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Will the new pope be open to change?

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NCR Today

Two contrasting viewpoints from *NCR*'s John Allen and *Time* magazine suggest that possibilities exist for either a conservative or more progressive successor to Benedict XVI.

I would put my money on Allen, as he is second to none on reporting on the Vatican. Yet there is perhaps much to learn from both articles. Certainly, as Allen intimates, progressivity is a relative issue. The new pope is not likely to say that abortion is a good thing, nor should he. Yet even the *Time* magazine article makes clear that simply by resigning, Benedict XVI has initiated a change in the governance of the church.

So what can we expect from a new pope? Everyone is speculating, so let me share my thoughts on the subject and encourage the readership to do so as well. First of all, what would I look for in a pope? Certainly he needs to be holy and a man of prayer. He needs to exemplify Gospel values, a preference for the poor and a commitment to social justice for all people. He needs to be thoughtful and learned. He needs to have experiences that go beyond the walls of the Vatican and chancery responsibilities. A parish ministry background is a must. He must be patently pastoral and open to the world around him.

If there is anything I believe about the direction of the church, it is that we need to get away from the notion that the world is evil. We need to see God's creation and his people as good. A new pope needs to be able to look at issues not from the point of view of what is wrong, but from what we can learn from every person and every situation. The new pope needs to preach a Gospel that a 21st-century world can respond to.

Now, what do I actually expect? We are likely to get a younger man, probably in his 60s. Allen believes Benedict's resignation is in itself a recommendation that it is time for a new beginning. He indicates that Benedict likely felt he was not up to the task of dealing with the myriad issues facing the church at this time.

What this means, I believe, is that we will see a new turn toward the collegiality of the Second Vatican Council. The pope needs to, and I believe will look to, the resources available to him to gather data on the issues confronting the church today. Certainly he will solicit greater input from the bishops around the world. He may even be moved to convoke a third Vatican Council.

The pope needs to go beyond even the use of such obvious resources to consult with the laity and especially with women in the church. They need to be brought into meaningful discussions relative to the direction the church should take in the 21st century. Beyond the entire Catholic community, the pope needs to draw on the expertise of non-Catholics and non-Christians in gaining a global perspective on the realities of the day. At the same time, the pope needs to work toward a much more decentralized church that allows for local and cultural differences.

There is much of value a new pope can do even while remaining a doctrinally conservative church. He can establish a new tone predicated on the humility of Benedict XVI. He can recognize that we do not have a definitive answer to every one of life's problems. He can demonstrate in action the love spoken about in Benedict XVI's encyclical on love. He can manifest the concern of the church for all people, even those with whom the church may disagree. He can exemplify an understanding that there is much to learn from the entire world and its people, and refuse to allow the church to become more and more of an island separating itself from the rest of humanity. We need to move from the notion that we alone have truth and everybody else is in darkness.

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