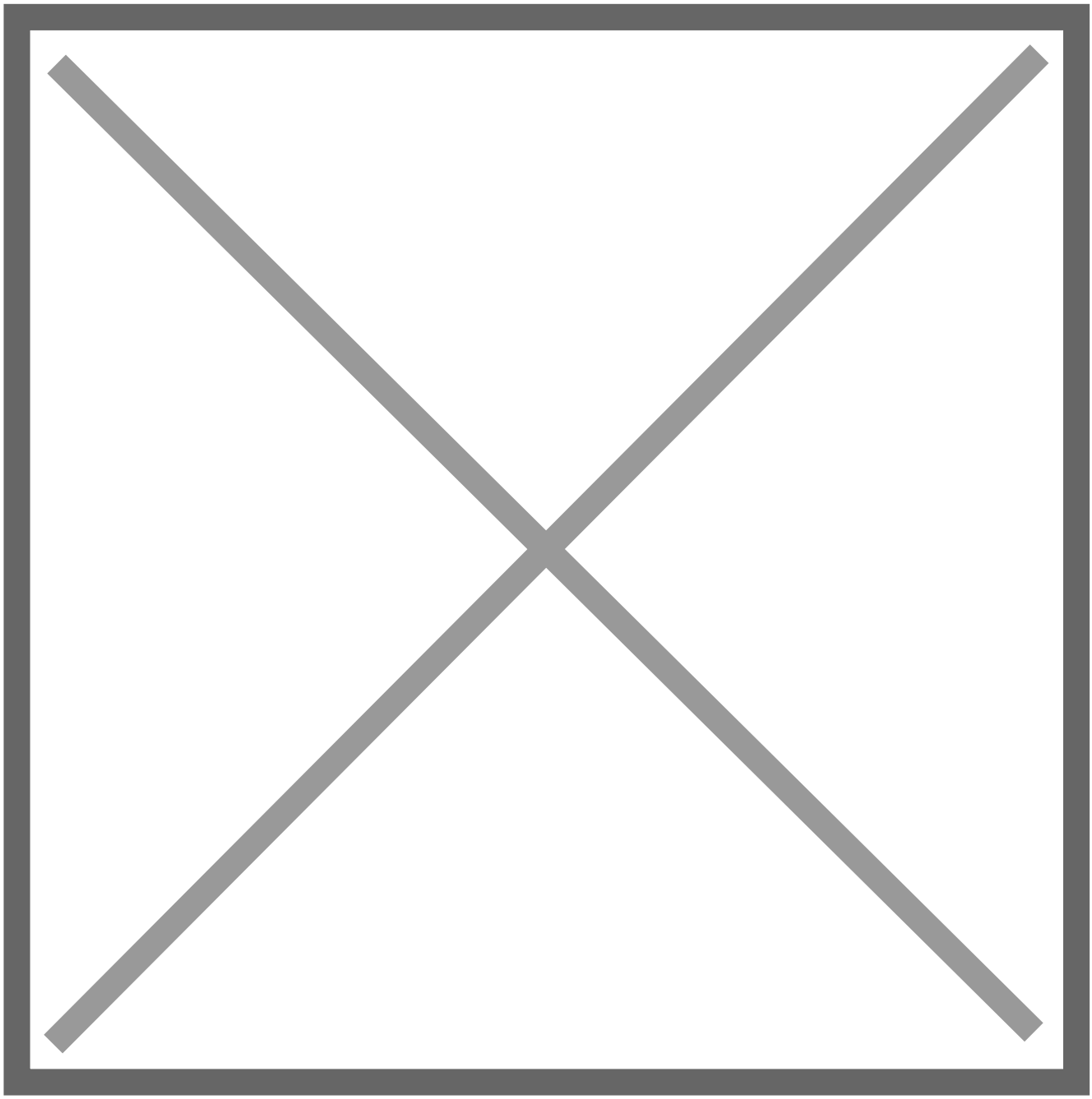
Opinion
Vatican
Editorial



Pope Francis leads an audience with participants in the Congress for the Pastoral Care of Vocations in Europe, at the Vatican June 6. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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With Pope Francis, the Catholic community is re-learning both the limits of papal power as well as the persuasive reach of papal imagination and symbol.

We've seen the latter before, especially during the reign of Pope John Paul II. He had no global mandate from any world body, but his presence and actions on the world stage contributed to historic changes in both civil and religious realms. He confronted communism in a unique way, and he forever clothed the words of *Nostra Aetate*, the document reforming the church's relationship with non-Christian religions, in unmistakable reality with bold gestures of cooperation with other world religions.

That example would have been impossible without the groundbreaking work of Vatican II, the multi-year council of the early 1960s that laid the foundation for ongoing reform. Current wisdom often holds that young Catholics have no memory of that council, are beyond its arguments and tensions and are wont to move on to a more placid Catholic reality. They may not have the same "issues" as their parents and grandparents, but make no mistake, they are living the working out of that council in ways their forebears could only have imagined.

While John Paul II established the church as a global force in a new way, he left the institution divided and at odds with itself. As the unmasking of the hierarchical culture reveals, he also left a church deeply corrupt and compromised at the highest levels.

Francis bears the burden of effecting interior change, of getting at the soft-tissue reforms that require the instincts of a pastor schooled in matters of the human heart. It is the more difficult task, by far, because it requires rethinking, at the most fundamental level, what it means to be an ordained cleric in the Roman Catholic Church and what it means to be Catholic.

If on the global stage John Paul went where popes previously had not gone, Francis is approaching reform of the interior life of the church in ways that are shocking the system. Read about a new proposed apostolic constitution on reform of the Curia. It emphasizes service and the need to include laypeople, especially women, in church governance.

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In an analysis, ecclesiologist Richard Gaillardetz writes: "In the prologue of the constitution, we already encounter what will be the overarching theme of the document, its reconception of the work of the Curia as an exercise not in domination and control but in Christian service inspired by Jesus' ministry of foot-washing."

What remains to be seen is how bishops worldwide react to the constitution as they receive copies of the proposal. But the language is that of the reformer who, it is said, in the week before he was elected pope, sealed his fate with a talk to fellow cardinals that diagnosed the church's "sickness" as rooted in a preoccupation with self-preservation.

"The evils that, over time, happen in ecclesial institutions have their root in self-referentiality and a kind of theological narcissism," he said. "In Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks. Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter, but I think about the times in which Jesus knocks from within so that we will let him come out. The self-referential church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out," he wrote.

He described two images of the church, one a church that "comes out of herself" and another, "the worldly church, living within herself, of herself, for herself." The going out — evangelization — in his construct meant going "to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery."

The irony, of course, is that requisite for such going out — this is not the evangelization of totting up newly won souls — would be a deep change not only of ruling structures in the church but also, more importantly, a change of heart of those inhabiting the structures.

Half a century out, we are working on the most profound levels of Vatican II reform. So a pope on a plane is able to say what previously would have been unthinkable: "The tradition of the church is always in movement. The tradition does not safeguard the ashes." Francis spoke those words recently in a stinging rebuke of Catholic "fundamentalists" who yearn to "safeguard the ashes." Tradition, instead, he said, "is the guarantee of the future."

He is turning on its head the idea that developed (and to an absurd degree in the United States) that equated tradition with a strange list of orthodoxies that became determinant for some segments of the church of whether an individual could be counted in or out of the community.

Francis has changed the image for the community from one of rigid boundaries and border-patrolling bishops to a community of movement and accompaniment. He is moving us from a God of transactions to a God of transformation.

The need has been long understood. In an eerie example of art preceding life, novelist Morris West in *Lazarus,* one of his papal novels, depicts a cardinal who has come to a personal reckoning with his career, having a frank conversation about the failed hierarchical approach with a pope newly open to the conversation as he is about to undergo a major heart operation.

"You and I , all of us, Curia and hierarchy alike, are the nearly perfect products of our Roman system," the cardinal tells the pope. "We never fought it. We marched with it every step of the way. We cauterized our emotions, hardened our hearts, made ourselves eunuchs for the love of God! … and somewhere along the way, very early I think, we lost the simple art of loving."

The people, he said, "want care and compassion and love and a hand to lead them out of the maze. Does yours? Does mine? I think not."

The existential threat against which West sets his main character in this 1990 novel was a radical Islamic group. The more imminent existential threat to the church today is the corruption evident in the clerical/hierarchical cultures.

Francis may not tick off all the boxes of all the interest groups in this raucous and divided community. He may make errors. It is clear, however, that he has no intention of shrinking from the difficult task of changing a deeply entrenched culture.

He has allowed the community to entertain disturbing, if fundamental, questions. What is legitimate tradition? What of the tradition gives nourishment? What are the ashes we should leave behind? Fiction, perhaps, anticipated the big questions. It doesn't hold the answers.

The illness, acquired over centuries, is not easily cured. It is encouraging to see Francis commencing the work and inviting the rest of us to join.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 14-27, 2019** print issue under the headline: Francis treats church's internal 'sickness'.