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The Pope's New Curriculum

Ken Briggs | May. 29, 2013 NCR Today

Pope Francis is showing himself too savvy to outright contradict anything recent popes have said. Instead, he's taking a different page out of the Vatican II playbook that's been neglected of late, and it's putting a smile on Catholic faces.

He's become the "Constitution on the Church in the World" pope. Pope *Gaudium et Spes*, if you will. More than any other document, it roused the church out of its introspection by insisting that to be Christian meant to pursue justice in every corner of the globe. It was the leitmotif of Paul VI and thereafter was downplayed in preference to the council's other magnum opus, *Lumen Gentium*, or the Constitution on the Church, which focused on inner workings and authority. John Paul II's passion for ridding Poland of communism, his antipathy toward liberation theology and his advocacy of poor people echoed that theme, though his mission often seemed more a personal cause than related to *Gaudium et Spes*. His larger concentration was on church order.

Institutional rules and discipline have marked the papacy in recent years, exacerbating the troubles that were growing. So what could Francis do to reset the scales? The expectation would be that he tend to housekeeping and possibly amend policies that were causing so much friction. He might still, but it appears he had something else in mind.

In effect, he has chosen to emphasize another aspect of Vatican II that has been overshadowed. It's a way of looking at the church and the world through a different lens. It's a way of keeping within the boundaries of consistent tradition while showing a different face of that tradition, one that calls for Catholics to act on behalf of those who suffer from various kinds of oppression. The internal church frictions may not receive nearly as much attention as in the recent past, but the church's renewed mission under Francis is already raising hopes in unexpected hopes and lending the church a refreshing image. Going beyond words will be important, but at least the words and the sentiments are there.

It seems to me entirely possible that Francis has undergone something of a transition. He kept away from liberation decades ago when it was under attack from the Vatican, but perhaps over the years, he has been tempered by his experience at levels of church power and pomp to embrace the liberationists in ways he never has before.

In any event, he comes across as placing *Gaudium et Spes* on the top shelf while setting *Lumen Gentium* aside for now, at least. The learned American Cardinal Avery Dulles' book, *Models of the Church*, presented distinct vantage points for viewing the church in view of Vatican II. How you saw the church, he said, depended on the particular perspective from which you started. None was better than others; only orientation mattered. Francis apparently saw the results of *Lumen Gentium* papacies and, given his best instincts and disposition, chose a different vantage point.

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