Opinion
Vatican



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As my 4-year-old daughter placed her tiara on me, I had an epiphany. With her wonderful and active imagination, her younger brother and I were playing in the land of make-believe. Therefore, it was not a literal cheap plastic princess tiara that she had placed on my head. No, for me, it was an old-fashioned metallic, jewel-encrusted papal tiara. *Habemus papam* to me!

2019 has reminded us that we have two living popes in the Roman Catholic Church: Pope Francis as well as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, whose pledge of silence for his successor ended in April. But beyond these two who were duly elected at conclaves, there seem to be others — predominantly white men from the Northern Hemisphere — who are taking on the mantle of the magisterium, acting ex cathedra, on behalf of the church, including Steve Bannon and the Papal Posse at EWTN.

Accordingly, as a white male from the North who likes to pontificate, and who now has his own papal tiara, I, too, would like to join this seemingly Protestant movement within the Catholic Church where we are all a pope. And by all, I mean all men of course. (For those not sarcastically inclined, that last line was sarcasm.)

I will limit my reign to one day. After all, there may not be a mortgage on St. Peter's but there is on my house, so I'll have to get back to reality tomorrow. Here is how my day as the servant of the servants of God would go:

I'd wake up and, even before morning prayers, I'd promptly log onto Twitter, where I'd make my reign official. If I am unable to get any of the @Pontifex logins, I'll just Latinize my own to make it seems more official for the inquisitors on #CatholicTwitter.

I'd then come up with my own guiding question that would direct my actions for the day: *Will this further the kingdom of God that Jesus preached*? I'd pray that St. Drogo intercede for me to the Lord our God, as I take my first sip of coffee and begin my work in earnest.

One cannot really be pope without daily Mass, can one? So I'd go to Mass, and then I'd go out to breakfast and pay for my meal and that of the person behind me. This action sets a tone, and may provide some of the media magic Francis was able to

capture early on in his papacy.

If I were pope for more than a day, I'd go out and make an example of being of service, but as it is, time is of the essence. Issuing decrees and writing documents takes time and must begin. I'm unsure what would be a *motu proprio*, apostolic exhortation or encyclical but I'd make phone calls, meet folks face-to-face to get the language right, and then issue the statements.

First, I'd formally rescind the Doctrine of Discovery. I'd apologize on behalf of the church to indigenous peoples, and pull together a commission to figure out what just reparations might look like today for this grievous historical wrong.

Next up, a moratorium on canonizations of popes.

Then, Paragraph 64 (and relatedly 65, 66, 161) of *Redemptionis Sacramentum* will be struck and rewritten, allowing for any member of the faithful to provide a homily. We know we've gathered for Eucharist, and not for the priest. But my heavens, we've all suffered far too many bad homilies, knowing there are people among us in the pews who could be equally guided by the gifts of the Spirit to ruminate on the readings.

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Having now agitated two vocal constituencies of the church, liturgists and rad trads, I'll turn my attention to other people who could make my reign more difficult: bishops.

I would issue an encyclical compelling every bishop and diocese to make it a priority to rent out or sell their unused spaces for the benefit of the kingdom at hand. Specifically, sell or utilize properties to assist the least among us (employing the preferential option for the poor) so as to better actualize our mission and have fidelity to Matthew 25. Perhaps proceeds could pay our own workers fair and just wages and the church would provide for a minimum 16 weeks of paid leave for all new parents (biological or adoptive), being pro-family and all.

In light of the yet-to-be-resolved sexual abuse crisis, I would make it clear in the letter that I would rather every brick of every sanctuary be sold to at least attempt to repay the debts the church has incurred by our crimes and cover-ups, and thus

stop coveting our assets.

To that end, I'd call up Marie Collins, and I'd say, "It's an understatement to say you've been put through the wringer, but, please consider being the new prefect for the new Office of Safety and Integrity in the Curia. Name your budget, and name what procedures and reforms need to happen now, and they'll be in place in 90 days. We'll amend things as issues arise, but you've the knowledge, and we can — finally — start with your valued perspective and go from there. Please and thanks."

I may only have one day, but I'll still take a midmorning break to take a walk by myself. After my break, it's back to the phone lines, where I'd turn to the issue of educating Catholics and thus to Catholic schooling.

I'd ring up the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and probably Villanova University theologian Massimo Faggioli, and say, "You all have a new charge." We know that catechists have been thrown under the bus, blamed for our Catholic children and young adults not knowing the faith or leaving it. Yet many more who remain don't know much history or biology either. I see more and more Catholics questioning evolution and vaccinations; from Pius XII to John Paul II, we've affirmed evolution and have no objections to vaccinations. Still even more Catholics are painfully ignorant of world history and the church's own history.

As such, figure out a Catholic curriculum that integrates the courses of religion, science and history. I'd request an emphasis on our horrendous anti-Semitic history; *Nostra Aetate* shall be required reading.



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During my working lunch, a few more items related to Catholic schooling and our sacramental preparation are addressed. If you want to designate yourself as a Catholic school (primary through collegiate levels), your students must be able to write or recite the Beatitudes and the works of mercy. If you want to be confirmed in the Holy Roman Catholic Church, you will have to profess the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes and in the works of mercy at your confirmation. I want to emphasize the "dos" of our Lord, of our faith, because the "don'ts" seem to come more naturally.

In this place of imaginary play with my children, my son's babble might as well be Latin or Italian, for I strain to understand those languages as I do the words lacking enunciation from my 1-and-a-half-year-old. My son plays curial prelate (which in papal history isn't that far-fetched) and informs me that I haven't announced my papal name.

I respond that my new name is Pope Kurt in honor of one of my favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut. That name will ruffle feathers, as Vonnegut was a secular humanist.

Despite his not confessing the Holy Trinity, he seemed to go about life theologizing and I find much common ground with him. One quote of his in particular allows me to articulate how I wish to build the kingdom of God:

> When I, an atheist ... hear from a man about to get out of prison who has no family waiting for him, who wants to know what to do with his freedom, I tell him "Join a Church." The risk of that, of course, is that he might join the wrong one, and end up back in the cooler for blowing up an abortion clinic.

My prayer and work is for a church that won't be the wrong one. It'll be the one that employs nonviolence, that creates "extended families" for all of us as we come to see and believe the words of Jesus and one another as brother and sisters, as neighbors, meant for community, communion and companionship. And to drive the point home, every blessed person is a neighbor. E-V-E-R-Y O-N-E. Love them. That mandate is from Christ, not me. Though I concur.

After lunch, recalling that as the successor of Peter I have the keys to the kingdom, and the ability to retain or loose sins, I will declare a jubilee. Unlike the Jubilee of the Year 2000, mine would be a bit more Old Testament and I'd encourage folks to literally forgive financial debts and I'd have the church lead the way.

To stave off stress-induced weight gain from the flak I'm sure to get, I'd probably take another walk, but I'd try to do it with others.

With the power, resources, and internationality of the church, I would walk with folks who ponder better ways to dispense charity; address systemic causes of poverty, hunger and migration; pursue education (especially of girls), environmental stewardship, peaceful co-existence and anti-racism; and assure the future of religious life.

Though, in all honesty, I'd likely ruminate on what a bishop is, and what an ordained priest is, because governance of the church seems to be in shaky hands, just as impediments for some who are called to priestly vocations rest on shaky reasoning. On governance, I wonder, if bishops are to preach, teach and sanctify, why do they act as high-level bureaucrats or corporate CEOs, French cuffs and all? Maybe we need another role in the diocese so that bishops can fulfill their mandate, and others can fulfill those other legal, fiduciary and governing responsibilities.



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As dinnertime approaches, my time on the papal throne ceases, but I'll still call a synod to address these issues of ecclesial leadership. I recognize that I focused far more on governance than on pastoral matters, maintenance over mission, and this will bother me in my post-papal life.

In sum, where other anti-pope goals are to better create gladiators in the West, my papal mandate was to build the kingdom, revivifying branches on the vine of life. And I think, as playtime comes to an end, does one need to be pope to be a branch that bears fruit in this life? No, I conclude. And true to my word, I relinquish my papal tiara back to my daughter, and the governance of the church back to Francis.

There's one minor detail between those other wannabe popes and myself: Despite the best efforts of my ego, I know I'm pretending. The chair of St. Peter is not mine, nor do I lay claim to it. When I hand my daughter that tiara, I recall that my work in the vineyard is that of building up the here-and-now kingdom of God within my family, my parish and my community. As a Catholic, I understand that I am not the Holy Father, and, at present, neither is anyone else other than Jorge Bergoglio, Pope Francis.

I pray earnestly that all of us, especially those who like to pontificate, better understand this reality for the sake of Christ, his kingdom and all peoples. No matter

how many followers or fanatics you have, no matter the financing or extravagant flights of fancy, if you want to build the kingdom, blessed be the meek. Blessed be those whose swords are sharpened and fatal, ready for battle, yet remain sheathed and instead bear patiently the troublesome and love their neighbors, their enemies, their sisters and brothers in communion with (the vicar of) Christ.

I believe in one God, who is a paschal victim, not an imperial gladiator, and in only one pope at a time. *Deus vult*, am I right?

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