting that Cardinal Angelo Scola and Cardinal Marc Ouellet are the leading papabili, I commented upon the historical novelty of theologians as popes. In addition to novelty, I think this tendency unfortunately misunderstands the nature of the papacy in relation to theology, further abetting one of the ugly consequences of Napoleonic rule, Rome?s exercise of disproportionate influence in theological disputes.

Today, I would like to take up the argument from a more positive angle. I hope the College of Cardinals will consider a requirement for election some degree of pastoral experience. Most of the popes in twentieth century were drawn from the diplomatic corps of the Church. That, too, reflected an improper understanding of the papacy. The person selected pope holds that title because he will be the Bishop of Rome, and whatever else he must do, a bishop must be a pastor of souls.

There are all sorts of theories about what makes a good pastor. Pastoral theology is taught in our seminaries. There are whole shelves of books on pasturing in our theological libraries. But, no amount of theoretical depth can replace the actual experience of being a pastor. A friend sent me this quote the other day from Jean Pierre de Caussade, SJ, (1675-1751), from his work, Abandonment to Divine Providence (sometimes translated as Sacrament of the Present Moment), in which he wrote these words:

We only know perfectly what experience has taught us through suffering and action, for experience is the school of the Holy Spirit. God instructs the heart not by means of ideas, but by pains and contradictions. It is fire and not the philosophy or scientific knowledge of fire that warms us. Likewise, it is in trusting in God?s will for us and not in our intellectual speculation about it, which produces sanctity in our souls. And so, if we wish to quench our thirst for God, we must lay aside books which explain thirst, and take a drink.

These words strike me as profoundly true. Knowing about pastoral theology is different from the knowledge gained by being a pastor. It also strikes me that both the ?Catholic Left? and the ?Catholic Right? is well advised to consider the way "suffering and action" and ?pains and contradictions? might instruct them instead of trying to find ways to justify their prior prejudices and distort the tradition to baptize those prejudices.

Now, it is not the case that experience provides anyone a privileged hermeneutic. I detest it when someone begins a statement, ?Well, as a Native American, I think?? or ?As a woman, I believe?? when that opening is invoked to claim such a privileged hermeneutic. Our thoughts and our beliefs are subject to rational scrutiny irrespective of their source or pedigree. But, experience is an avenue to clear thinking, even if it is never an excuse for poor thinking. And now, more than ever, our Church needs clear thinking informed by pastoral experience.

I have long been depressed when I get up in the morning, go to the Vatican website, and check the ?Rinunce e nomine? and find listed a new bishop whose CV indicates no pastoral experience. Seminary rectors in

abundance. Former bishop?s secretaries aplenty. Lots of Judicial Vicars. But, rarely does one see, except in the choice of auxiliaries, a new bishop who spent the bulk of his life in the trenches, helping the people of God make their way through this vale of tears. I suspect that until we have more bishops who have seen, first hand and up close, the ways secularism is changing people?s lives, we will never find ways to combat it. I suspect that until we have more bishops who have counseled married couples, our teaching on sexual ethics will remain unpersuasive to many Catholics. I suspect that until we have more bishops who have listened to people as they face end-of-life decisions, we will not be able to articulate the Church?s commitment to the dignity of human life in its fullness, nor see the experience of death and dying has changed and our methods of evangelizing must take account of that if it is to be effective again.

Similarly, it would be a disaster to elect a new pope who has not proven himself to be an effective leader of the local church entrusted to his care. How did he conduct himself? Did his clergy love him and did he evidence his love and support for them? Did he find ways to combat secularization or simply complain about the phenomenon? Did he confront the sexual abuse crisis with fortitude or did he apologize not for the crimes but for getting caught or, worse, try and pin the blame on others? I think it would be a good thing for the Church if the Bishop of Rome was someone who had been an effective local bishop too, indeed, it might be a good idea for the papacy if the new pope took his job as Bishop of Rome more seriously and let that example speak to his leadership of the universal Church.

What does pastoral experience teach? I do not look to the Sunday morning news shows for insights into the Catholic Church. But, in the event, James Carville had something very smart to say on ABC?s ?This Week with George Stephanopoulos? yesterday. Twice he said that Catholics wanted a ?humble? pope. Perhaps it is the fact that Carville is from New Orleans, the least Calvinistic city in America. In any event, I think he hit the nail on the head. What pastoral experience teaches is humility. It teaches both the pastor and the flock that along the pilgrim?s path there are many bumps in the road, there is the constant awareness that life?s travails can sometimes make it difficult to discern or even contemplate a better, more heavenly road, there is the fact of human frailty, often found in the most steadfast of hearts. In short, a pastor encounters sinners and, hopefully learned that any one who pastors in the name of Jesus Christ must be, first and foremost, an ambassador of God?s mercy.

It is curious that those who defend the clerical state, and its role in the Church, seem never to have come across the best reason for restricting decision-making in the Church to what seems to me to be the only justification for that restriction. Only those who, on a regular basis, hear confessions and serve as ambassadors of God?s mercy there should be entrusted with decision-making in the Church. I would extend such decision-making to those who practice the corporal works of mercy as a way of life, that is, the many men and women religious who feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, bury the dead, etc. Perhaps decision-making could be extended even to an extraordinary layperson like Dorothy Day. I would not mind seeing Day in a conclave! Only a pastor of souls, someone who confronts on a daily basis the endless need for mercy can really convey the endless gratuitousness of God?s mercy in a compelling way, in a way that is touched by experience and not just by theory.

There is nothing ideological about selecting a pastor. A good pastor must be rooted in the faith of the Church and capable of proclaiming that faith. But, a good pastor also gets to know his flock and speaks to them in ways they can understand. A good pastor comforts those who need comforting, no matter the source of their broken-heartedness and he also challenges those who have become too comfortable or conformist. A good pastor helps his flock form their consciences to be more and more consonant with the teachings of the Church but also helps to assuage those consciences when they fall short, as fall short we all do.

This, then, is why I pray and hope that the cardinals will select a candidate who has actually served not only as a diocesan bishop, but who has actually worked with the poor, ministered in a parish or otherwise got his hands dirty with the messiness of Christian discipleship. This is what Carville meant, I think, by a humble pope. It is

what the Church needs, a man who loves the people of God as Jesus did, not in spite of their sins but because of them. Jesus came to heal the sick of soul and ours is a soul-sick world. Only a pastor can find the words and the example to convey that ineffable mercy one encounters in the confession. Our world needs to be reminded that our God is the Father of Mercies. Only then can they be invited to consider the many and manifold ways in which they have need of mercy. Jesus understood this which is why we call Him the Good Shepherd. Will the next pope understand it too?

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