



Pope Francis: Making of a New History of Church Leadership

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Abstract: The self-understanding of the Church and its leadership has gone through evolutionary changes and paradigm-shifts. For Robert Bellarmine of seventeenth century the Church was a pyramid-structure with the power of the papacy supreme within the Church. His ecclesiology stressed the institutional structure of the Church where the pope was seen primarily as an administration. The challenges of the 16th century Reformation and the 18th century Enlightenment did not change the static ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. The risk of change and new beginnings was avoided and the Catholic Church remained linked to a past age and became increasingly irrelevant to the present. It was Vatican II that changed the self-understanding of the Church and attempted to make the Church relevant to the present day challenges. Imbibing the spirit and vision of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, Pope Francis began his mission of recasting the role of the papacy and, in the process, the image of the Church. Pope Francis has put into effect the practice of consultation with his fellow bishops in mapping out policies and guidelines for the Church. This quasi-synodal mode of governing the Church does not mean that that Francis abdicates his own responsibility as the final authority in the Church; it means that an informed authority has greater credibility and that decisions from the centre are made in dialogue with the periphery.

Keywords: Papacy, Self-understanding of the Church, Dicastries, Magisterium, Periphery.

Introduction

When Vatican One (1869-1870) referred to the Catholic Church, the image it drew on was of a pope exercising universal and immediate jurisdiction over each baptized person. This image was influenced by the account of the Church given by St. Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621). He elaborated an ecclesiology that saw the Church in terms of a pyramid-structure with the power of the papacy supreme within the Church. Such an ecclesiology stressed the institutional structure of the Church where the pope was seen primarily as an administrator rather than one called to exercise the Petrine Ministry.¹ Peter's role was to strengthen his brother bishops by speaking in their name, overseeing the activities of the Church, preserving the apostolic faith and inspiring the Church through his words and actions. Bellarmine's ecclesiology supported a Church that was juridically structured, and where centralized authority was exercised less as service and more as power to command obedience. Bellarmine stressed the visible aspect of the church community by comparing it with a secular state. Just as the secular state needed offices/organs to perform its manifold functions, so too the Church needed its institutional and administrative structures to function in the world.

During the papacy of Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590), a reorganized Roman Curia continued its task of providing the papacy with secretarial functions.² As head of the Vatican State, the pope ordered the affairs of the Church through the Curia so that every diocese in the world would be well administered; there would be appointments made and directives given for the successful running of the Church. However, the papacy itself was enveloped in a history that had absorbed customs and practices which gave it a settled form. For instance, the pope was expected to live in the papal apartments in the Vatican, follow protocols in dress, travel and interaction with the laity, and present himself as a head of state to the nations of the

world. Changes in the Church were seen as signs of instability and imperfection especially as the Church was considered a *societas perfecta* having within itself the necessary means to attain its goal.

The 16th century Reformation and the 18th century Enlightenment fostered a deep fear in the Church of responding to an evolving rather than a static world. This was seen very strikingly during the pontificate of Pope Pius IX that lasted 32 years.³ The lifestyle of the popes was seen to be unchanging and their teaching and governance in a fast-changing world affected the common life of the Catholic marginally. The risk of change and new beginnings was avoided but the Catholic Church remained linked to a past age and became increasingly irrelevant to the present. And then Vatican II was announced by Pope John XXIII (1881-1963) a few months after he was elected pope. When Vatican II (1962-65) happened, it was a gift and a task: a gift of the Spirit that enabled the Church to have a new self-understanding, and the challenging task of updating itself in a changing world (*aggiornamento*).

1. A New Self-understanding of the Church and Pope Francis

The new self-understanding of the Church was spelt out in the sixteen documents promulgated by the council but especially in the four constitutions: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* suggested far-reaching changes in the celebration of the liturgy; *Lumen Gentium* spoke of the Church primarily as the People of God and not as hierarchy; *Dei Verbum* saw divine revelation as a continuing action of God in dialogue with humankind, and not merely a sum of truths making up the deposit of faith; and *Gaudium et Spes* envisaged the Church as sharing hope centred in Jesus Christ with the secular world. Much was expected in the aftermath of Vatican II. Some decades later,

elected as the 266th pope on March 13, 2013 Francis began his mission of recasting the role of the papacy and, in the process, the image of the Church.

The mind of Pope Francis in his effort to recast the Church is well reflected in the following:

1. How I would like a poor Church for the poor,
2. Mercy is the Lord's most powerful message,
3. Authentic power is service,
4. Tell priests they must be shepherds who 'smell of their sheep'.⁴

(1) *How I would like a poor Church for the poor*

As pope, Francis enjoys being with people, especially the poor and neglected. He draws inspiration from them and he looks to learn from them in their life of faith. His contact with the poor led him to theologize from their concrete actions. He wrote the following in an article entitled *Criteria of Apostolic Action* in 1980:

Walking patiently and humbly with the poor, we shall learn how we can help them, after first having accepted that we receive from them. Without this slow walk with them, action in favour of the poor and oppressed would contradict our intentions and impede the poor from making their aspirations heard and acquiring for themselves the tools they need for an effective assumption of their personal and collective destiny.⁵

His compassion for the poor was very apparent already-when he was the bishop of Buenos Aires, even though he retained his convictions about what he wanted to pursue. In his life as a Jesuit superior, novice master and provincial, Francis had encouraged those in his care to reach out to and spend time with people by responding to their needs. He harboured suspicions about Liberation Theology and when appointed

provincial sought to enforce a conservative stance in living out religious life. He wanted liberation theology activists to cease their activities on behalf of the poor. His priorities were: mass, catechesis and the alleviation of poverty.⁶ To some in the province, the future pope appeared authoritarian; consultation was not something that came to him easily. To others, he was doing the right thing. The result was a division among the members of the province.

In 1971 he had become Novice Master; in 1973 Provincial; and in 1979 the Rector of its ceremony [seminary]. From 1971 to 1986 he had been the most influential figure in the [Jesuit] religious order but by the end of that period Argentina's Jesuits were deeply riven between those who loved him and those who loathed him.⁷

A major change was in store for the future pope and it took place when he was sent to Cordoba. Before that, he had led the Jesuits in Argentina for fifteen years. Cordoba gave the future pope time for deep reflection, introspection and prayer. He could look at his past, assess it with searing honesty and experience the change that God's action made in him.

He took full responsibility for his actions which caused harm, especially those that injured his Jesuit brethren: "...I made hundreds of errors. Errors and sins. It would be wrong for me to say that these days I ask forgiveness for sins and offences that I might have committed. Today I ask forgiveness for the sins and offences that I did indeed commit."⁸

After he was elected pope, Francis gave his first interview to Fr. Antonio Spadaro where he spoke of the change that had been effected in him. The interlocutor began by asking Francis: "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" and after a moment of silence, the answer came: "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner."⁹

As pope, Francis lost no time in sharing the fruits of his newfound convictions. He made the Casa Santa Marta (a guest house) his residence; he kept on using his old black shoes, carried his own brief case and made people aware that they could phone him directly. He had already requested his friends in Argentina not to spend money to attend his inauguration as the ‘Bishop of Rome’—that is how he continually referred himself in his new position—but to spend it on helping the poor. Pope Francis had assumed a new lifestyle and the universal Church began to follow suit! A series of concrete actions like washing the feet of women and the non-baptized, his meeting with and chatting with people during his outings, his refusal to leave the Vatican for summer holidays, etc., announced to the world that imitating the spirit of the man from Nazareth could rejuvenate the papacy and the Catholic Church. The head of the Roman Catholic Church found his inspiration for governing the Church from the very persons who formed the Church, the People of God.

At his first press conference after his election as pope, Francis announced the main idea that would guide the acts and events of his papacy: “How I would like a poor church for the poor,” a refrain to which he would return often.

(2) Mercy is the lord’s most powerful message

In *Misericordiae vultus*, the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis has spelt out some of his deepest convictions concerning the mercy of God.¹⁰ In its second paragraph, there is a profound consideration: “Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.” There must be a just order in the world and efforts to make justice available to all are necessary, but mercy is that which defines God best since it is unfathomable, unconditional and

eternal. While returning from the World Youth Day in Brazil, Francis said the following in an impromptu press conference:

I believe this is the time for mercy. The Church...must go down the path of mercy. It must find mercy for everyone. When the Prodigal Son returned home, his father didn't say: "But you, listen, sit down. What did you do with the money?" No, he held a party. Then, maybe, when the son wanted to talk, he talked. The Church must do the same...I believe that is a *Kairos* of mercy.¹¹

Just before the beginning of the conclave that elected Bergoglio pope, Cardinal Walter Kasper gave him a copy of his latest book *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. Seeing the title, he exclaimed: "This is the name of our God."¹² Since the time of St. John Paul II, Kasper had wanted the ban lifted on remarried Catholics receiving communion, even if their first marriage had not been annulled. Kasper was suggesting a change in pastoral practice, not a change in the Church's teaching on marriage. He was opposed by the then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Joseph Ratzinger. The CDF's view prevailed.

Pope Francis' deep concern for mercy in the different and often difficult situations of marriage inspired him to promulgate *Amoris Laetitia*, Love in the Family.¹³ To imitate God in showing mercy calls for an inclusive society according to Francis. Not only those who followed Church teaching on Christian Marriage, but also those in irregular unions, civil unions and even those cohabitating, were to be seen as part of the Church and deserved the Church's pastoral care unconditionally. Pope Francis questions applying a law to a situation without discerning the context in the light of mercy. He did not claim that what was wrong had now become right! Instead, he looked to find in each situation the merciful hand of God bringing out the positive that was present. Francis was basing himself on theological roots that had been part of authentic Catholic Tradition.¹⁴ Hence he could justifiably assert:

For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in “irregular” situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings, “sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families”. Along these same lines, the International Theological Commission has noted that “natural law could not be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves a priori on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions”.¹⁵

Moral insight is not the result of rational logic alone but of admitting in the first place that human actions and decisions are the outcome of complex factors. Pastoral concern should be exercised while taking these complex factors into account. Canon law and magisterial diktats alone are insufficient to respond to problematic situations. Pope Francis was retrieving a holistic way of relating to persons and dealing with situations that are presumed “sinful”. God’s mercy is unconditional and has no limit. The Church, as the enduring, public witness to God’s active presence in the world is called to celebrate this unconditional and limitless love of God when serving God’s people. Discernment and accompaniment should be included in pastoral care.

(3) *Authentic Power is Service*

Earlier in this article, Bellarmine’s description of the Church stressed authority as the ability to command obedience. Usually it is the magisterium of the Church that makes known official teaching which includes the setting down of directions, policies and rules by which the People of God are to be governed. The dicasteries (Congregations) in Rome had overseen formulating and sending out directives to the different dioceses in the world. Whereas the dicasteries were meant to work as the secretarial agents of the pope, they were creating and fixing norms to guide the Church, tasks that clearly belong to the bishops, the teaching church, *Ecclesia docens*.

This was already seen at the time of Vatican II. At the council, one of the charges made against the dicasteries was that they did not represent sufficiently the international character of the Church. Persons from other countries were inducted in the dicasteries in response to the charge. But the deeper malaise remained. The dicasteries were in effect overseeing the day to day running of the entire Church.

It is a moot point whether the issues taken up by the dicasteries are issues that affect the whole Church or only part of it; perhaps they affected the European Churches. How does one justify their action of sending out instructions and rulings to be followed by the entire Church as though the languages, cultures and customs were the same for whole world? Many examples can be given of dicasteries sending communications to all the dioceses in the world without awareness of different contexts due to languages, cultures and customs. For instance, the dicastery in charge of divine worship decided that many abuses were being committed in the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁶ For the Latin Church, one of those abuses was the pouring of consecrated wine from one vessel into another at communion time; yet the same practice followed by the Syro-Malabar Church did not constitute an abuse! On September 16, 2016, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CBCI) published *Directives for the Celebration of the Liturgy*.¹⁷ Frequently, in the publication, the General Instructions of the Roman Missal (GIRM) are referred to as supplying norms to be followed. Should not there have been a greater effort to indicate norms for eucharistic celebration that considered cultures and customs and usage that flow from the way of life in India?

Pope Francis has put into effect the practice of consultation with his fellow bishops in mapping out policies and guidelines for the Church. This quasi-synodal mode of governing the Church does not mean that that Francis abdicates his own

responsibility as the final authority in the Church; it means that an informed authority has greater credibility and that decisions from the centre are made in dialogue with the periphery.

Pope Francis has had to steer a path that questioned a merely doctrinal approach but he is also aware that crossing swords with the incumbents in the Vatican could produce unnecessary turmoil. In the case concerning the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in the United States, he waited for the ‘right’ moment to intervene. In April 2008, Cardinal William Levada was the CDF head. He told the nuns that the Vatican would conduct a doctrinal assessment. They were also told that some of their attitudes to women priests and homosexuality were contrary to those in the Vatican, and that they should articulate the classic Catholic position more clearly in matters of birth control and especially abortion. There seemed to be no common ground between the Vatican and the Sisters for dialogue. Worse still, Pope Francis supported the investigation against the Sisters. However, in 2014 when the final document was published, it contained the following:

Since the early days of the Catholic church in their country, women religious have courageously been in the forefront of her evangelizing mission, selflessly tending to the spiritual, moral, educational, physical and social needs of countless individuals, especially the poor and marginalized. Throughout the nation’s history, the educational apostolate of women religious in Catholic schools has fostered the personal development and nourished the faith of countless young people and helped the Church community in the US to flourish.¹⁸

In this episode, Pope Francis allowed the dicastery in question to fulfil its given task but he also saw to it that the persons who presided over the dicastery were objectively well-disposed to what the LCWR stood for.

II One can accept that the authority of the magisterium is constitutive of the Church—in so far as it indicates God’s concrete providential care guiding the Church, but must the mag-

isterium in its teaching role always appear as one commanding obedience? Teaching (*ecclesia docens*) can be communicated also by example, inspiration, emulation and evocation. When the magisterium is restricted to dealing with doctrine and its imposition on the faithful, is it really exercising itself in the spirit of the gospel? "...the Son of man came...to serve ..." (Matt 20/28) Through his actions that are self-explanatory and answers that acknowledge the complexity of life, Francis suggests a pattern of living in the world that seeks to serve one's neighbour. His image of priests muddying their shoes while caring for their people aptly describes authentic power as service.

(4) '*Tell Priests they must be Shepherds who 'smell of their Sheep'*

Over the years, the efforts to distinguish the specific aspects of priestly life from those characterizing the lay Catholic has often resulted in the ordained minister becoming distant from the very persons he is called to serve. Worse still, the culture of clericalism made out that the ordained ministers belonged more properly to the Church than did the laity. In stressing the closeness of priests to the people, Francis is asking for a simpler life style, a humbler demeanor, an attitude of learning from the poor that should characterize the ministerial priest as envisaged by Vatican II. It was with this understanding that Francis spoke about the diseases that the Curia suffered from. One can be a true shepherd only if one walks with the flock under his care. To be a pastor one must bring solace to those who are needy and celebrate the saving presence of God among the poor and suffering.

After his council of 8 cardinals had been appointed to assist the pope in his ministry, the pope asked that the norms for the Roman Curia be written anew.¹⁹ Cardinal Sean O'Malley, one of the eight, explained the pope's mind as follows:

The Curia [was] to be at the service of the universal Church and that means great efficiency, greater transparency, collaboration among the different departments, a great focus on collegiality and involvement with the bishops through the world and the local churches.²⁰

To smell like the sheep includes first consulting the people one serves and cares for. Whether in sacramental celebration, counselling, rendering aid to others or building the flock more completely into the People of God, one should start not with doctrinaire reflection but from the praxis of a believing people who are centred on Jesus Christ.²¹ In the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, the priest representing the Church must make “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish” (no. 1) of the people his own, thus establishing a deep solidarity with his flock.

2. A New History of Church Leadership

It is now time to put together the elements that contribute to a new history of Church leadership as symbolized by Pope Francis.

First, Francis has recognized that the history of the Catholic Church until the present is mostly the effect of a Top-Down movement. This movement used the deductive method where the truths of the faith contained in scripture and in the tradition of the Church (statements of Councils, papal proclamations and magisterial teaching) were the premises from which conclusions could be drawn. These conclusions were presented to the faithful as teachings of the Church. Francis has inserted dialogue into this method, dialogue with the People of God before the Church presents its teaching.

Second, contextual reflection means that a Catholic theology is constructed by conducting a dialogue between sacred scripture, Christian tradition and the context of the living community today. Each age must rethink its theology; if it does not, the Church will be repeating answers made in response to questions of an age gone by. Pope Francis has taken *aggior-*

namento seriously especially since this was one of the reasons adduced by St. Pope John XXIII for calling Vatican II.

Third, “establishment theology” tends to suppose that most, if not all, important questions concerning living a Christian life have been answered. Pope Francis is willing to address questions that many persons ask today; he is willing to concede that the Church has still to find adequate responses to the issues of the modern age. This may call for a re-examination of Church doctrine and practice. He also knows that structures in the Church may need changing so that the witness to Jesus Christ may be preserved. Introspection by the official church as well as its members will be part of such a re-examination.

Finally, Pope Francis prefers to view the Church as inclusive since *Lumen Gentium* no. 1 sees the Church as sacramentally expressing the action of God in the world. For him, it is important to recognize what God has already done in every person. One builds up relationship on this premise. This understanding calls the Church to serve the world in a new way and build a world community.

Notes

- 1 Richard McBrien (General Editor): *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, New York, 1995. Jean-M. R. Tillard “Petrine Ministry”, 995: to witness to the faith, to preserve it and hand it over with integrity, to assist fellow bishops in defending the content of faith, to coordinate the activities of the local churches, to declare solemnly the true faith of the church when required.
- 2 The next reorganization of the Curia took place with Vatican II.
- 3 Calling himself “the prisoner of the Vatican” he refused to negotiate with the Italian nationalists who wanted to include the papal states in a future united Italy.

- 4 Paul Vellely: *Pope Francis untying the Knots*, The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism, Bloomsbury Continuum, Revised and expanded, London and New York, 2015, 434.
- 5 Paul Vellely, 135.
- 6 Paul Vellely, 40.
- 7 Paul Vellely, 111.
- 8 Vallely, 84.
- 9 Vallely, 84.
- 10 April 11, 2015, given at St. Peter's, Rome.
- 11 Vallely, 184.
- 12 Vallely, 333.
- 13 St. Peter's, Rome, March 19, 2016.
- 14 That tradition includes discernment, the mystery of God, proportionality and *epikeia*.
- 15 *Amoris Laetitia*.
- 16 *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (Instruction from the offices of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Rome, on the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, 25 March 2004.)
- 17 Published by the Deputy Secretary General of the CBCI after being approved by the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI on March 6, 2016.
- 18 Vallely, 382.
- 19 Vallely, 283.
- 20 Vallely, 293.
- 21 This was clearly seen in the two sessions of the Family Synod where the pope wanted the understanding of lay persons concerning marriage to be heard.

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