

The power of frailty: A papal plus

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They brought the Pope back to the Vatican, the papers said, "in a people-mover with tinted windows; looking fairly alert." It was, I figured, a symbol not only of the Pope's physical condition but of the spiritual state of the entire church. We are all living behind the tinted windows of another age.

What we took to be eternal truth in so many areas has turned out to be temporary at best, in some cases even highly questionable. We wonder now about the nature of life, the purpose of government, the place of religion, the role of institutions, the power of power.

We look "fairly alert" but we are all struggling to breathe, to speak, to go on living in a world in which parts of it, and parts of ourselves, as well, are clearly long gone. The problem is that no one is really sure which parts they are.

This pope's last real message to the world may well be that silence and faith, in the face of such change, are the only appropriate responses to it.

All hope for being able to control it is over now. The questions rage without end. Should Terri Schaivo's feeding tube be reinserted? Was the invasion of Iraq moral? Should Social Security, the lifeline of our middle-class elderly be ended, changed, or stay the same? The questions abound. The answers are slow in coming.

Oh, force is always a factor, of course. We can force our answers on other people--and many are trying. But once a group, any group, lacks the power to enforce its will--like the Roman Empire, for instance, or the old European ruling families, or even the U.S. army in Iraq, whatever its firepower--there is nothing left to do but face the unwanted circumstances: to listen, to learn, and to change with the changes around us.

Force always masquerades as real but when the masses stop listening, it dies. And we are there, it seems.

Authoritarianism, the notion that any one person can have all the answers, has become a thing of the past. It has outlived itself, in fact.

No one is completely under anyone's real domination anymore. People know too much to be fooled. They travel too often to be duped into thinking that any one way is the only possible right way to do a thing. Because I said so has ceased to be proof of anything. Is almost ludicrous. Is barely heard, let alone listened to much.

The times, as always, are indeed a'changing.

The trouble is that the times are changing faster, more globally and more dramatically than at any other period in history. We are on the cusp, not only of a new era, we are on the edge of a whole new way of being human.

On the one hand, technology seems poised again to change life as we have always known it.

The Japanese are developing robots at a great rate. They play instruments, they sing songs, they greet visitors at the new expo.

Cell phones, those gadgets that have turned the world into a roving communication system designed to unleash us from the umbilical cords of desk and home, are becoming standard now. We go through life, head phones around our necks, microphones in front of our faces, talking to people thousands of miles away as if they were beside us.

Medicine is discussing eternal life; the imminent possibility that life can be extended indefinitely, cloned, engineered and manipulated without end.

Regional accents are disappearing as the whole world begins to melt into itself like butter folded into cream.

Purporting to speak definitively, for all time, absolutely, without discussion, for everyone in all circumstances in a world of this character smacks of a scene out of *Our Town* where the dead one returns only to discover that nothing is the same as when he left it.

The question then becomes--in the person of a pope whose speech is limited--how will we, as a church, speak to a world such as this? Now that all the rules are suspect and all the laws were written to regulate another whole kind of society, what rules can now prevail? How long will the old answers to new questions inspire, give direction?

It may be the moment for the church itself to contemplate a different way of being alive in the world that is more than the image of a massive basilica, confined under a hulking dome, encircled by a monumental colonnade and living behind a set of old rules.

The very person of a frail, silent pope, devoid of the drama and the force of the church triumphant, open to the future, calm and quiet in the face of it, could itself be a lesson to the church in a spiraling, renascent world such as this one. That, in fact, might be a far more potent image of what is really the spirit of Christ in the Christian church than anything else we could hope to see.

In 1294, Pope Celestine entered Rome after a 27 month conclave stalemated over the direction in which to take the Church. In the end, they chose an 84 year old monk who insisted on entering Rome on a donkey. Three months later, when the Cardinals refused to take over the daily administration of the church so he could fast and pray during Advent, he called a consistory and resigned on the spot.

The pope who succeeded him understood the power of the spiritual over the administrative. He refused to allow Celestine to return to his mountain hermitage for fear the gentle, prayerful monk-pope, would become a center of schism, a rallying point of holiness, in a church more given to pomp than to circumstance.

Now, in our time, the world has launched a period of authoritarianism, it seems, in order to control the chaos that change brings. But it isn't working. On the contrary. The control has only managed to breed alienation at every level.

Maybe Pope Celestine knew in the thirteenth century what people are now beginning to suspect: Simple holiness always trumps force.

From where I stand, it seems that history may well be repeating itself. This time the stakes are higher than ever. Let's hope we're all fairly alert to the fact that the purpose of the church is not control. It is holiness. The power of frailty is always more potent, in the long run, than the power of power.

Bring on the donkey.