Opinion
Vatican



Pope Francis greets the faithful before celebrating Mass at the Church of St. Gelasius in Rome Feb. 25. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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There was a time in life when I wanted things done and wanted them done now. I still want things done now but over the course of the years, I discovered that, at least where the church is concerned, I was looking for action in the wrong places. As Sean Freyne, the Irish theologian and Scripture scholar, put it, "It's a mistake to think that a pope has the power to do anything." Translation: The right to reign as an autocrat, to take unilateral action about almost anything, does not come with the miter and crossed keys. Nor, for that matter, does it come with the capes and crosses of bishops.

Popes and bishops, I have come to realize, are the maintainers of the tradition of the church. When they move, it is commonly with one eye on the past — the point at which lies safe canonical territory. Only we are the real changers of the church.

It's the average layperson living out the faith in the temper of the times who shapes the future. It is the visionary teacher, the loving critic, the truth-telling prophet that moves the church from one age to another. It was those who had to negotiate the new economy who came to see fair interest on investments as the virtue of prudence rather than the sin of usury, for instance. It was those caught in abusive relationships who came to realize that divorce could be a more loving decision than a destructive family situation.

And yet, the manner in which popes and bishops move, the open ear they bring to the world, the heart they show, and the love and leadership they model can make all the difference in the tone and effectiveness of the church.

Five years ago, for instance, we moved from one style of church to another. It happened quietly but it landed in the middle of the faithful like the Book of Revelation. Gone were the images of finger-waving popes, stories of theological investigations, and the public scoldings and excommunications of people who dared to question the ongoing value of old ways.

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When Jorge Bergoglio, the newly elected Pope Francis, appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, he bowed to the people and asked for a blessing; the faithful roared their approval of a man who knew his own need for our help and direction.

When he told aristocratic bishops to "be shepherds with the smell of sheep" — to move among the people, to touch them, to serve them, to share their lives — episcopal palaces and high picket fences lost ecclesial favor. What the people wanted were bishops who would come out of their chanceries, walk with them and come to understand the difficulty of the path.

When Francis told priests to deal with abortion in confession, where all the struggles of humanity find solace and forgiveness, rather than treat it as the unforgivable sin, the church grew in understanding. When he said, "Who am I to judge" the spiritual quality of the gay community, the church became a church again. The fluidity of human nature and the great need for mercy and strength that come with life's most painful decisions became plain.

Francis, building on foundations laid by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, opened hearts and doors to Cuba, regardless of the politics of it, and with the Obama administration eased Cuba's isolation from the modern world. Francis has brought to the world's attention migrants fleeing war and oppressive economic situations; he has spoken up against slaughter in Southeast Asia and central Africa. He has said a definitive no to nuclear weapons and encouraged rethinking so-called just war.

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Clearly, Francis is an invitation to change our stance in the world. We have a new model of what the church should look like to others as well as what we ourselves can hope for from it in our own lives. We begin to see the church as a sign of the love of God rather than the specter of the wrath of God.

And yet, at the same time, some things that must change clearly have not changed in these last five years. Instead, there is smoke without fire, commissions promised but not created, questions acceptable to ask, yes, but answers still scarce.

The very recognition of a problem, the modern world assumes, is the beginning of its solution. There is promise and possibility galore. But, in too many instances, if nothing happens, more and more people, disappointed, drift away from a drifting ship.

And so the married couples who lived through abuse, through marriages more toxic than life-giving, wait for the understanding that even though married again, they deserve the right to have the spiritual support the church offers as they attempt to make more loving marriages. They wait, but the declaration of inclusion in the church does not come.

A commission on the restoration of the female diaconate is formed, but the church itself is not included in the conversation, no public reports are ever given, and a very important and long-lived part of Roman Catholic history goes silent again.



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The leviathan of child abuse, the most glaring problem facing the church, continues to raise its hoary head. It reaches across the world and even up to the pope's own household. Unless or until even bishops and cardinals are suspended until charges are resolved, the taint on the integrity of the Vatican itself will continue to undermine the sincerity of the church's effort to dispel the venom. Meanwhile, an

abuse commission itself was formed, allowed to lapse, is now formed again we're told, but all of that with little or no evidence of palpable response to the problem itself.

The call for women in official positions at higher echelons in the church is promised — but ignored. This means, of course, that the role of women has not shifted at all yet — despite their educational readiness, their life-time records of service, let alone the discipleship offered by their baptism. The effect is clear: Women have nothing to do with the theological commissions where decisions are made that affect the spiritual lives of their half of the church. But Francis says that there is nothing more that can be said about women because his predecessors have spoken.

The question is why this papacy appears to have stalled. Whether situations like this stem from Francis' own lack of commitment to them or as a result of the interminable resistance of the Curia to papal leadership is anybody's guess. But they do mark this papacy. They make for long-term distrust.

From where I stand, this papacy has made thinking possible again. It has embraced the idea that change is part of the process of living. But it has not given some major issues significant direction. In cases like this, the promise of action and the absence of results, as the French say, "flatter only to deceive." They give false hope. As a result, in the end, the absence of action is even more disappointing than it would have been if hollow promises had never been made.

St. Paul warned the church about this kind of unclear leadership centuries ago. He writes in 1 Corinthians 14:8, "If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?"

It is a warning to a papacy that came full of hope and is deeply respected for it. As the Talmud says, "Those who risk nothing, risk much more."

[Joan Chittister is a Benedictine sister of Erie, Pennsylvania.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Joan Chittister's column, From Where I Stand, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

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