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A torn civic fabric

Can the Catholic Church stitch together what politics has ripped apart?

Pope Francis' death on Monday introduces the Catholic Church to an uncertain era for which he tried to prepare it. The cardinals will soon be summoned to Rome for the conclave to elect his successor and must now consider if Francis' vision – a merciful church in which all are welcome – remains the right one or whether an altogether different approach, perhaps one more focused on the demands of the Christian faith, is needed.

Before the conclave starts, the cardinals will spend up to two weeks in Rome meeting to consider what kind of pope is needed, both for the church and for the world. As the discussions go on, they will ask, 'Who among us?' Only then do the 135 cardinals eligible to vote – those under 80 years old – go into lockdown in the Sistine Chapel and decide on their choice.

The cardinals will be aware of the moment. In the final months of Francis' papacy, the West appeared to be fracturing, along with the post-World War II rules-based order. The world now seems a jungle in which might is right, in which imperial centres – America, China, Russia – compete ever more fiercely to assert their sovereignty while trampling on that of smaller nations. The cardinals will take note, too, of a social breakdown within many countries: the increasing collapse of civility and the angry resentment that lie behind the rise of nationalist populism. They will see growing violence and the prospect of more war.

They will wonder what all this now asks of the church as a whole and of the papacy in particular.

While worrying about the threat to democracy and law, most of the cardinals are not likely to mourn the imminent passing of the liberal order, which many may see as the consequence of individualism and market idolatry. They instead may blame Western liberalism for what they consider gross social inequalities, the privatisation of morality, the erosion of institutions and the neglect of the common good.

The church against authoritarianism

Many churchmen are traditionally sympathetic to workers; they share the indignation of ordinary people at the way the deck has been stacked in favour of the educated and wealthy and against the working poor. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, from which nearly half of the electors hail, many cardinals are also angry about market-driven globalisation. They believe liberal Western values have been imposed on the world, dissolving bonds of trust, tradition, community and family.

At the same time, probably few will be impressed by the rise of strongmen dressed in the flag of nation and faith. Many may regard Donald Trump, Elon Musk and his ilk as nihilists who know how to destroy but not to build and be aghast at the hounding of migrants and the reckless rejection of environmental concern, both of which were core to Catholic social teaching under Francis, who appointed four-fifths of the electors. They will probably see in the new authoritarianism a sign that the state is no longer acting as a brake on what St Augustine called the 'libido dominandi' – the desire to dominate – but now exalts it in the person of an autocrat.

The question the cardinals face today is: How can the church protect and further its mission in this new scenario? For if the liberal state was indifferent to its beliefs but content for the church to do charity, the new authoritarians want the church to bless their pagan ideologies but not speak up for the stranger and the weak.

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As a long-time observer of the Vatican and the church, I believe the cardinals are likely to choose a pope who draws clear lines in the sand in defence of the church's freedom to proclaim its values and who calls out political distortion of its teaching. Some may see an analogy between this time and a century ago, when a pope led the church through another age of waning democracies and rising autocracies. In the time of totalitarianism that led to World War II, Pius XI (1922-39) promoted and defended a plural civil society against the suffocating power of the state. Now, many of the cardinals will think, the new pope must do the same.

In one of the Vatican's most important 20th-century teaching documents, Pius detailed the obligations of the law to protect the

autonomy not just of the church but also of all those intermediate institutions – schools, charities, labour unions, civic associations – that belong neither to the market nor to the state but spring from groups of people putting their faith values into action. You could see the direct impact of this teaching in the letter of support that Francis sent in February to the US bishops, who were implicitly criticised by Vice President JD Vance – a Catholic who met with the pope during Easter weekend – over the church's support for migrants.

Francis' legacy will feature strongly in the cardinals' decision-making — not just his reforms, teachings and priorities but also his style, the way he embodied and performed the Gospel. In March 2013, after Benedict XVI's resignation and before the conclave that elected Francis, the cardinals made clear that Vatican reform, of both structures and culture, was a priority. Francis took this as a mandate, and today the Vatican is largely free of the Benedict-era scandals. One of Francis' great achievements was a new Constitution for the Vatican, the fruit of years of consultation and revision, and the cardinals will most likely want the new pope to consolidate and extend those reforms.

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Some cardinals will want a new pope who can mend fences with groups who were frustrated with Francis, such as traditionalists and conservatives in the United States and progressives in Germany. And it is possible, after history's first Latin American pope, who focused on the world's margins, that they will want Francis' successor to refocus on Europe. The cardinals may feel that the European Union, which was born in a spirit of Catholic humanism, and the church need each other as never before.

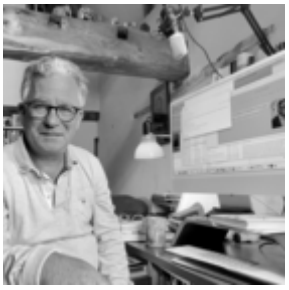
Whatever else emerges in the cardinals' priorities for a new leader, it is likely to be Francis' call for 'synodality' that most resonates in their discussions. 'Synodality' is the word given to the ancient church habit of assembling, discussing, discerning and deciding. Francis adapted the ancient practice of synods and councils in a radically inclusive way that invites all the faithful to be involved. The cardinals may conclude that right now, this is the greatest sign of hope the church can offer the world.

This 'culture of encounter', as Francis called it, may seem a puny thing to the powers that be. But it starts from the idea that those in thrall to the will to power cannot understand: the innate dignity of all, the need to listen to everyone, including those on the margins, and the importance of

patiently waiting for consensus. These things are all crucial to the repair of a torn civic fabric.

The cardinals may look at the world and decide that, whatever else they might want from the next pope, the pressing issue facing humanity is how we treat one another.

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