

The Next Pope

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The question of who becomes the next Pope has taken centre stage since the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II. Papal vacancy and succession often offer a concrete reflection of the state of the church. It is one of those great moments in the history of Christianity when one could easily see the hand of divine providence. Historically, papal elections have often been conducted with dignity and mystery; with reverential secrecy and grace. Naturally, the Cardinal-electors might differ on who they think should take over the *Chair of Peter*, but at the end whoever is elected should receive the full respect, loyalty and co-operation of all the cardinals and the Catholic faithful.

Many people are predicting that the conclave will see a battle between the reformers and the conservatives; others predict that it will be a power struggle between Western cardinals and those from the developing world who are craving for a greater voice in the church given the fact that a greater percentage of the Catholic population live in their countries. There is also an emerging concern among some cardinals that a residential cardinal (one who lives outside Rome and is a pastor of an archdiocese), who will devolve more powers to local churches is to be preferred to a curial cardinal (one who lives and works in the central organ of the church's leadership in Rome), who will have a more centralist approach. There is also the question as to whether the catholicity of the Church is endangered if each local church in the interpretation of the church's creedal and moral teachings adopts a more contextual approach. These factors are very fundamental though not decisive in the choice of who becomes the next Pope.

The name of Francis Cardinal Arinze has been mentioned in several quarters as one of the *papabili* ('popable candidates'). He is no doubt a man of proven integrity. A person of deep spiritual conviction and affective piety. He is

a noble Church-man of unvarnished credibility, who combines wide-ranging and articulate theological depth with unassuming and uncanny human touch that bespeak of his humble origins. He is widely respected in the Roman curia, while his influence, personable and compelling presence has won him friends and admirers the world over. He has distinguished himself in the service of the Church and the world both as a seminary professor, a parish priest, a bishop, a residential archbishop and now a cardinal heading one of the most important Congregations at the Vatican (Divine Worship). His bearing on the need for deep connection between humanity and God on one hand and among men and women themselves on the other, has seen him publishing many works on issues of God, liturgy, worship, human rights, family, sacrifice, Islam etc. Many people believe that the greatest challenge for the Church in this day and age is dialogue with cultures and civilizations, especially Islam. Some will also add as another challenge the building of relations with countries like China, India and Cuba among others, where it is still impossible to evangelize. Arinze is one of the most prominent cardinals in the world today to lead the Church in this needed dialogue with cultures and religions. He is also a polyglot, whose communication ability will be another asset as the Church moves to the next level.

Every cardinal-electoral is qualified to be the next Pope. At the end of the day, the Good Lord will help them to make the right choice. If Arinze becomes the next Pope, it will be a pleasant surprise to many people the world over, but a joy for all Africans. The question many people ask is: whether non-Blacks are prepared to accept a Black Pope since racism particularly against Blacks is alive and active in the world even in the most sacred religious portals. Will non-Africans not be slow to accept the teachings of an African Pope? There are some like myself who think that Christianity of all denominations is becoming very multi-dimensional without any single model of spirituality or theology. Thus negotiating the contours of these competing voices especially the voices from the

marginal continent of Africa will be very daunting. The Christianity of Africa is radically different from the Christianity, which we see in the Western world. Moral relativism and the triumph of individual conscience and personal preference have taken over the common element of faith and morals, which historical Christianity had advanced, as discoverable in Scripture and Tradition. Thus it will be a big challenge for an African Pope to bring a unity of faith and morals among Christians all over. Will the world not be racist to an African Pope and perhaps make his life and ministry an endurance test? Will Arinze be able to stem the destruction of marriage and family in Western societies that are presently adopting homosexual behaviours and same-sex marriage as a new expression of human dignity and rights? Will he be able to push Western Christians to accept the place of God in public life and to accept religious education in their schools? Will he put an end to the contagion of globalization that is destroying the economic and cultural lives of people especially in the developing world? Will he give more room for local cultures and expressions of God to resonate in the symphony of global Christianity? How will he bring back Jesus Christ to the centre of Western societies whose civilization is appropriately interpreted as Christian? These are, no doubt, serious issues.

In addition, having an African Pope may not necessarily put African issues on the agenda. The Pope is going to be as always 'the Pope of the world.' If an African Pope pursued an African agenda will he not be accused of nepotism? How has the presence of an African in the top job of the United Nations helped to advance the cause of Africa? Most often Africans who assume international positions of influence are put in a tight corner where, in an attempt, to present themselves as being fair they even marginalize Africa? However, an African Pope will no doubt be a validation of the emergence of Africa as the leading Christian spiritual center of the world. But the more important thing is that the way the Catholic Church is organized does not allow any Pope to rule alone. In addition, there is always an attempt to balance the equation in terms of

addressing the concerns of all people, especially the poor and the marginalized. Where a Pope comes from may not necessarily determine what he does as Pope. An African Pope will not necessarily change the status of Africa as a forgotten continent. If Arinze becomes Pope like many people in Africa are praying, I expect that he is elected not because he is an African, but because he is qualified and is chosen by God to lead his Church. 'Who he is' should take precedence over 'where he comes from' in this regard. The cardinal-electors might not behave like Nigerians where elections are influenced by such factor as place of origin. Many people will be disappointed if that is what is primary in the selection of a new pope; many might even lose faith in the credibility of the process and the Church.

Wherever the pendulum swings, what has emerged since the death of Pope John Paul II is that the papacy is not a dying institution. It has actually grown in stature and become stronger. The reason may not be unconnected with the personality of Pope John Paul II, who in a very quiet way has redefined the papacy. Many people think that religion and the papacy will become mute and marginal in the emerging world of infinite possibilities. However, the global attention that was given to the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II must have left many anti-papists revising their theories that the papacy will overtime become a relic like other monarchies.

It does appear and rightly so that the papacy has a lot of significance that goes beyond what the eyes can see. Christianity needs the Pope. We might not all agree with what he says; we might not all believe that he represents us; we might not all show allegiance to him, but he does provide a centre of confluence for the various streams of the Christian faith. He is one Christian voice that should continue to resound from pole to pole. This is why the funeral of the Pope brought together Jews and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, believers and non-believers, liberals and conservatives, prisoners

and presidents, saints and sinners. They came because the Pope represents something, which they all could connect with.

The next pope should therefore see himself as a Pope of the world. He should not become a prisoner of the Vatican; he should go out to the ends of the earth and reach out to all. He should also become sensitive to the movement of the Spirit in history and the dignity of differences. The boundaries of ethical and doctrinal discourse are shifting in a radical way. He must connect with this movement not to approximate to it, but to correctly interpret and appreciate it, while not sacrificing the truths of revelation from which the church and Christians draw their inspiration and direction. Pope John Paul II understood the primacy of the human person and human dignity as the starting point of all the ministry of the church. The life of the human person is imperiled if our human cultures do not shine through with values that promote the spiritual and material wellbeing of every man or woman, especially the weak and marginalized.

I do believe that the world needs a new kind of civilization, which Pope John Paul II calls *the civilization of love*, which builds fraternity, a culture of peace, and tolerance, respect for all especially women and children and renounces all forms of violence and injustice. It should be the task of the next Pope to help build this new civilization that spurs human history to transcend its own limits and dark sides. Civilization is central to the interpretation of the human person and actually shapes who we are. Hence building a civilization of love means to shape men and women of our day along the values of love. The new pope must courageously challenge the world through his own example of humility and openness to embrace the ethics of love and human freedom. He must also sincerely address the broad issues which often bring dissent, division, pain and anger in the church.

Every culture needs to be transformed, in the light of its ability to promote the quality of life of individuals. The religious leadership we need in the world is

the one that helps to bring out the true value of religion. The measure of the true value of any religion is to what extent it promotes the peace and happiness of humankind. Religious practices are considered good if they enhance the quality of life of people, promote sound morality in society and project the ideal of love and transcendence. Unless cultures are imbued with a dynamic creativity, and the innate belief in the capacity of the human person to rise above evil, selfishness and wickedness, we would be endangering our collective destiny. It should be the task of the new Pope to gradually take the Catholic Church to the next level where it mirrors and inspires this new culture. It should become a Church of many colors where men and women, liberals and conservatives are all treated as equal children of God. This way, all will be proud of the Church because something of the Church re-echoes in their hearts and something of their talents and *charism* finds expression in the Church.

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