

Opening the Papacy to New Ways of Thinking

By Sidney Callahan
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In the face of death, Pope John Paul II's iron will is giving him the strength to suffer courageously. But even this most determined of pontiffs won't be able to stave off the inevitable: the church's need to choose a successor, an event that millions of Catholics anticipate with both anxiety and hope.

There's been vigorous debate about the papacy for more than 1,000 years, and as this pontificate nears its end, there are no signs of a cease-fire. At this point, Roman Catholics can agree that the bishop of Rome should hold the office of pope and exercise churchwide leadership. But beyond this minimum, they disagree over what needs to be changed and what should stay the same.

The prospect of electing a new pope brings up crucial questions: What makes a good pontiff? What are popes for? Will the papacy even continue to be a going concern over the next millennium?

In his 26 years as pontiff, John Paul has exercised an extraordinary influence on both world events and the church, and he can claim many positive accomplishments, from helping to bring down communism to asserting a "culture of life" that inspires so many of us. But his has also been a centralizing, authoritarian pontificate, one that has resisted the need for new ways of dealing with issues of sex and gender and with the way the church is governed. What the church needs now is a pope who will be able to lead it on the path of renewal and reform. For reforming the church, I believe, is one of the things that good popes do.

Raised in a family of "lapsed Protestants," I converted to Catholicism in the 1950s and have been mulling over the pope's role for a long time. I struggled with accepting the papal office as I studied to become a Catholic. But in the end I recognized its value and validity.

The pope's mission is often called the "Petrine ministry," after the Apostle Peter, the disciple who first named Jesus as Lord and received Christ's charge to lead his church, but who also denied him out of fear. After the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the other apostles at Pentecost, according to the New Testament, Peter became transformed and able to proclaim the gospel bravely. More significantly, he learned to listen and change his mind in response to the prompting of God. Gathered together, the disciples prayed and decided that the Spirit was telling them to welcome into their midst those non-Jews who wished to convert. This responsiveness to the Holy Spirit has been seen as "the rock" upon which the church is built, and the pope, as Peter's successor, continues as the conduit for the Holy Spirit.

Whoever holds the office of pope serves as a vital center of communication through which lines can be maintained to all the groups and far-flung churches that make up the great Church. The pope's enduring role is to remember, to listen, to teach and to keep in play the constant conversation through space and over time, as arguments unfold and different interpretations of God's revelation take their turn on center stage. Periodically, great church councils gather the flock under the leadership of the papal shepherd and try to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit and what course the church should take.

The surprising advent of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s taught that the church is an "ever reforming" institution that must repent of past sins in order to move forward. John Paul II made this teaching come alive when he took the extraordinary step of making public apologies:

for the condemnation of Galileo (better late than never!), for the church's past treatment of women, for its wrongful failures and affronts to the Jews.

This pope has also preached peace in season and out. As a member of Catholic peace groups such as Pax Christi, I find it encouraging to have a pope's support when opposing and picketing my government.

John Paul has furthermore continued to advocate human rights and international cooperation while seeking justice for families and the poor. He rejects violence and the taking of innocent human life whether through the death penalty, war, abortion or euthanasia. Martin Luther King Jr. talked of establishing "the beloved community"; popes advocate "a civilization of love" or John Paul's culture of life.

Nonetheless, to many of us in the church's liberal wing, some of John Paul's rulings have been cause for real distress. As a card-carrying member of Feminists for Life, I find myself dissenting with a small but significant percentage of church teachings -- on women, sex, divorce and homosexuality. I also fault the pope for failing to enact more of the Vatican II reforms intended to change the way the church is run.

The priest sex abuse scandal here in the United States revealed the institutional weaknesses in the American church and the urgent need for change. Good institutions operate on the ethical principles of accountability, separation of powers, due process and public disclosure. But the current church is too centralized; bishops, appointed by the pope, must answer to Rome on all matters. This has led to weakness, timidity and too often an effort, in the sex abuse scandal, to sweep the truth under the rug. What a difference it would make if the church reinstated the ancient practice of electing bishops, allowing the priests and people of a diocese to choose their own leaders.

In the wake of the sex abuse scandal, loyal lay Catholics have offered to help the bishops improve their management practices, but the church today resists advice from the laity. The consent of the governed is an ancient Catholic precept, but one that unfortunately became obscured when monarchies ruled the world. While the church advocates that the faithful should participate equally in taking responsibility for all its actions, this teaching has never been instituted in practice. A new pope should move the church forward to complete the reforms in governance and lay participation that were envisioned in the teachings of Vatican II.

The matter of women and sex is more complicated. The church today is in the throes of a painful struggle to grow beyond its past denigration of both. Happily, Christian teachings and understanding of sexuality and gender have been evolving over the centuries toward a more personal and positive perspective. Yet many Catholic leaders still seem caught in the bind of underestimating the positive power of sexuality for healing and growth and overestimating the moral and theological significance of gender. In their eyes, women are essentially different in nature from men and thereby ineligible for ordination. Arguments over birth control and homosexual activity turn on questions of how sex relates to love and procreation, the relationship between lovemaking and baby-making.

In this impasse, it would be a great move for the next pope to call for consultations with married and divorced Catholics, women theologians, homosexuals and celibate priests, nuns and monks to try to forge a consensus on these contested issues. If a pope could encourage agreement, many changes could appear, if not in the next decade, then surely sometime in this century.

My dream list of reforms would include making celibacy optional and allowing priests to marry. Not only would this be the right thing to do, but these changes would also have the practical effect of helping to solve the priest shortage, which is reaching crisis proportions in the United States and elsewhere. Revising the rules on marriage and divorce, contraception and homosexuality would take more theological development and time.

Perhaps the most crucial and difficult reform to achieve is the ordination of women. But on the rocky path to full equality, more leadership roles for women could help ameliorate the church's oppressive, exclusive male club character. One thing is certain: If reforms giving women more equal participation don't arrive soon, the church's courageous defense of the moral equality of the unborn will be weakened.

The church and the papacy are undeniably at a crossroads. And yet whatever comes next, the need for a pope at the head of his church will, I believe, survive. I remember my first papal audience, in 1998. I was astounded by the huge crowd's exuberant display of affection for John Paul. Gathered in a huge hall at the Vatican, pilgrims from all over the world played music, sang songs, recited poems, presented the pontiff with gifts, flowers and testimonials, waved their group banners and kept up festive cheers and clapping.

Suddenly I realized that I had been raised, before my conversion, in a very cold climate, and I saw how Catholics love to love their Papa. He is the embodiment of their faith, a flesh and blood person whom all can adore and celebrate together. As long as that bond of love exists, the papacy will not fade away.

Sidney Callahan is a psychologist who writes books and articles on moral theology and ethics. She was formerly a columnist for Commonweal magazine.