

Prayer for the pope

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue



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It is a fearful thing to be
The Pope.
That cross will not be laid on me
I hope.
A righteous God would not permit
It.
The Pope himself must often say
After the labours of the day,
“It is a fearful thing to be
Me.”
(A. E. Housman)

As I write this column, it is early Lent and Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, still reigns, amid rival theories about the reasons for his retirement and rampant speculation about his possible successor. Irish bookmaker Paddy Power gives Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana 11/4 odds—and promises, if a black pope is elected, to refund all losing bets. Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Canada, who has confessed that to

be elected pope would be “a living nightmare,” has reason to be concerned, for Paddy Power is ranking him next in line, with 6/1 odds. Richard Dawkins languishes near the bottom of the rankings at 666/1, so he is off the hook.

But as you read this column, *les jeux sont faits*. The Holy Spirit has spoken, the identity of the new pope is known, and there are many questions in the air: Does this pope possess the intellectual strengths of his immediate predecessors? Will he be an effective universal pastor, a generous ecumenist, an evangelizer of modern culture? What will he do to advocate for the imprisoned and persecuted Christians of the world? How will he reach out to young people, women and lapsed Catholics? How will he advance the dialogue of Christians with Jews, Muslims, adherents of other faiths, atheists, secularists and animists? Will he make common cause with the faithful of other traditions in the defense of human dignity and religious freedom? Will he encourage the growth of contemplative monastic life? Will he carry on the work of clarifying and implementing the liturgical and spiritual renewal envisioned by Vatican II? And if these questions are not enough to make the new pope’s heart sink down to the tips of his ruby slippers, how will he support the 12 million Catholics of China, whose government regards loyalty to the Holy See as allegiance to a foreign power?

Inevitably there will also be questions of the “when did you stop beating your wife?” kind. Any skeletons in the new pontiff’s former diocesan closet will be found and put on parade. Any impolitic remark will be amplified and analyzed to death. If there is the slightest ember of suspicion about his past, it will be fanned into flame. And if he is not overwhelmed by the challenge of living up to the charisma of John Paul II or the theological vision of Benedict XVI, who has with some justice been compared to Augustine, the new pope will be weighed down by having their failures thrown in his lap. Analysts tell us that the Curia—the Vatican’s millennia-old bureaucracy—is riddled with corruption and inefficiency. It is natural to hope that the new pope will make a clean sweep.

Natural to hope—but it is unrealistic to expect the new pope to surmount all the obstacles he will face. Moreover, history teaches us that the most necessary reforms and thrilling revitalizations of the church—Vatican II, among others—bring unintended consequences that the devil (if there is such a being) is quick to exploit. *Corruptio optimi pessima*—the corruption of the best is the worst. There are deep fissures in every institution and in every human heart; if there is a devil, he would know where to find them.

In any event, by the time you read this column the Holy Spirit will have spoken and the moment will have arrived to welcome the new pope, wish him well and sympathize with his plight. What we should be looking for in the pope is not a monarch or a CEO but a profound teacher, learned in the essentials of the faith and alive to the cultural moment; not a magician who can fix all that he touches but a man of integrity; not a rock star but a man of prayer who directs our gaze to Christ rather than to himself; not a resounding success but a gospel witness. As the affable and *papabile* Timothy Dolan put it, “You look for somebody who just seems to radiate the love and the tenderness and the mercy and the truth of Jesus Christ.”

If we take the Christian story seriously, the burdens of this pope are not his alone to bear but are shared by everyone who is united with him in prayer, including the laity among Catholics (as Newman said, the church would look pretty silly without them), the rest of the Christian world and the well-wishers of other faiths. If we don't take the Christian story seriously, then I suppose it doesn't matter very much. But I prefer to think that if enough of us pray for the new pope, it will help to make his labors more fruitful, his cross lighter, his day-to-day existence less fearful than a living nightmare.