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The tale of a reluctant pope

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Apr. 5, 2012

Michel Piccoli, center, as Cardinal Melville in "We Have a Pope"(IFC Films)

A pope has died and the world?s cardinals gather for his funeral and the conclave to elect a successor to the throne of St. Peter. The voting begins and a nervous Italian television reporter is standing with the crowds watching the smoke rise from the Sistine Chapel. He has to check the television monitor to tell what color it is: black. Again.

Inside the chapel the cardinals scribble and scratch out names. The votes swing here and there until the final balloting when Cardinal Melville (Michel Piccoli) is elected out of the blue. The cardinals seem delighted while Melville smiles nervously. ?Do you accept?? asks Cardinal Gregori (Renato Scarpa) over and over. In a sea of uncertainty Melville says, ?Si!? -- that is, ?Yes!? But he doesn?t seem sure.

They dress the new pope in white and lead him to the balcony overlooking St. Peter?s Square. The announcement, ?Habemus Papem!?, is made but he sits down and refuses to address the crowd. ?I cannot do this.? The cardinals are shocked and the Vatican spokesperson, a layman (Jerzy Stuhr), is beside himself.

A psychiatrist (Nanni Moretti) is called in to sort out Melville, but with the condition that he can?t ask the pope-elect about sex, his infancy, his mother or dreams. The psychiatrist must speak in front of all the cardinals, who can?t leave the conclave until the pope is inaugurated.

When the psychiatrist reaches an impasse with Melville, he dispatches the pope-elect to his ex-wife, also a psychiatrist and expert on ?parental deprivation.? Afterward, Melville wants to go for a walk, and he disappears.

French actor Piccoli as Cardinal Melville is wonderful in the film ?We Have a Pope.? He captures the indecision, the doubt, the introspection and the extreme angst that probably does beset a man who is unexpectedly elected the successor of St. Peter. Melville is a beautiful soul who once wanted to be an actor but was not accepted into the academy; instead, his sister was. A gentle man, he knows he has probably done some good in his life but he seems utterly overwhelmed and thinks himself incapable of being the pope.

The Vatican spokesman (nameless in the film) captures the terror of one who has lost the pope on his watch. Then the cover-up begins: The spokesman installs a chubby Swiss Guard into the pope?s apartments and

instructs him to shake the curtains so people will think the pope is there. The spokesman tells the press and the cardinals -- still locked in the conclave -- that the pope is praying. This goes on for three days.

Director/writer Moretti has recreated a consistory and selected actors who carry off being cardinals in believable ways. Moretti, raised Catholic but now an unbeliever, says that ?We Have a Pope? is a story he wanted to tell. He has an agenda, yes. Using clever dialogue and scenes, he mocks the churchmen?s ambivalence in needing psychiatric insight and not trusting psychiatry at the same time.

Locked in with the cardinals, the psychiatrist does not know the pope is missing. He creates a volleyball tournament for the cardinals. Europe has two teams because it has the majority of ecclesial princes. Oceania, with only three cardinals (in reality that region has one), complains that it doesn?t have enough players. The psychiatrist tells them that if they learn to play well together maybe the next time cardinals are named there will be better representation.

Moretti admitted, ?The feeling behind the film is autobiographical. ... There is part of me in both the role of the psychoanalyst and in Melville?s uncomfortable feeling of not being up to the role.?

The April 15 release of ?We Have a Pope? is timely, just after the Feb. 25 installation of 22 new cardinals and amid rumors that Pope Benedict XVI will resign on his 85th birthday on April 15. Moretti seems to be onto something.

Although Moretti told a reporter that his choice to set a performance of Chekov?s ?The Seagull? within the film did not mean anything in particular, I think it is significant that the play?s main theme is about the meaning of life, and this is what the new pope is pondering, not just if he should really be the pope. The contrast between the lead actor -- who appears to be a little crazy -- with his troupe and the reluctant pope with his entourage of costumed cardinals, habited nuns and clerics in collars is a startling visual that asks: Aren?t we all just acting? Doing what is expected of us? Hiding behind our costumes so that no one sees who we really are?

In another sequence, the pope is riding on a streetcar filled with faces from around the world; he is an old man among them and they show him respect and companionship, even for a brief moment. In another scene, soon after escaping his keepers, the pope collapses in the household section of an upscale department store. A saleswoman comes to his aid and offers him water with great kindness, even though no one knows who he is.

Only the most well-adjusted among us will admit flaws, and even then I don?t think people want to admit human weakness. We can be so good at covering up, or not looking, and moving forward without discerning, perhaps, what the next best step and God?s will really is in our lives. In the conclave, the Holy Spirit does not make mistakes, as one of the cardinals affirms, but the path of the Spirit may come to a crossroads, or seem to go one way, when the other way is the true path. Or the Spirit can correct a mistaken path. The cardinals did not elect a *papabile* (they seldom do) and their choice fell on Cardinal Melville because they obviously didn?t want someone else. Is this really a good reason to elect someone to any role, never mind the most visible role in the Christian world?

The new pope?s anguish ultimately reveals his inner strength and honesty; divine grace (or Moretti?s perspective) leads to a surprising, gentle conclusion.

There are some jumps in the narrative that make a couple of moments in the film seem somewhat illogical. But Moretti pushes on to tell his story thoughtfully, with humor and deep humanity.

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Wandering popes, real and fictional

For ?We Have a Pope,? Italian director Nanni Moretti seems to draw on previous stories about wandering popes and those who resigned, real and fictional.

Ignazio Silone?s 1968 *The Story of a Humble Christian* offers a fictional imagining of the true-life election and resignation of the former Benedictine monk who became Pope Celestine V (1215-96) after a conclave lasting two years. He resigns after just five months because of ?the desire for humility, for a purer life, for a stainless conscience, the deficiencies of his own physical strength, his ignorance, the perverseness of the people, his longing for the tranquility of his former life.?

In real life, four other popes resigned, though one, Benedict IX in 1045, regretted it and returned. The last pope to resign was Gregory XII in 1415 at the request of the Council of Constance.

It is interesting to note that Pope Paul VI?s visit to the tomb of Pope St. Celestine in 1966 fed a rumor that Paul was considering retirement. More recently, Pope Benedict XVI visited Celestine?s tomb in Abruzzi, Italy, in 2009 and left at the saint?s tomb the woolen pallium he received when he was inaugurated as pope. Benedict also proclaimed Aug. 28, 2009, to Aug. 29, 2010, as the Celestine Year in honor of the 800th anniversary of the saint?s birth. No other pope since has taken the name Celestine.

Thus it would seem that resigning the papacy is not as bad as the poet Dante is believed to have written in the ?Inferno? about Celestine V:

> I saw and recognized the shade of him
> Who by his cowardice made the great refusal.

For a more populist look at the same kind of scenario where a pope considers resigning, I prefer ?Saving Grace,? a 1986 film based on the novel by Celia Gittelson and starring Tom Conti as Pope Leo XIV. Here the pope is locked outside the Vatican when a garden gate closes. He takes advantage of this moment and ends up in a village where he is able to discern his role, and minister to a flock that needs him.

In Morris West?s 1963 novel, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, and the 1968 film based on it, Pope Kiril goes for anonymous strolls outside the Vatican to stay in touch with the people rather than to discern whether he should stay or go.

It?s hard to believe that no one has yet made a film from Robert Ludlum?s very funny 1992 novel *The Road to Gandolfo*. It?s a military conspiracy story with a ?Ransom of Red Chief? O?Henry twist when the beloved Pope Francesco I is kidnapped for ransom. That he is thrilled about taking a break from his role as pope renders his fumbling kidnappers utterly confused.

-- *Rose Pacatte*

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