

Pope Francis: the first Space/Information Age pope

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Pope Francis

A high tide of conventional analysis of Pope Francis -- is he conservative or progressive, a reformer in fact or a pastor at heart -- misses the central significance of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation and Pope Francis' election. They constitute one event whose meaning cries out for our attention but is drowned out by the re-enactment in our time of the myth of Babel, in which Yahweh turned the talk of the self-important tower builders (TV towers today) into babble.

This event, occurring on the eve of the spring equinox from which both Easter and Passover are dated, places it symbolically within the spiritual pull of the moon, the symbol of time, and of the sun, the symbol of eternity, in the vast array of space, whose age we entered as the Second Vatican Council convened, during which Jorge Mario Bergoglio studied theology, and climaxed when we visited the moon in 1969, the year he was ordained a priest.

This papal resignation and election complete the Copernican Revolution that revealed that the Earth was not the center of the universe by making it clear central Europe is no longer the center of the Catholic church.

While we are told Benedict resigned because of increasing weakness and advancing age, this action may better be understood as a function of the impact, little-understood or even considered except tangentially at what was considered the topmost level of hierarchy, of the Space/Information Age.

As Giordano Bruno wrote many centuries ago, there is no center in space, and this new age exerts an invisible but real force on all institutions that, following an outdated cosmology, perceive themselves as the hub of the universe.

Hierarchy as the principal governing form in Europe was in decline even as its last crowned, plumed and colorfully costumed royalty gathered at the 1910 funeral of England's King Edward VII; "of its kind," as historian Barbara Tuchman wrote, "the last." The last, that is, until the royalty of the church -- they are not called princes by accident -- entered the Sistine Chapel this week to choose a pope. They would have to go, in Francis' own words, "to the ends of the earth to get one."

Benedict's spending down his energy was a function of his fighting against the Space/Information Age's relentless pressure on the concept of hierarchy, the restoration of which he had, following John Paul II, made a central part of the program that has come to be known as the reform of the reform. That hierarchy was coming apart was seen in its loss of the control of information, not just in the leaking of papal documents by the pope's butler, but in the revelation of the extent of and suffering caused by the long-running sexual abuse scandal that hierarchs had kept largely secret, until the Space/Information Age swept away their capacity to conceal it or to control its management.

William Butler Yeats, writing with a poet's feel for the unfolding 20th century, prophesied that "things fall apart, the center will not hold." Similar visions of the collapse of worn-out forms were shared by such artists as

Pablo Picasso and others who sensed the frames of the past could not hold the art of the future.

Benedict's resignation is less a sign of his personal state than of the larger reality that, in the church, "things fall apart, the center will not hold." His resignation will be understood someday as a critical moment in papal succession that forever changed the notion that the pope was the last monarch and remained in power until he died. His departure from the Vatican was not a personal choice as much as a response to the impact of the new age on old institutions. He understood, perhaps not grasping all the reasons, and made the courageous decision to go.

Cardinal Bergoglio's election is also a function of this new age because it ends, as we have observed, the identification of papal authority with central Europe. Polish and a German popes were merely the first movements in breaking away from central Europe, which was once the center of the world and of Roman Catholicism. The election allowed us, so to speak, to view the earth from space and to understand how a religion that calls itself Catholic, or Universal, could no longer identify itself with the center of Europe and the dead monarchical style of hierarchy.

The relevant questions are not whether Pope Francis is a progressive or a conservative or any of the other ecclesiastical junkie's speculations. The only important question is whether Pope Francis is a man of his time, and the answer to that is certainly yes. That reality transcends many of the worries about where the pope stands on this or that issue.

The choice of Cardinal Bergoglio burst the longitudinal lines of an outdated understanding of Catholicism. The church chose a man who had already cast aside the hierarchical trappings of residence and retinue. His lifestyle was not that of a monarch but of a servant, of a pastor who has been more interested in easing the world's grief than in enjoying its grandeur. If the cardinals were looking for a leader who lives in the future by living fully in the present rather than a leader living in the past by trying to revive yesterday -- a motivation that might have hovered around but did not invade the consciousness of many of them -- they made a choice wiser than they knew. The action of the conclave was also a response to the pressures of the Space/Information Age, the real dynamic beneath this extraordinary event in the history of Catholicism.

Some might even say this is how the Spirit breathes on the world with what Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called its "bright wings."

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