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Cardinal Wuerl is looking above all for a Pope with a spiritual vision

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CARDINAL WUERL

America's Cardinal Wuerl is looking for a pope with a spiritual vision who can lead the Church into the 21st century, holding up faith in Jesus Christ as the way to build a better world. He hopes the new pope will use the new media more than travel to be present to people worldwide

GERARD O'CONNELL
ROME

Cardinal Donald Wuerl, 72, is archbishop of Washington and one of the 11 cardinal electors from the United States. He is participating in a conclave for the first time and in this interview he speaks about what he sees as the main challenges facing the Church today and the qualities he is looking for in the man to be next Pope.

Has the resignation of Benedict XVI changed the nature of the papacy?

I think the resignation of the Holy Father perhaps has more changed the way people perceive the office than what might happen in the future. I think the initial shock was simply because this hasn't happened in six hundred years. I think that has now, in a way, settled; the dust has settled and people are saying yes this is something that should be able to happen, especially since Pope Benedict put it in such reasonable terms. He clearly loves the Church. He served well as Pope, and when he said I just don't have the energy to do the job as well as I know I should, I think that resonated with a lot of people. Indeed when I talked with my priests in Washington about this, they had nothing but admiration for him. But I think what has changed is the perception now among the Catholic faithful that not only is this theoretically possible but now it can be a practice in the Church.

Given this possibility of resignation, how big a factor do you think age will be in the conclave?

I think probably more important will be the perception of two things: the perception that the person has the vision to carry us into the future and, second, the perception that the person has energy to do this. But I'm not certain that I'm necessarily talking about physical stamina.

But getting back to vision, I think the person who will now fill the Chair of Peter has to carry on the vision of Blessed John Paul and of Benedict that the New Evangelization is where we have to be focused. That we are being submerged in a secularism and we are being engulfed in this vision of the world that has limited the horizon to the here and now, and we have to be able to look to the young people coming along in the future, and invite them to an experience of God. I think that has to be the overriding vision of the next pope. And I think he has to have, what I would call, a ministry of presence, but that ministry of presence today does not require travel, as it did for John Paul or even for Benedict. Today we live in a world of media, of instantaneous communication, of electronic communication, and I think the Pope has to have the vision to see this as the way to exercise the Petrine Office around the world, and the energy to devote a substantial proportion of his ministry to this virtual presence, an electronic presence. That will take energy, not necessarily physical stamina. So those would be some of the things I would look to see in the future direction of the Church.

There are always the ordinary routine things, the Pope has to also govern the Church, but I would be much more interested in his spiritual vision for the future, and his understanding of how he is going to lead the Church into the New Evangelization.

As you enter the conclave, what do you see as the main challenges facing the Church today?

I think there are three challenges. One is on the level of the academia, intellectual, elitist world, and that is to re-introduce into that discussion - and this is something that Benedict has done well - the compatibility of faith and reason, the complementarity of faith and reason. Secondly, on the pastoral level, we have to keep focused on the need, and in whatever way we do this, the need to be proclaiming the basic kerygma of the Gospel. A third is going to be the re-appraisal of how the Petrine Office is exercised, and I think that is going to require an enormous concentration on communications.

Could you unpack that last one a little: are you talking about how the Pope links with the Bishops of the world, and how he links with the Roman Curia?

The communications part, I think, is probably going to cover all of that. One of the things we have learned in the past two pontificates is that the Pope is now reaching globally to Catholic people around the world, always with the bishop when he is present, but he is now exercising the Petrine Office in a global manner, and it's not directly mediated as say Popes Paul VI or Pius XII did through encyclical letters. That has to continue in some way, but it can't continue with physical presence, it

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going to have to continue by being present electronically, by being present visually in all the ways that we are able today to communicate.



LANGUAGE: Italiano [English](#) Español

- HOME
- NEWS
- 12 **Next** NEWS
- INQUIRIES AND INTERVIEWS
- THE VATICAN
- AGENDA
- ABOUT US



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