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Beneath the color commentary on the conclave

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side
Conclave 2013

To the media, reduced to "Dancing with the Stars" after the Super Bowl and the Oscars until re-entering Eden as the Masters Golf Tournament blooms again, the gods have suddenly delivered a gift seemingly from heaven, a surprise papal resignation and a conclave to elect a new pope.

There will be a new pope by St. Patrick's Day, but the timing was so good for the media that you would think that, for his resignation, Pope Benedict XVI had the same reporter adviser who told Pancho Villa to postpone his revolution until after the World Series.

This papal election has everything Americans love: color, drama, great sets, a cast of thousands and, in common with "Downton Abbey," the challenge of keeping a medieval castle running with, briefly, the master's valet in jail. The gathering throngs give off a Kentucky Derby crowd buzz as the post time neared -- get your bets down now. The odds shifted every day after Irish oddsmaker Paddy Power first put America's Cardinal Timothy Dolan at 33-1 and Africa's Cardinal Peter Turkson at 2-1. If the media moguls could figure out how to sell commercials -- in good taste, of course; say, the Clydesdales caparisoned in papal colors clumping solemnly across St. Peter's Square -- the sky would be the limit for network charges for every commercial minute.

Then there is the Dickensian touch of two popes living in the Vatican at the same time, one a world-class theologian who promises, using a word that must resonate for a boy who grew up in wartime Germany, "unconditional" obedience to his successor. Dramatic possibilities tingle in the air with two white-cassocked popes crossing each other's paths constantly in a Vatican City that is smaller than some Wal-Marts.

The real pontificating is being done by the analysts whose readings of the pope's stepping down and the

gathering of the world's cardinals is, in fact, instructive about the nature of the church itself. The collage of color commentary, wishful thinking and outright guessing equals the hyped-up quality of ESPN's coverage of the first pick in the NFL draft, with endless recitals of the stats on each contender.

This is Church One; that is, the church as an institution that is covered by the media and whose constituents -- just check who is quoted -- are dependent on this organized church for their ecclesiastical careers, their employment, their daily dose of inside gossip for a habit that, as citizens of Church One, they acquired when they first became involved with the organizational side of Catholicism.

Church Two is a much larger group, and while it includes many priests and religious nuns and brothers, it is mainly made up of what church officials term "the faithful"; that is, the millions of everyday lay Catholics who live their faith in raising their families, working at their jobs, paying their taxes and supporting their parishes, schools, charitable work and volunteering for countless unpublicized endeavors through which they experience and express their Catholic beliefs.

The latter is not the church as an institution, but the church as a mystery that centers on its sacramental life rather than on its organizational maneuvering.

This is the real church for whose members faith is the touchstone of their lives. They are so busy living their faith that, though they hope for the best, they are essentially uninvolved in papal politics or even in who will be elected pope or, for that matter, who their bishops are and what they may say in the letters read at Sunday Masses. These Catholics love their priests because, despite the sex abuse scandals, they have known too many good ones to be totally dismayed at the failures of some troubled ones and, despite the financial and sexual scandals, they keep supporting the church that understands, at its best moments, their suffering and longing, their hopes and their disappointments, and helps them, if they fall one way or other, to get up and keep going. These are the people who live in favor of life, who prize and nourish it and understand that religion does not pose implausible riddles to them but celebrates and supports them through the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the great and gripping mystery, that is life itself.

These people do not have the interest in the accidental and incidental aspects of church life that are the subject of the color commentary of a papal interregnum and election that is always manna for the insatiable appetites of the media and institutional church junkies.

The drama acted out at every papal election is not really relevant to their everyday lives. They long ago learned how to remain good Catholics in an institutional church whose human failings they accept because the church as a mystery of belief has always accepted theirs. They understand that despite the headlines about Catholicism in crisis, it has been in crisis, one way or another, since its founding. Despite the romantic visions of those calling for a pope who will fulfill their fantasy as conservative or progressive, the church has always been and remains the home of well-known sinners and unsung saints and is run more by sinners like them than by saints of any kind.

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That is why the white smoke that is supposed to rise from the chimney above the Sistine Chapel is so often so mixed with a darker hue that nobody is sure of what it signals about a papal election. That mixed smoke is the perfect symbol of the church as it is: not quite as pure as it ought to be but human enough to make it a home for the everyday Catholics who, far more than the elaborate institutional sets and well-costumed actors covered by the media in Rome, constitute the real Catholic church.

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