

Despite its reputation as a stodgy organization, the Roman Catholic Church is a remarkably adaptable institution, which has allowed it to survive for over 2,000 years. This is a remarkable achievement, given how short-lived organizations tend to be. For example, in the U.S., it is quite an achievement for a firm to remain important for 100 years. I am confident no U.S. firm will remain important for 500 years, and 2,000 years is simply unimaginable.

Years ago, I read a great story told by Professor Robert Tollison and his coauthors about how leadership changes in the Church caused a change in Church policy. The authors noted that two generations ago, Catholics did not eat meat on Fridays. However, over time the College of Cardinals, an important governing body of the church and a group often called the princes of the Church, experienced a change in membership. There was a significant increase in the percentage of cardinals from countries where beef production was more important than fishing. The College of the Cardinals were now representing more people with an economic interest in beef production. The authors argue that the cardinals wanted to represent their constituents by making it easier for a Catholic to eat beef. In response to the changing preferences of the cardinals, Pope Paul VI absolved Catholics from being bound by the rule that forbid them from eating meat on Fridays, although the requirement still held during Lent.

The Catholic Church is experiencing another large change in the composition of the College of Cardinals. Pope Francis is the first non-European to be elected Pope since 741 AD when Pope Gregory III from Syria became Pope. Pope Francis has already made 60 appointments to the position of cardinal, and he has made a concerted effort to appoint non-Europeans and to appoint cardinals to countries that have never had a cardinal. In all, 47% of the cardinals, who are eligible to vote for a pope, have been appointed by Francis. His appointments have brought about an important change in the composition of this important governing body. Now, more than half of the cardinals are non-European.

On June 29, fourteen of St. Francis's nominees will become cardinals. These new nominations continue his reshaping of the College of Cardinals. As the leadership continues to change and now that it represents constituents with values that differ from the European values, I expect to see changes in church policy. These changes will probably not be limited to trivial matters, such as what you can eat on Fridays. They likely will extend to some of the social issues that the Roman Catholic Church has been grappling with. Hold on to your hat. Change is coming.

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