Opinion



Pope Francis waves during the April 2 Easter Monday "Regina Coeli" prayer in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Tony Gentile)



by Pat Perriello

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April 2, 2018

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What can we expect from Francis after five years?

Sr. Joan Chittister makes two very important points in her article on the first five years of the Francis papacy.

Sadly, her first point is that it seems only too clear that the momentum of the Francis papacy has stalled. So many of us had such great hopes for what Pope Francis would be able to do, but there is little to show for these past five years.

There is no doubt that Francis dramatically changed the style of church governance. His humble, pastoral approach demands greater compassion, understanding and care for the poor and the migrant. Yet there is resistance even to the most Gospel-oriented actions of this pope. Even in fulfilling Jesus' command to wash the feet of one another, it was made clear by some that certain people's feet were not to be washed. We wait for divorced and remarried Catholics to be allowed to share in the sacramental life of the church, but the church remains stingy with its largesse. Are female deacons on the horizon? I doubt many would believe this to be likely.

Francis, of course has flaws. He has been tepid and uncertain on addressing women's issues in the church. He lacks a complete understanding of what needs to be done to ensure equality for women, and why that is so important for women and the church. His efforts at addressing sexual abuse issues also falter. He sometimes seems strong, and at other times his moves are confusing.

His visit to Chile is a case in point. His strong defense of his friend Bishop Juan Barros is difficult to defend. Francis had to back away, and we are forced to wonder whom he is talking to and just how isolated he may be.

Francis himself seems to have tired of the struggle. It's almost as if he feels he has gone as far as he can and is discouraged from continuing to push for change. The resistance is winning. The conservative hierarchy is unwilling to relinquish power and seems to have the wherewithal to maintain it. Why is Francis' council of eight cardinals who were to govern the church not doing more?

Sister Joan's second point is probably the most powerful but also the most difficult. We are the change, she says. "It's the average layperson living out the faith in the temper of the times who shapes the future. It is the visionary teacher … that moves

the church from one age to another."

It is a beautiful thought, but what do we do? If the church is unable to move under the direction of this charismatic pope, how will the efforts of us "pray, pay and obey" Catholics in the pews be heard and have an impact?

The only hopeful sign that I can perceive is the appointment of bishops and cardinals. Personnel changes may ultimately result in a new face for the church. Only time will tell.

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In the meantime, we need to remain true to ourselves and our understanding of the Gospel. Maybe we can take a page from the young people who are working for change in gun laws in our country. Like-minded Catholics need to find a way to connect and provide a meaningful counterweight to the anachronistic ideas that keep the church from being the powerful force for good that it can and should be in the world. There is power in numbers, but we need to find a way to have our voice heard and demand the changes that will bring the church into the 21st century.

Remember when Francis said to act and not worry about the consequences? As is often said: It is sometimes better to ask for forgiveness instead of permission.

We live in a divided country and a divided church. Many of us hoped Pope Francis could bring us all together in a return to the core Gospel message of Jesus. Yet, we are no doubt destined for more conflict. We will need the Holy Spirit to bring this church back together.

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This story appears in the **Francis at Five Years** feature series. View the full series.