

OPINION

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The Pope Is Not the Church

By NATHAN SCHNEIDER

The pope is not the church.

It's going to be very tempting to forget this fact over the next few days. The pundits, Catholic and otherwise, have been rapt in the suspense of awaiting the arrival of Pope Francis. We heard a lot of impossible hopes for who the next pope would be, along with the less thrilling reality of the actual candidates. But Catholics, along with the masses who have been suddenly and momentarily interested in Catholic affairs, should remember that the papacy is not to be confused with the church itself. At no time should this have been more clear than those strange and special few days when the Catholic Church was a people—an assembly, a community, a mystical body—without a pope.

This is not to say that a pope doesn't have an important job. It's an office with considerable (if metaphorical) justification in the Bible, as well as a very long and venerable (if checkered) tradition. Popes help hold together a diverse church, one far more varied and interesting than most people realize; Vatican City and St. Patrick's Cathedral are part of the same church as the back-side of an altar in Guatemala covered in wax and feathers and the parish on the South Side of Chicago that worships with a gospel choir and African dance. A pope is part of the Catholic package for sure, but only part.

Catholic Christianity has a long tradition of being shaped from the margins, starting with its founder.

The Jesus we meet in the Gospels is refreshingly indifferent to those who claim to run the institutions of the world, both religious and secular. He doesn't appear to have been a revolutionary in the modern sense of seeking to replace those in power with an ideology, but nor did he ever take authorities more seriously than necessary. Render Caesar's coins unto Caesar, he said, but save the rest for God and neighbor. He accepted the death sentence that the high priests and imperial legates placed upon him, but he never stopped laying bare their hypocrisy. In that ultimate obedience to authority he found freedom, for himself and—as far as Christians are concerned—for all of humanity.

Since then, the story of the church has been punctuated by people who consulted their conscience first and their popes later. Francis of Assisi assembled his community of barefoot wanderers before going to Pope Innocent III to seek approval. In more recent times, Dorothy Day didn't need a pope's permission before opening a house of hospitality for the poor and resistance against war. The Community of Sant'Egidio, founded in Italy in the late 1960s, has fought HIV/AIDS and negotiated peace treaties around the world on its own terms. Yet, in honor of this witness, Benedict XVI made a habit of visiting Sant'Egidio's ministries in Rome. Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York is seeking Dorothy Day's cause for sainthood. And now, almost eight hundred years after Francis' death, a pope has named himself after him.

Each of these Catholic heroes had a certain respect for the papacy, but they didn't let that get in the way of living out the gospel for themselves. They took inspiration from the words of church authorities, but more importantly they took action on their own—in creative, authentic, and Christian fashion. “In all times the laity have been the measure of the Catholic spirit,” Cardinal John Newman said more than a century ago. If what we expect from the church is what we expect from the aged and insulated man who happens to hold the office of Peter, there is little reason to expect much.

In the *New York Times* Paul Elie recently [suggested](#) that in imitation of the papal resignation Catholics might “give up your pew for Lent”—that is, take at least a temporary break from their troubled church. From time to time, one hears a call [along these lines](#) for frustrated Catholics to boycott the church outright in protest, as if that will make the men in charge finally clean house. But I’ve seen far too many smart and conscientious people give up on the church—for good reasons, I’m afraid—to want any more of them to leave, even for one Sunday.

What the church needs is more committed and courageous souls in it, not fewer. It needs souls who are too busy organizing communities of radical living and prayer, and working for justice among the oppressed, and composing new hymns, to worry all that much about whom the Spirit and the cardinals might choose as pope. It needs souls willing to undertake new forms of thought and action capable of making what Catholics see as God’s good news a reality in our time—forms that will influence and inspire popes of the future, even if the present ones don’t yet get it.

There is no better time to reclaim a living faith than this in-between period with a new pope and an uncertain future—for Catholics to say their own prayers, to serve their own communities, to find their own voices. And to the extent that we bother wishing that Pope Francis will be one kind of pope or another, let it be for the kind of pope who listens.

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Sure. But whose leadership? What about the leadership from below? Certain people hold certain offices, sure, but does that mean that the future of the institution necessarily stands or falls by them?

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Jim Reed • 4 hours ago

In a way the pope is the church in that it is a pyramid authority structure with the pope as the ultimate authority.

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certainly in his mind he is

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