Opinion
Vatican
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Pope Francis leads a consistory for the creation of 20 new cardinals in St. Peter's Basilica Aug. 27 at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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While in Rome this week, I spoke with a number of visiting cardinals and curial officials. All agreed that speculation that Pope Francis' tenure is coming to its end is misplaced. But there was a sense that the papacy has entered a new phase in which the Holy Father and the Roman Curia are looking to consolidate the reforms.

The consolidation is focused on the central, ecclesial themes of the pontificate: discernment, encounter, accompaniment, emphasizing the mercy and tenderness of God, the revival of pastoral theology, synodality, how to care for creation, and how to engage, rather than confront, secularization. These themes are taking root, and even those cardinals and bishops who were once skeptical are embracing the pope's ideas. One cardinal who in 2015 gave what a synod father said was "a finger-wagging speech" to the pope, telling him he couldn't do what he thought he could do regarding Communion for the divorced and remarried, this time gave a speech commending the pope and endorsing his reforms of the Roman Curia.

The consolidation of themes is not like the consolidation of gains a general might undertake on the battlefield, halting an advance so that the rest of the army can come up, reestablishing supply routes and taking measures to squash any counterattack. No, this consolidation is more like the flavors of a stew melding together in the course of a long, slow simmer, each flavor still distinct but improved by encountering the other flavors.

In conversations with people in different roles, the most consistently expressed opinion was that synodality was changing the way the church is, not just the way it functions, including what it means to be a pastor and an evangelizer. A bishop is a teacher of the flock, for example, but synodality reminds him in concrete ways that the Spirit of God is already at work in the lives of his flock. A bishop does not drop out of the sky with all the answers and if he thinks he can, his ministry will be limited, even crippled, and pedantic. The diocese may become an extension of his vision, and the people may be obedient, but the diocese will not be alive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Master chose 12 apostles, not one, so the church

has never been a univocal thing.

Similarly, cultivating discernment in the life of the church takes more work than simply memorizing the catechism. A rote faith may be real, but it will not be well suited to evangelization. It will only be capable of apologetics. There is a place for apologetics, to be sure, but unless pastoral leaders distinguish apologetics from evangelization, we will continue to drive away five young people for every one we attract. Reducing the faith to a set of propositions is very Kantian. For a sliver of the ambient population, such a reduction works, but for millions of other people, it is the tenderness of God, not the theses about God, that attract and stir the heart. Here it is Francis, not his critics, who is most faithful to the *ressourcement*, or return to the Patristic sources and Scripture that characterized Vatican II.

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The Spirit of God is at work not only in the lives of the faithful, but beyond the walls of the church as well. This is one of the Holy Father's most provocative and important themes, one he touched on in his address to the bishops, clergy and religious of Quebec. There, building on quotes from Pope Paul VI, he said:

> *Saint Paul VI distinguished secularization from* secularism*, a concept of life that totally separates a link with the Creator, so that God becomes "superfluous and an encumbrance", and generates subtle and diverse "new forms of atheism": "consumer society, the pursuit of pleasure set up as the supreme value, a desire for power and domination, and discrimination of every kind" (ibid). As Church, and above all as shepherds of God's People, as consecrated men and women, seminarians and pastoral workers, it is up to us to make these distinctions, to make this discernment. If we yield to the negative view and judge matters superficially, we risk sending the wrong message, as though the criticism of secularization masks on our part the nostalgia for a sacralized world, a bygone society in which the Church and her ministers had greater power*

and social relevance.

Instead of wringing our hands about the secularization of the ambient culture, a process that has been ongoing for centuries, Pope Francis invites us to accompany those outside the church, mindful that the Spirit is at work in their lives too, that our Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation demands we stipulate that God is at work in their lives.

That speech in Quebec is one to read again and again if you want to understand Pope Francis and how his Christocentric vision is so rooted in the teachings of Vatican II.

What most surprised me about this visit to Rome was the cross-pollination among the themes of this pontificate. Officials who have been hard at work implementing the integral ecological vision of *Laudato Si*' talk about the importance of synodality to their work. Curial officials who are coordinating the synodal process talk about the importance of *Laudato Si*' and its commitment to the idea that everything is related.

It is ironic in a sad way that so many U.S. Catholics, and so many Catholic institutions of higher learning in the U.S., fail to see these connections or engage this cross-pollination. Ideologues always abhor synthesis and resist cross-pollination. Academics need to specialize to get published, focusing on ever narrower points of interest.

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But a secular, non-Catholic school, the University of Louisville, launched in May a "New Vision of Health" downtown campus as part of its Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute, and the organizers of that endeavor seem to have grasped what Pope Francis and the Curia grasp: Everything is related and if we do not break out of our silos, our culture and society will never meet the challenges we face. Science, justice, encounter, charity, faith all have a role to play in coping with the mess we moderns have made.

The picture of what a synodal church will look like, which was somewhat unknown and even vague when the Holy Father began placing emphasis on synods at the start of his papacy, is being filled in. This week, he added an element that has been missing since 2015, getting all the cardinals together so that they can get to know

each other because they one day have to enter into the conclave that will choose Francis' successor.

Critics of this papacy, however, shouldn't count on that conclave happening anytime soon. The pope seems to have made peace with his physical infirmities and doesn't appear to be going anywhere. What is more, the reforms he has begun are likely to be pursued by the next pope and the pope after that.

Francis' synodal commitment is not only changing the papacy and the Curia, although it is doing that. It is changing the church. The windows opened at Vatican II are letting in fresh breezes. There is excitement again in the ancient center of the Catholic faith as new ecclesial approaches spread the good word to a new generation of Christians and non-Christians: The cloth at the temple has been rent from top to bottom and the tomb of the crucified is empty.

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