

Views from the Pews: Popes come and go

Now is probably a good time to reflect on the passing of Francis and the arrival of Leo. We will all have noted the degree of 'cut-through' into the mainstream news media, the time spent on reporting events in Rome, and the (generally) thoughtful comment. Part of this is due no doubt to the Vatican's flair for showbiz, and to our fascination with Catholic politics, but other more important forces are surely at work.

Change in Rome coincided with other world events, which were often relegated down the news cycle. Something was up.

It was probably a hunger for different styles of leadership, a hunger for agendas based on need, rather than on anger and fear. Could it be that the Gospel message is front of mind after all? We keep telling ourselves that the world is more secular, less 'religious', less interested in matters of faith. If so, how to explain the impact of these events, the profiles of Francis and of Leo, and of their messaging? It is strongly suggested here that we need different styles of leadership, more discussion of the needs of others, more words of healing and reconciliation, more service. It cannot be coincidental that both Popes are off-side with most authoritarian regimes, off-side with those who want to re-define the word 'neighbour', off-side with the powerful and the wealthy.

The lesson offered today is that leaders who themselves follow Christ – and are upfront about it – are likely to have a following, from many different corners.

We should stick to our democratic norms and values, while simultaneously admitting that leadership is legitimized not only at the ballot-box but by post-election words and actions. A Papal Conclave may seem odd, not particularly democratic (although thoroughly political). But if it produces a leader who captures world wide attention, who invites emulation of Christ, then that surely is sufficient legitimacy. Popes walk with all sorts of folk from the political spectrum, as well as with Imams, Rabbis and Archbishops. They are of, but yet distinct from, the world of power. We all need to take advantage of this opportunity, regardless of denomination. God is in the mainstream. Let us not apologize about Him, or about ourselves as followers of the Gospel. Our own Patronal Festival is fast approaching; we sit on a hill, flag flying on our pole. Now is the time.

- Richard Swarbrick