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The Church in 2014

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 31, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

If 2013 is any gauge, 2014 will be a year of surprises in the life of the Church as well. One surprise from last year is unlikely to be repeated: Pope Francis is not going to resign.

The main surprises we can anticipate in 2014 are akin to those we experienced since Pope Francis first walked out on to the loggia of St. Peter?s on March 13: They will speak to his concern to re-introduce a pastoral emphasis into what amount to management positions within the hierarchy and his commitment to a simpler lifestyle among the hierarchy. The pope will continue his focus on the poor and challenge those of us in the affluent West to re-think our assumptions about economics and the good life, and he will continue to articulate this concern as key to evangelization. And, I suspect he will continue to tone down the culture wars. The difference in 2014 is that while last year we had symbolic and rhetorical steps in this direction, in 2014 we will see concrete acts and decisions, putting structural, organization flesh on his priorities.

Indeed, the replacement of Cardinal Burke with Cardinal Wuerl on the Congregation for Bishops certainly lays the groundwork for the selection of a different kind of bishop here in the United States. This morning, I read this article about Bishop Robert Morlino [1]of Madison, Wisconsin, who says the pope?s example inspires him to double down on his efforts to fight the culture wars. Can we expect an exorcism at the cathedral in Madison sometime soon? There was a time when such comments made one more likely to climb the career ladder within the Church. I suspect that time is now past. Wuerl is a true conservative, eschewing culture wars and exhibiting confidence in the gifts of the Spirit to lead the Church, adopting a more pastoral and less canonical and ideological approach to the task of ecclesial leadership. I would imagine he will promote candidates who share his approach. And not a moment too soon!

In her book, Law?s Virtues, Cathy Kaveny wrote these words I have quoted before about the different approaches to ecclesial leadership:

Prophets emphasize the importance of clear, unambiguous witness to the transformative power of the inbreaking Kingdom of God. They believe that the purity of their witness to those values will be compromised if Catholics, and especially Catholic institutions, appear resigned to the great systemic evils of our time?.In contrast, pilgrims are acutely aware of just how far human society still remains from the kingdom of God and how difficult the journey continues to be. The consequences of sin and the sting of death are still all around us. The only way to ameliorate those consequences is by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. It is not enough to avoid sin; we have to love and serve our neighbors. (p. 264)

I think it is obvious that Wuerl belongs to the more traditional, pilgrim model and always has. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the prophet model was invoked mostly by liberal theologians to justify their positions. In the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century, it was conservatives who claimed the prophetic mantle for themselves. Both

groups forgot that in the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets were reluctant to accept the mantle. Both groups forgot that the dominant Catholic mode of leadership has almost always been the pilgrim model, and when the prophet model dominated, ruin came: Savonarola, Saint- Cloud, Pio Nono. The Church is not at Her best when Her leaders are busy hurling epithets or indulging what Pope Francis has called a ?self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism.? Wuerl strikes me as one of those bishops who does not over-inflate his own significance. Yes, he takes his job seriously and expects his collaborators to do so as well. But, like Pope Francis, he leaves room for the Spirit to do its work. Let us have more bishops like this in the coming year. The first test will, of course, be Chicago. No need for extensive previstas from the nuncio on this nomination as all of the candidates will be well known. The rumors of any particular names have dried up, which usually means those who are being consulted are shifting from speculation to decision. I have no idea who it will be but I will venture one prediction: Some jaws will drop.

The more immediate news coming from Rome will be the new cardinals to be created on February 22. Word on the street is that we could know as soon as next week who will be raised to the sacred purple. I anticipate the Holy Father will break the 120 barrier of voting age cardinals, but not my much: In the months after Feb. 22, another half dozen cardinals will hit the age of eighty and lose their vote in conclave, so I expect the pope will name about 20 or so new cardinals, bringing the total number to about 126 or 127. I would be very surprised if there are not more cardinals drawn from the Global South and fewer from Europe and especially Italy. I have no idea if any American will receive a red hat. In both Los Angeles and Philadelphia, the predecessor cardinals still have a vote, but Los Angeles is one of the largest dioceses in the world, with some 4.4 million members, so the Holy Father might give Archbishop Jose Gomez a red hat early. Nor would I be surprised if Atlanta receives its first ever red hat: The Church there is growing, Archbishop Gregory has been recognized as one of the finest churchmen in the country for years, steering the USCCB through the worst of the sex abuse crisis, building up the Catholic schools in Georgia, and always a gentleman.

I expect we will see more shake-ups in the curia in Rome and in the USCCB headquarters in Washington. The issue at the USCCB is not simply dysfunction, but the adoption of the culture warrior model that Pope Francis is desirous to set aside. You will have noticed that when Evangelii Gaudium was released, it got a mention on the USCCB website, a generic and very general statement, issued by a bishop. The same day, the news that the Supreme Court would hear the Hobby Lobby case received a prominent, very specific statement from an archbishop. That nonsense has to change. And, the finances? Who knows what is going on when you have no audits. Great hopes attended the election of Msgr. Ronny Jenkins as General Secretary, but those hopes have not been fulfilled. One fears he has been listening overmuch to those bishops ? and those staffers ? who are ?disappointed? with Pope Francis.

The divisions within the Church are not going away, but they are likely to change in the coming year. I predicted early on that you would begin to see cleavage within the Catholic Left between those who are thrilled by the Holy Father?s focus on the poor, and for whom that focus is enough, and those who argue for changes where no change is likely to be forthcoming, the ordination of women, same-sex marriage, etc. And, on the Catholic Right, you will see a similar cleavage between those who will allow themselves to be challenged by Pope Francis and those who will shift towards a rejectionist position, either completely gutting the pope?s words of their obvious meaning and import as +Morlino did in the article mentioned above or, for the more extreme members, moving towards schismatic groups. The Left, when it gets disaffected, just walks away. The Right causes trouble. In 2014, many bishops will face the prospect of clear, unambiguous dissent on the Right and it will be curious to see how they respond.

Predictions are fun but they are foolish too. So, let me give myself an out. I readily grant that what I have written this morning reflects my hopes as much as my analysis. And, based on the first year of Pope Francis? tenure, I think the one thing we can expect in the coming year is to be surprised. And, having just come through Advent, we should be spiritually prepared for surprises. If we aren?t, Pope Francis will encourage us to dig deep

into our hearts and find that space that is still willing to be surprised. Of that, I have no doubt.

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