

A Warming Glow from Rome

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By RICHARD T. NOLAN

At a time when national or international heroes are utterly nonexistent, Pope John Paul I saves the day!

As he greeted each of the cardinals so warmly, so personally as they knelt before him during enthronement ceremonies, one could imagine the Holy Father saying, "don't forget, my friend, there'll be wine and cheese tomorrow afternoon in the papal apartment!"

Of course, those who idolize the trappings, the "we's," and all the possibilities for stuffiness in the church, will be horrified by the naturalness of this man. He shines so brightly among those attending him — who, as one commentator quipped, "have a long tradition of not smiling." Surely within weeks those newspaper advertisements scarred with bold-faced proclamations will pick at the Pope for all kinds of trivia; after all, their convenient visions are, in their eyes, far more authoritative than anything the traditional See of Peter might claim!

His election was a bit irksome. I had spent over \$13 to buy "The Inner Elite: Dossiers of Papal Candidates," scrutinized news magazines and had my list. In case of a deadlock and a miracle, I stood by the telephone ready to accept. My feeling of rejection was tempered when Cardinal Felici appeared on the balcony. At least he had not been elected! His dossier was frightening, all six pages of it. The Cardinal intoned the name of Cardinal Albino Luciani. What nerve! He wasn't on my list. He rated less than a full page among the dossiers and was apparently overlooked by the news magazines.

From the moment of his first words, however, Pope John Paul has won the hearts of many, if not most, Roman Catholics and other Christians

throughout the world. He would probably be far more comfortable with a "Grandpa John Paul" than "Your Holiness." He truly radiates a grandfatherly holiness.

The observer who noted "same policies, new style" is probably correct. The new style will disappoint only the pretentious; the same policies will be more problematic. Cardinal Albino Luciani takes to the papacy his 65 years, his Italian mentality and his theological formation by Rome's Gregorian University. Though a pro-

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fessor of dogmatic theology for some years, he can be suspected of carrying with him a very Roman, rather than catholic, theological orientation. It seems probable that he will also maintain, as predicted, previous interpretations of the norms for human relations. We may look for few significant changes in such matters as birth control, women priests, clerical celibacy, divorce, etc. In fact, in some of these matters, he is very much like many bishops of the Anglican Communion and leaders of other Christian churches. A moderately conservative pope reflects the tone of leadership in

most churches.

My own stance is different. I wish as Christians we might broaden our visions of liturgy, doctrine and human relations. Clearly, outer limits must be set in all these areas; "do your own thing" has no place in the Christian community. But, a choice among options need not violate Christian community and authority.

For example, many liturgical expressions of Word and Sacrament remain boring to many of us, clergy and laypersons alike. I detest those eccle-

siastical concerts where fine pieces of music go on, on, on — reducing the congregation to a patient audience. But I would not deny them to others. Do we not need parishes that offer the same Eucharist with different aesthetic expressions?

On matters of doctrine, might we not confess Jesus as "Lord and Christ" and agree to differ within limits on the precise meanings of those words? The creeds themselves are interpreted differently by competent theologians; need all the differences be resolved in order to break bread?

With regard to human relations,

might the "Summary of the Law" — ("Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.")—suffice as the only moral absolute? If so, we might reexamine the possibility of love in lifestyles other than the very few now acceptable (celibate solitude, celibate community, nuclear family) and view more comprehensively matters of family planning, divorce, and so on.

Pope John Paul and other religious leaders will soon have to face a pivotal issue. No longer will claims of authority based on disputable biblical texts, tradition or appeals to the guidance of the Holy Spirit validate their teachings. Loving reasonableness has become for many (and eventually for most) of us the key to persuasion.

That Pope John Paul is a loving and lovable person is clear, and his persuasiveness in many, many matters will become evident. On the other hand, the extent of his reasonableness is less sure. The reality of Christian pluralism on matters of faith and morals will come hard for the mindset that insists on mathematical certainties in all of life's complex dimensions.

Of one thing I am certain. When this Pope dies and is greeted by the Lord, "Welcome, Albino!", he will know to whom the Lord is speaking.

The world is fortunate to have this Christian man prominently in our midst, regardless of our differences.

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