

Saturday of Lent Week 4



Habemus papam. Lent is given a new dimension. May Francis be blessed.

Not so long ago it would have taken days or weeks to spread the news of a new Pope. Today we are all there in the Square as the news breaks. First impressions are made globally and instantly. He seems to have the gift of making an impression without trying to, which is called humility. Within minutes he has been googled by millions and predictions and evaluations are piling up from experts.

Yet there were also many thousands there physically, standing in the cold and indeed singing in the rain. The joyfulness of the crowds in St Peter's Square was a very different thing from the commentaries of pundits and the cautious response of distant observers. It is a ritual and rituals require physical presence and participation. There is a kind of knowledge and insight that comes only to those who are taking part in the ritual, even if they don't get a good view or clearly hear his name pronounced. There was the immediate knowledge of relief ? no one likes to be on a ship without a captain. But also of hope.

Pope Francis reawakened that hope in many by a wonderful economy of gestures ? his humour, his choice of name, his asking to be blessed before he gave a blessing, his stillness before the cheering crowds and his bowing low in silent prayer.

We cannot live well without hope and this key virtue of life can be eroded and sapped over time. We are eager to have it reawakened by our leaders and indeed that is part of their work and service. But then we easily project unrealistic expectations on them. We may even mythologise them as they stand before us. That is why Francis' gentle and gracious words about his predecessor were hopeful too ? the resignation of a pope re-humanizes the office. And Francis's first symbolic gestures seem to want to remind us of the humanity of Christ - and therefore of our own.

In this sense the election of Pope Francis is not a distraction from the season of Lent but a magnification of its meaning.

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