NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Who are the people who were waiting for Pope Francis?

Joan Chittister | Mar. 14, 2013 From Where I Stand
Pope Francis

Pat Howard, columnist and managing editor of the *Erie Times-News*, my hometown newspaper, brought his own experience of church-watching to this second papal election in eight years. His description of having been disappointed in the way the church has responded to the questions of the time in the last two papacies gave me a new way to understand what I have been hearing from so many people in so many places these last three weeks.

The importance of Howard's opinion piece [1] as a bellwether comment lies in the fact that Erie, Pa., is not a hotbed of dissent against anything. On the contrary: This is the kind of small city Americans call "a great place to raise a family." There are churches in every neighborhood of every stripe in the Christian catalog. There are some longtime Jewish synagogues with their congregations deeply embedded in the life of the city. There is a growing Muslim social center and a strong core of new refugees. We are, that is, a mixed population, and we live together well. There is nothing either New Age or critically atheistic about the area's social climate. On the contrary: This is a place that registers "average" on just about every social index. Obviously, then, opinion here can be thought to cover a great deal of ground.

So while reams are being written about what kind of man this new pope should be -- scholar, saint, administrator, reformer, whatever -- Howard puts his finger on what kind of people are waiting for this pope, whoever and whatever he is. He describes his own growing disillusion with the character of the church and his reasons for it in ways that are eerily reminiscent of similar conversations across the country and from one group to another.

Howard is clear about the issue: "Pope Benedict's Vatican labeled ... as part of the problem (those who were) too willing to entertain questions and views the hierarchy has declared to be verboten ... too open to engaging the real lives, moral qualms and evolving understanding of people in the modern world. ...

"I still believe the church will change in due course," he concludes. "... What I underestimated was the weariness that comes with the waiting."

That's it exactly, I said to myself. It is weariness that is palpable in so many groups now. "I have very little hope in this election," I hear over and over again. "It will all simply go on business as usual," they say, and you can almost hear the sigh in the voices.

The problem is that weariness is far worse than anger. Far more stultifying than mere indifference. Weariness comes from a soul whose hope has been disappointed one time too many. To be weary is not a condition of the body -- that's tiredness. No, weariness is a condition of the heart that has lost the energy to care anymore.

People are weary of hearing more about the laws of the church than the love of the Jesus who says whatever a person's struggles, "Remember, I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

People are weary of seeing whole classes of people -- women, gays and even other faith communities again --

rejected, labeled, seen as "deficient," crossed off the list of the acceptable.

They are weary of asking questions that get no answers, no attention whatsoever, except derision.

They suffer from the lassitude that sets in waiting for apologies that do not come.

There's an ennui that sets in when people get nothing but old answers to new questions.

There's even worse fatigue that comes from knowing answers to questions for which, as laypersons, they are never even asked.

More false news of a priest shortage drains the energy of the soul when you know that issue could easily be resolved by the numbers of married men and women who are standing in line waiting to serve if for some reason or other, some baptisms weren't worth less than others.

They get tired watching of Anglican converts and their children take their place at the altar.

It gets spiritually exhausting to go on waiting for a pastor again and instead getting a scolding, reactionary church whose idea of perfection is the century before the last one rather than the century after this one.

They're weary of seeing contraception being treated as more sinful than the sexual abuse of children.

All in all, they're weary of being told, "Don't even think about it." They're weary of being treated as if they are bodies and souls without a brain.

It's weariness, weariness, weariness. It's not an angry, violent, revolutionary response. It's much worse than that. It's a weary one, and weariness is a very dangerous thing. When people are weary, they cease to care; they cease to listen; they cease to wait.

These are the kind of people who waited for a new pope, whatever kind of man he might be.

At first sight, Jorge Mario Bergoglio -- Pope Francis -- is a quiet and humble man, a pastoral man and as a Latin American, a leader of 51 million Catholics, or the largest concentration of Catholics on the planet, which is not business-as-usual as far as papal history goes.

But perhaps the most profound and memorable moment of his introduction is that he presented himself on the balcony in front of thousands of people from all parts of the world not in the brocaded fashion of a pope, but in a simple white cassock.

And then came the real shock: He bowed to the people. Bowed. And asked them to pray a blessing down on him before he blessed them. Francis, I remembered, was the Christian who reached out to Muslims. Francis, the one who listened to every creature in the universe and dialogued with it.

Indeed, if this Francis, too, is a listener, there is hope for reconciliation, hope for healing, hope for the development of the church.

No doubt about it: We know who the people are who have been waiting for a pope and why they are weary. The question now is, Does he know how weary they are? And does he care? Really?

From where I stand, something has to change. Maybe, just maybe, this time ...

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