Signs of a new beginning - Hopes for Francis’ papacy
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There were no big gestures when the new Pope came on to the balcony of St Peter's to greet the people who had gathered in the square on that cold, wet night. Instead, he addressed them with an open ear and heart. After a few minutes, he asked the crowd first to bless him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, before he gave his first papal blessing. This testifies to his deep understanding of the common priesthood of all the baptized, irrespective of whether one is a lay person, a priest, a bishop, or the Pope.

As a Jesuit, the new Pope will doubtless bear the riches of Ignatian spirituality into the Vatican and the Curia, and will develop them further on the model of the Spiritual Exercises. The Church must become again a praying Church that follows Christ. It also means getting back to a humble and modest Church, without power, bribery, and ambition.

In our daily living as Christians, we are called to realize the common priesthood and to illustrate this Saint Paul compares the Church of Christ to the human body: “The body too does not consist of only one member, but of many members ... Through the one Spirit, we were all received into one single body in baptism ... and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12).

The new Pope is the first ever to choose the name Francis. He did this in honour of St Francis of Assisi and this in itself is a hopeful sign of a new beginning. The name “Francis” stands for poverty, humility, peace, and love. This is more valuable than all riches of gold and jewels and also more important than a papal court, because external signs of dignity distract from the essential, namely, from following Christ. St Francis was so much impressed by Jesus that he saw the radical renunciation of all wealth and luxury as the only possible way to imitate him. He embarked on a path of praise and of respect for the simplicity and beauty of God's creation. As Jesus said: “Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them” (Matt 6:28-29).

Saint Francis attached great value to dialogue with other religions. We need this dialogue, in order to understand one another better and to honor God anew. But we need dialogue among Christians too, in order to have a better mutual understanding and to overcome the division of Christendom. This dialogue needs a new élan, so that the walls we have erected in the course of the centuries may be torn down, and the lacerations in the Christian community that we have helped to cause may be repaired. In this way, a renewed, united Christendom can come into being, with respect for the various traditions, without losing the riches we have among ourselves, and preserving a unity in differentness (as a “catholic,” universal Church).
St Francis once said: “Let not people go sad from hence” and this implies that we must reflect in a new way on the lost collegiality of the bishops. In the furtherance of this aim, in an interview two days after the election of Pope Francis, Cardinal Godfried Danneels floated the idea of a panel of senior papal advisers.

“Peter was a unique and indivisible personality, and it would thus be good if Pope Francis were surrounded by a small group of persons, not to direct him and guide him, nor as persons equipped with the power to take decisions, but simply in order to help him and to advise him, so that Popes too need not go sad from hence,” said Cardinal Danneels.

The cardinal also reflected on St Francis’ mission to renew the Church and drew a parallel with the task facing the new Pope.

As he explained: „St Francis said one day to the superior of one of his monasteries: ‘If someone comes to you, do not send him away if he is still sad. You must console him in his sadness.’ Well, I think this is precisely what we need in the Church. If Pope Francis can do this – and he is, of course, also the guardian of the true faith and doctrine, and he must sometimes speak out very clearly – then he has almost fulfilled his task.”

Pope Francis has a model also in his namesake’s determination to give women roles of real responsibility in the Church. St Francis helped St Clare to attain a respected position, and he supported her when she founded the order of Poor Clares in 1253. From the beginning of Christianity, women have had a central and visible place in the Church though not in the recent history of the Church. Perhaps the Pope will succeed in giving today’s women, with all their competence and their specific spirituality, their place in the ecclesial community, in order to bring about a better balance in the Church.

Some have suggested that at the age of 76 the new Pope may not have sufficient energy to carry out wide-ranging reforms of the Church. But John XXIII was even older at his election, and that did not prevent him from fundamentally reforming the Church through his Aggiornamento. The level of world interest shown in the new Pope is a sign of the depth of hope that people have placed in him.

Meteorologists had predicted the appearing of a comet on 13 and 14 March. On 12 March, the first day of the conclave, the comet appeared at the spot where the sun goes down and the new day dawns. Is this perhaps a sign of a new beginning?

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