

# Live from Vatican City: more rivalry and ambition?

The global media fascination with a new Pope is a strange thing. Even non-Catholics and anti-Catholics are spellbound by the spectacle beamed by satellites.

Why is that? What draws them in? Power and pagantry? Secrets and smoke signals?

Undoubtedly, Catholic stuff looks great on TV. But why does the media give its maximal attention to the Church during a conclave?

I have noticed that more and more people, even at universities, are less and less inclined to think and reflect. Their minds are already made up. Instead, their focus is on looking at life like a horse race, with many losers and few winners. No surprise the media view a conclave through the same lens.



Global Theatre  
C.S. Morrissey

As he departed the world stage, Benedict spoke of how “today’s world” is “subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith.” This allusion to the power of media technology was no lame excuse or hasty rationalization. It revealed something deep that Benedict had been thinking about for a long time – ever since the Council of Vatican II, in fact.

Benedict explained his thinking to the clergy of Rome Feb. 14: “there was the Council of the Fathers – the real Council – but there was also the Council of the media. It was almost



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A prelate holds up a booklet emblazoned with the “sede vacante” seal as cardinals gather in synod hall at the Vatican March 7 for one of several general congregation meetings ahead of the conclave.

a Council apart, and the world perceived the Council through the latter, through the media. Thus, the Council that reached the people with immediate effect was that of the media, not that of

the Fathers.”

The media, says Benedict, operate according to their own logic, because “the Council of the journalists, naturally, was not conducted within the faith,

but within the categories of today’s media, namely apart from faith, with a different hermeneutic. It was a political hermeneutic: for the media, the Council was a political struggle, a power struggle between different trends in the Church. It was obvious that the media would take the side of those who seemed to them more closely allied with their world.”

By implication, Benedict is alerting us that the papacy today still faces the same situation. Popes will be digitally assaulted with worldly expectations and be pressured to conform to a celebrity script. The inescapable media spotlight demands no less.

But the Church does not need to produce its own version of celebrities to compete with political leaders and Oscar-winners. The Church’s mission is not to generate rivals for games of power and adulation.

Leading by example, the Emeritus Pope is teaching us not to draw the wrong lesson from the media success of John Paul II’s charismatic papacy. He shows us instead where to direct our deepest attention.

There were just 16 Popes named Benedict. Even so, these few Popes stand for all the other humble Christians who have taken the name Benedict. All these Benedicts are the opposite of what the world looks for in a successful celebrity.

Take the example of Benedict of Nursia, whose precepts inspired countless monastic communities. He

knew of a better way: joining work with prayer. Our brains and bodies crave it. The Benedictine monks at Westminster Abbey in Mission, B.C., show us. “Being surrounded by the natural world makes us more reflective, more creative, sharper in our cognition. But if we’re too busy talking on the phone or sending a text, we won’t even notice that we’ve walked by a tree,” says Maria Konnikova, author of *Mastermind: How To Think Like Sherlock Holmes*.

Take also the example of the great Dominican thinker, Father Benedict Ashley, who died just before the end of February. He would have been 98 years old in May. Humbly unknown to most of the world, he was nevertheless my greatest mentor, and I know he also touched the lives of countless others with his teaching and writing.

Benedict Ashley wrote many books, but his greatest, called *The Way toward Wisdom*, came in 2006, when he was 91. Like Benedict XVI, Father Ashley knew that the highest wisdom opts out of playing society’s deluded games of gossip and meanness. It rejects the social hierarchy game, with its obsessions of rivalry.

All these Benedicts know of the rich rewards and hidden joys of a life of prayer and contemplation. Sometimes that quiet, hidden gift is the best one can offer up to a crazy world enslaved by the media’s latest fascination.

Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan criticized the media for “creating the world before which misguided Christians kneel. This strictly Luciferan product is ethereal and a highly plausible mock-up of the mystical body.”

But it is a poor substitute for the real thing, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI teaches us in absence. His act of voluntary withdrawal from the media whirlwind exhorts us instead to seek Real Presence.

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