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Help Wanted: Pope

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As the cardinals meet in Rome, discussing the characteristics they are looking for in the next pope, a consensus is developing. They are looking for someone who can preach the Gospel in a way that is understandable and attractive to people in the 21st century.

For this preaching to be believable, the new pope must be a holy man who believes and lives what he preaches. He must also be a brilliant intellectual, like Popes John Paul and Benedict, who knows the tradition and theology of the church. But holiness and intelligence are not enough. He must be able to communicate. He must look holy and be able to explain the church's teaching to people of today in a language they understand. Finally, he must be a good manager and capable of reforming the Vatican bureaucracy.

In other words, they want Jesus Christ with an MBA.

The problem, of course, is that he died, rose from the dead, and left town to join the family business. Frankly, there is no one in the College of Cardinals that fits the job description. Jesus may have founded the church, but he left it to human beings to run.

Nor is there any consensus on what the job description actually means. What is holiness? When I was growing up in the 1950s, we all thought Pius XII was a saint. He certainly looked pious and ascetical: thin, hands folded in prayer, eyes directed toward heaven. We did not think his feet touched the ground when he walked. John XXIII, on the other hand, was fat and smiling, with a twinkle in his eyes. Two such different people, yet each of their generations revered them as saints. Should a kneeling pope with clenched hands and a frown storm heaven with his prayers, or should he sit in the Vatican garden singing a canticle of praise like St. Francis of Assisi as he watches the sun set?

Nor is there consensus on what kind of intellectual is needed in the papacy. John Paul II and Benedict XVI had their theological visions, but there were other brilliant theologians in the church who took different approaches. Benedict's differences with Hans Küng are well known, but there were others like Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner and Dominican Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx who got in trouble with the Vatican.

What the church needs is a 21st-century St. Augustine of Hippo or a St. Thomas Aquinas. The conservatives who like to quote these theologians do not want contemporary theologians to imitate them. Both of them took the best intellectual thought of their times and used it to explain Christianity to their generations. Augustine took Neo-Platonism, because all of the smart people in his time were Neo-Platonists. Aquinas took the newly discovered writing of Aristotle, which was the avant-garde thinking of his time. Aquinas was so radical that the bishop of Paris burned his books.

The difficulty today is that much of theology is expressed in the language of classical thought, but when was the last time you met a Neo-Platonist or Aristotelian on the street?

Today we need to free theologians to imitate, not just quote, these great saints. This means not electing another intellectual, as the cardinals did in the last two conclaves, but electing someone who will allow all the other theologians in the church to do their jobs without persecution. What is needed is a pope who listens as well as teaches, a pope who encourages creativity and is not expected to have all the answers, a pope who is good at consensus-building, not just giving orders.

Finally, the cardinals are looking for someone who can reform the Vatican Curia, the church's central office. Again, there is no consensus on what this means. Even people in the Curia agree it needs reforming, but that means, "Give me more power to do my job and give less power to those who oppose me." These folks saw no problem with a declining, sick man in the papacy as long as he was willing to delegate his authority to them. They would have been perfectly happy to run the church for him while he gave witness to suffering.

On the other hand, many would like to see power in the church decentralized, something the Vatican finds abhorrent. Vatican reform, like tax reform, is in the eye of the beholder. For my own views on reforming the Vatican, see my article in *Commonweal* [1].

What should the cardinals do if they cannot find Jesus Christ with an MBA? At the time of St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine order, there was a monastery faced with a similar dilemma. They wrote St. Benedict, telling him that they were divided over who should be abbot. They had three candidates, each backed by a third of the community. There was a monk renowned for his holiness; another who was a brilliant theologian; and finally, a practical man. St. Benedict wrote back, "Let the holy man pray for the monks, let the theologian teach the monks, and let the practical man rule the monks." While the pope is not an abbot, perhaps there is some wisdom here.

Follow Reese on Twitter: @ThomasReeseSJ [2]. His email is treesesj@NCRonline.org [3].

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