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Pope Francis' challenge to clergy a welcome clarion call

Renée Schafer Horton | Oct. 1, 2013 NCR Today

Editor's note: This blog previously appeared on Renee Schafer Horton's blog,Bus Stop Jesus[1], on Sept. 22. It has been edited for style and clarity.

Months ago, I wrote about Pope Francis and the possibility of change in the church. According to last week's extensive interview [2] with various Jesuit journals, it seems that change may be here -- at least in the Vatican.

But -- and this is a huge but -- he said change will only trickle down and make a difference to we, the people of the pews, if clergy take to heart the call by Pope Francis to "... not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest protecting our mediocrity."

For any of the pope's words to matter to the regular Sunday congregation (and all those who have left that congregation), the clergy must attend to this section of the interview:

"The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. ? let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent. The ones who quit sometimes do it for reasons, that if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage."

I want desperately to believe our Catholic priests will do what the pope asks (immediately, please), but after nearly two decades reporting on the church [3] and more than three decades active in liturgy and catechesis (you name it, I've done it), I have my doubts they will.

Why? Perhaps because the most common Facebook and Twitter posts from priests since my man Francis was elevated to Peter's chair six months ago are along these lines: "Pope Francis makes me want to be a better priest." Fair enough. Nice to be inspired and all. But what I think the pope desires -- and what the pew people want -- is something far more specific. As in:

"Taking +Francis to heart and visiting sick this weekend, even though I'm not official hospital chaplain. While I'm at it, bringing nursing staff chocolates to thank them for the good they do for city. #blessthesick"

"Heard one of my parishioners gave birth. Sent card today, but next month when family is feeling pressure of newborn, I'll bring them home-cooked meal. #cookinglessonsthisweek."

"Realized in Sac of Reconciliation that I was insensitive last year with a parishioner who left and hasn't returned. +Francis inspires me to #actmyfaith so I'm calling this week to apologize and ask forgiveness. #reachingout."

"Never again, when a couple approaches my parish for marriage or someone calls from the hospital in need of a priest, will I ask 'Are you registered here?' #tonedeaftoneed #sawthelight!"

I've heard three priests over the past few months say they'd like to do what the pope asks but don't see where they'll find the time. They say the pope can do outreach because -- wait for it -- he doesn't have a parish to run. Really? One can only shake one's head and go back to the pope's admonition to clergy: "The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials." In other words, the people of the pew don't want excuses. We get enough of that from our politicians.

We've got a great pope (proof of God, this man) who actually does things like call people in need and live simply and visit prisoners and dare to say that the church should be "the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people." Yet we have parishes run by priests who cling to a "Father-knows-best" style and, worse, insist that they do not.

Priests think that because they have town halls and listening sessions and sometimes a parish council that they are not "Father knows best." But as any person of the pew will tell any priest who has the *cojones* to ask, after the town halls and the listening sessions, we all know that father will still do what father wants. (True story: Texas priest who confided how hard it was to set up parish council after numerous parishioners had recommended a certain man be appointed says: "I can't have that man on my council! He drives me crazy!")

My dear clergy, it is not enough to celebrate Mass. We appreciate it because we love the Eucharist. In fact, the Eucharist is the only reason most people of the pew don't run screaming for the door. Far too many Catholics put up with liturgies featuring mediocre to atrocious music; wandering, way-too-long homilies; condescension from the pulpit, the chancery and the bishops' conference; a complete lack of programming that fits the needs of busy families; no real discussion with or outreach to unmarried 20-somethings; and a priest who is too busy after Mass to meet with someone in distress. (Another true story: Priest says he didn't really think the person needing to see him was in "actual distress." I try to explain that if someone needs to see you, it doesn't matter if you think they're in distress; it is what that person thinks. Priest says, "Well, I'd be talking to everyone then!" Yes, and that would be the definition of your job, Father.)

These things are driving people away, including a Catholic colleague from New York who explains her frustration in a great post [4]. Don't get me -- or my New York colleague -- wrong. There are some outstanding parishes that manage to get everything right (tip of the hat here to a great parish in Encinitas [5], Calif., my husband and I visited last month) and a handful that get at least two right. But most get only one right on any given Sunday. That's just not good enough.

Many Catholics no longer practice their faith. To me, this is heartbreaking. It actually keeps me up at night. Seriously. But I don't know one priest -- and when you've written for the Catholic press for two decades, you know a lot of priests -- for whom this is truly bothersome. In fact, when the subject is broached, the priests always blame the people. They don't come to Mass because they're lazy. Or they're sinful. Or they're too picky about homilies. Or they want to complain but don't want to be a part of the solution. (That last is so ironic because, as mentioned above, the only solution will always be the one Father thinks best, even if the people disagree.)

I think something's wrong when yours truly, a lay Catholic who has more than her fair share of nits to pick with Holy Mother Church, has insomnia over the fact that the four parishes she's attended in the past 13 years are losing parishioners to Starbucks or nondenominational churches or Sunday football, and the priests are all sleeping soundly.

Pope Francis is my main man. Rocks my world and gives me more hope for the church than I've had in decades.

And I believe priests in his mold could bring people back, one by one, just like the Good Shepherd. The time -- absolutely no pun intended -- is now. May they be audacious. May they be courageous. May they channel their inner Francis and get out in the world, seeking the lost.

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