

A Citizen of a Democracy Watching the Vatican

Maureen Fiedler | Mar. 12, 2013 NCR Today

It's been said before, but it bears repeating. Watching the preparations for the upcoming conclave is like watching a Renaissance classic about a royal court. It's not just the pomp of the Vatican, the garb of the cardinals and the Swiss guards. It's the monarchy of it all. This could be a pageant from the 15th or 16th century!

Now, you may say: but there *is* an election! The cardinals will VOTE for a new pope. That's true: 115 Cardinals: all male, all older, all claiming to be celibate? and not elected by anyone... they will get to vote. They were not elected to that position; they were all appointed by the previous monarch, Benedict XVI, or the one before him, John Paul II.

Am I the only one who finds that this truly disconcerting? As a citizen of a democracy who is used to some type of a voice in governance, I'd like to see the values of wide participation reflected in my church. Our Protestant sisters and brothers could teach us a lot in this regard.

We lay Catholics had no say in this choice of cardinal electors. Even the "rules of the game" were changed ? not by any kind of vote ? but by decree. Pope Benedict XVI issued a "decree" giving the cardinals discretion in choosing a date for the beginning the conclave. Earlier in his papacy, he "decreed" that the vote for Pope HAD to be 2/3 of the voting Cardinals, no matter how many ballots it takes. Now, these may be reasonable decisions. And a certain amount of "executive prerogative" is expected, even in a democracy, but here there was no debate or discussion about either decision, and there is no appeal. No challenge is possible.

Then, we have the question of candidates for Pope. Only the cardinals have had the benefit of their speeches. We've never heard what they have to offer, and we have never heard a debate. We have no polling, not even from the cardinals. So we have no idea who might be a real contender, and who might be out of the running. Our views, in other words, are irrelevant in this process.

And in a Church which Vatican II proclaimed is "the People of God," it's about time all of us in "the People of God" all had a say in this process.

That's why I hope the next Pope, whoever he is (and unfortunately, there are no women in the running), calls a new Council ? but not one like Vatican II. This would be a "Council of the People of God," including bishops and clergy, but predominantly laymen and laywomen from every culture and continent. Together, we could discern the future of the Church in the 21st century.

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