Opinion
Vatican
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Pope Francis poses with Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron, vice president, and Fr. Michael Fuller, interim general secretary, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Oct. 11. The conference leaders meet the pope each October and visit Vatican congregations before the U.S. bishops' general meeting in November. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Michael Sean Winters

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December 29, 2021
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The life of the Catholic Church in this country in 2021 was characterized by an obvious, flailing culture war fit and evidence the pope is more and more determined to press forward with the reception of Vatican II in ways that will likely affect the U.S. church in profound ways.

The effort by the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to pick a fight with the nation's second Catholic president was the dominant story of the year. NCR's editors named Archbishop José Gomez its Catholic Newsmaker of the Year because of his role in the bishops' conference's catastrophically narrow focus on President Joe Biden's support for legal abortion, and consequent failure to recognize the unique opportunity presented by having a president who attends Mass with a frequency fewer and fewer Catholics display, and who has articulated the importance Catholic social teaching has had on his political views.

The drawn-out squabble about how to frame a document about "eucharistic coherence" showed a conference that was torn between the lousy theology of the culture warriors who think Biden and other pro-choice politicians should be denied Communion and the otherwise universal practice of the church that distinguishes between lawmaking about an evil action and the performance of the evil action itself.

Part of the problem with the debate was a function of the fact that the bishops' June meeting was virtual and the kind of dialogue needed to forge a consensus was therefore impossible. But only part. The other main cause of this debate was that the bishops had elected Archbishop Joseph Naumann to lead the Committee on Pro-Life Activities four years ago, and he used that perch to push for this strategy. When the Vatican intervened, making it clear such a strategy was impossible, the bishops

realized in the summer what they should have realized all along: That they needed an off-ramp from this misbegotten approach.

The compromise was a text that is not even technically a teaching document because the conference leadership announced it would not be sent to the Holy See for the canonical approbation necessary for such documents to become binding under the terms of canon law, and specifically St. Pope John Paul II's teaching in *Apostolos Suos* (Paragraph 22). They have gussied up the document with a proposed eucharistic revival which is not a horrible idea in itself. But when they announced the revival would culminate with a national eucharistic congress costing an estimated $28 million, jaws dropped on both sides of the Atlantic.

"Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing," says Macbeth. But that is not quite right. The sound and fury of the bishops' debacle over Biden — among other items, especially liturgy — signified how out of touch the U.S. bishops' conference was with their people and with the direction the pope is indicating. There remains acute resistance to this pope, and it is more and more evident that such resistance is actually rooted in a deeper opposition to the Second Vatican Council.

President Joe Biden walks into Holy Trinity Catholic Church to attend Mass Feb. 20 in Washing

President Joe Biden walks into Holy Trinity Catholic Church to attend Mass Feb. 20 in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Ken Cedeno)

Across the waves, as the Vatican emerged from the pandemic shutdowns, some conservative commentators were already speculating — I had almost written fantasizing — about the end of the Bergoglio pontificate. Pope Francis turned 85 this year, the same age at which his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, resigned the papacy. What is more, Francis had major surgery this past summer. Those who are close to him, however, say he has no intention of stepping aside and is as fit as ever.

Francis certainly is as determined as ever. He began the year by sacking Cardinal Robert Sarah, with whom he had butted heads, from his post as prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments. Before naming a new prefect, the pope ordered a visitation of the congregation, something he repeated later in the year with the Congregation for Clergy and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. In the past, Vatican dicasteries investigated others! Now the pope was using the method to bring fresh perspectives on the running of these often staid bureaucracies.

Cardinal Robert Sarah, former head of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacramer

Cardinal Robert Sarah, former head of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, is pictured in a file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The removal from office and trial of Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu was another huge sign that Francis was not going to allow prelates to avoid accountability for their decisions. For centuries, a red, watered-silk zucchetto was a get-out-of-jail-free card in the Vatican, no matter the wrongdoing. Not anymore.

In July, Francis issued *Traditionis Custodes*, which revoked some of the permissions his predecessor had granted for celebrating the Tridentine rite of the Mass. He made it clear that an ideological movement had abused the concessions that had been granted. Some used the celebration of the old rite to mount opposition to the Second Vatican Council in its entirety, and specifically the liturgical reforms that not only flowed from the council but which had helped lay the groundwork for the council.

Then, to resolve some questions bishops had about implementing *Traditionis Custodes*, the Holy Father approved responses from the Congregation for Divine Worship that made it clear: Attachment to the old rite could be tolerated, but not promoted. In the U.S., where some conservatives have used the internet to make a great deal of noise about the traditional rite, the attacks on the pope were incessant. As I observed last summer, the critics proved Francis right in discerning the old rite was being abused in ways that undermined the bonds of Communion.

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Francis is inviting us to continue the reception of Vatican II. Some people thought that task had been accomplished with the publication of the official catechism, or with the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law and the body of papal teaching that was issued by John Paul II. But it takes a century to receive a council, and Francis has been shaped by his experience of the post-conciliar church in Latin America, which witnessed the most fecund theological developments and from which emerged the deepest ecclesial expression of Vatican II's call for a *ressourcement*, a return to the ideas and impulses of the early church. Where John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI saw that call as a theological one, Francis saw it as a

more primordial, and pastoral, invitation to place the poor and marginalized at the center of the church's concern.

Some in the U.S. church are resisting the pope's invitation, including a significant percentage of the hierarchy. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, in a recent interview, noted the opposition to Francis coming from EWTN, the conservative Catholic media conglomerate. "The Holy Father himself has commented on the situation of the EWTN television (large American Catholic network), where many times the commentators are very critical of the Holy Father, at least of his ideas," said O'Malley.

In the past several decades, the Catholic Church in this country has lurched to the right, among both the laity and the clergy. They applauded both John Paul II and Benedict insofar as they perceived those two popes to be rolling back the reforms of Vatican II. (In most respects, this perception was incorrect.) With Francis, there is no doubt that he is encouraging the church to move forward, and that he is not the least bit intimidated by the hecklers on the right. This has spawned a schismatic tendency that has been evident for several years.

The pandemic caused all of us to view the world differently, and our wonderful Holy Father has emerged from lockdown ready to move boldly forward. 2021 saw the emergence of the first post-pandemic signs of his stirring the pot anew. Next week, we will look at how the pope's goals, and the resistance they engender in the U.S., will shape the year ahead.