
Ancient Christians in the Modern World

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**



By the time you read this article, surely the Roman Catholic Church will have a new pope. As I write on Tuesday morning (12 March, the Feast of Gregory the Great, in the Episcopal Church), I am listening to news reports, analyses, hopes, fears, and projections about the Roman Church; the world is fascinated with the old and reverent process by which a new pope is elected.

Even Christians of other denominations are paying attention. Of course, I am quite glad to be an Episcopalian, in the Anglican Communion of Churches, where most of our bishop election processes are far more "democratically representative" than the Roman process of selecting bishops. (Furthermore, our Episcopal hierarchical structure stops locally; we are not an empire. Our bishops have no real jurisdictional authority outside their own dioceses; and even within those dioceses, our best bishops work collegially with layperson and deacons and priests.)

But we other Christians respect our dear Roman Catholic brothers and sisters; theirs is an old and revered tradition, and we really want the best for their leadership. For better and for worse, all Christians are affected by the Roman Catholic choice of pope; since non-Christians often tend to perceive all Christians in the same manner, the way any Church acts does affect all other denominations, to some degree.

However, I am particularly intrigued with the fascination of non-Christians with this Roman election system. They are legitimately curious about an event that clashes with our modern Western insistence upon open process and full transparency. The cardinals are kept to themselves, with no access to outside communication at all. Conversations occur which will probably never be written down. Ancient prayers and ceremonies and customs are repeated solemnly, customs which few non-Christians even understand.

Yes, the entire world is fascinated with that ancient system; parts of the system are quite attractive. Its solemnity is attractive, as is its sheer beauty. Surely, one would be inspired to vote honorably while inside a piece of art painted by Michelangelo! The system's obedience to tradition is also attractive, as is its insistence on not being carried away by every wind of modernity that blows into the world.

Well, I observe that many faithful American Roman Catholics do wish for change in the Roman Catholic Church. One poll (see [The New York Times, March 6, 2013, "U.S. Catholics in Poll See A Church Out of Touch"](#)) claims that a majority of American Roman Catholics longs for policy changes on such critical matters as married priests, the possibility of women priests, and especially certain birth control methods. Personally, I doubt that the Roman Catholic Church will be changing those policies soon, no matter who the next pope is; but I do pray it does!

But there is also a dangerous reason for our fascination. Every human being, whether Christian or not, carries inside us a temptation for absolutism. We are tempted to think that our world would be so much easier if everything were settled,

once and for all, with decisions that made everything perfect, forever. Absolutism is even more enticing when it is wrapped in secrecy.

Unfortunately, absolutism leads to empire, and I am wary of empire wherever it is. I am wary of imperialism, and it is an attitude that seems to come from so many quarters these days. It often comes from the places we love: from political parties who want one hundred per cent agreement with their platforms, from absolutism in general conventions, from our naive desires to make bishops emperors, from "political correctness" that can look like nonsense (read [George Will's "The Pop-Tart Terrorist" in The Washington Post, 8 March 2013](#)), from any government who thinks that perfect law will create a perfect society.

The challenge of every Church is to bring the wisdom of our ancient prayer to the challenges of our modern world. But both ancient Christianity and the modern world agree that "empire" rarely succeeds in honoring the common good. So, I pray the same for the Roman Catholic Church as I do for the Episcopal Church as I do for all Christian churches: that our leadership can follow the Holy Spirit even into modernity, and that our leadership can bless the fullness of God in the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip