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Cardinal George's plan to evangelize America

by John L. Allen Jr.



Cardinal Francis George (CNS)

Chicago's George says both liberals and conservatives focus too much on bishops, not enough on Christ

Rome

Historically, American cardinals have rarely been preoccupied with the intellectual life. By reputation, they're known more as pragmatists — bricks-and-mortar men, or pastors, or political powerbrokers — as opposed to the European model of the theologian-bishop. Chicago's Cardinal Francis George, however, has long been an exception, and his new book *The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion and Culture* (Crossroad) offers a classic illustration of the point.

George, who is also the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is in Rome this week for meetings between conference leaders and Vatican officials. While in town, he's also presenting his book at the Lateran University.

The Difference God Makes lays out a vision for the evangelization of contemporary American culture,

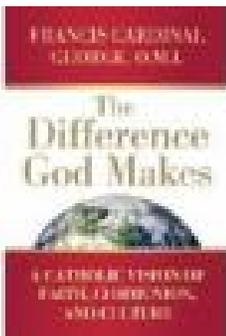
and it covers an awful lot of ground, from the fine points of liturgical practice to reflections on Catholic/Jewish and Catholic/Muslim dialogue. Perhaps the most intriguing thread running through the book, however, is George's critique of both liberal and conservative Catholicism, especially as those groups have developed in the United States since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

In essence, George argues that liberals too often function as "chaplains of the status quo," taking their cues from the prevailing secular mindset, while conservatives often end up in a sectarian dead-end, clinging to a narrow and triumphalistic version of Catholic identity sealed off from the surrounding culture.

In fact, George argues that while liberals and conservatives may think of themselves as having little in common, in truth they're two peas in the same intellectual pod. Both, he argues, share an implied ecclesiology that George traces to the 15th century Jesuit thinker St. Robert Bellarmine, who styled the church as a "visible society" comparable to the Republic of Venice. Both liberals and conservatives, George says, focus far too much on the bishops' how much power they have, and the ways in which they exercise it' and not nearly enough on Christ.

Instead, George argues for what he calls "simply Catholicism," meaning a clear sense of Catholic identity that's nevertheless open to the world. As examples, he points to Mother Teresa, the origins of the Catholic Worker movement, and the Community of Sant'Egidio' all, he says, share a "simply Catholic" concern for prayer and serving the poor.

George sat down on Tuesday afternoon for an interview about his book at the North American College. The following is a transcript of that conversation.



Why this book now?

I don't think you can tie it to a particular event. I've been talking around these issues for a long time, and there was a lot of material to be worked through again. I had a lot of help from my friends, who suggested that this is the time to publish a book and bring a lot of these points together. That's along with my long-standing conviction about the importance of relations as identity markers, and the difficulty of making that argument in a very individualistic culture. I thought, well, let's try it in book form, rather than just the occasional criticism here or there. That's the sustaining element of the book' it's all about relationships.

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There are two things with which we [as Americans and as American Catholics] have a hard time: relationships, and seeing the whole thing. We're very good at individual choices, which often separate us, and we're very good at specializations, which also separate us. If there are lacunae in the culture that is ours, which we all have to love, it's a lack of appreciation for relationships that you can't un-choose and that are constitutive of your identity, and also this ability to see the whole thing, to see it as global, to get

outside the national parameters that define how we look at everything, including the church.

This isn't your farewell message as president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops?

No, it had nothing to do with that. I think I would have published it whether I'd been president of the conference or not. Anyway, I've still got a year and a couple months to go.

One of your central points is that faith and culture are always in tension, because they are both normative systems. In your view, what's the defining tension between faith and culture in the United States today?

Fundamentally, I'd go back to what I just said: individualism versus a communitarian ethos, and national parochialism versus a genuinely global or universal communion. Those are cultural realities, so they're not just events or problems on the surface.

After that, where would I think the tensions lie? Well, I think one is the tendency to capture the church in national terms, and to see everything in terms of our political realities, [meaning] liberal and conservative. Those become the final terms of analysis, so that the church's voice can't be heard. The church is strangled by putting its voice into a system of communication that doesn't understand her, and doesn't want to understand her.

Are you talking about the press?

The whole thing, with the press as a case in point. But universities, for example, are also culture-forming institutions. The political system is too, especially now, because its terms are becoming constitutive of our experience everywhere. In other words, the courts become the place where tensions are worked out which should be settled in other forums, if there were available, but they're not. Thus the terms of the political system become determinative for every area of human experience ? marriage, the church, the family, sports, and so on.

?Political? in the sense that all those areas are seen as a contest among competing interests?

I mean that the forum for working out competing interests is uniquely political. It's the only forum available, along with the media. That makes us very legalistic, as I say in the book. Today, you need a lawyer to accompany you at every step of your life, practically. Nothing is done without a lawyer, so we have lawyers in courts, lawyers in the legislature, lawyers in private practice, in corporations, and so on. If you're not a lawyer, you're hardly part of public life anymore.

On that subject, you write that for modern American culture, everything is tolerated but nothing is forgiven, while for Christianity it's exactly the reverse ? many things aren't tolerated, but everything can be forgiven. Would you see the explosion of legalism as the index of a culture that doesn't know how to forgive?

That's right. Punishment has to be legal, and it has to be permanent.

You wade back into a debate you set off in 1998, when you defined liberal Catholicism as an ?exhausted project.? Among other things, you write that while liberals and conservatives often see themselves as opposites, both share an implied ecclesiology that comes from St. Robert Bellarmine, defining the church as a visible society. Can you explain that?

For both of them, bishops take on an importance that's disproportionate. Liberals and conservatives both

define themselves vis-à-vis authority.

Broadly speaking, liberals want you to have less of it, and conservatives want you to use it more.

Liberals are critical of [authority], although they'll use it when they're in power. Conservatives would tend to be less critical, but equally dependent upon it.

Consequently, when you get into the church, you get the conservatives unhappy because bishops aren't using power the way they're supposed to, the way they want them to. You get liberals who are unhappy because [the bishops] have any power at all. Both of them are defining themselves vis-à-vis the bishops rather than vis-à-vis Christ, who uses the bishops to govern the church. It's not a Christ-centered church, as it's supposed to be, it's a bishop-centered church.

Do the bishops bear part of the responsibility for that?

Sure, yes! That's what we're trying to work through now in the conference, I think. What is the bishop's role, particularly in governance? Of course, to some extent the bishops are central to Catholic communion, in the sense that Ignatius of Antioch says "that nothing is done apart from the bishop. But, they don't control the whole thing. They don't in the Code of Canon Law, they don't in Ignatius of Antioch.

How can [the bishops] be related without controlling everything? This is what Americans don't see, that you can be related even if you don't control. Liberals say you have to be independent, because to be related is to be controlled. Conservatives say that because you are related, you must be in control, and if you're not in control there's something wrong. No, it's a relationship, and not every relationship is a controlling one. The relationship is a real one, and there are different ways of influencing it without controlling it.

Is there an example of what a relational model of leadership would look like?

It shifts as you go through different eras. Bishops take on the aura of leadership that is proper to the societies of their time. As the Roman empire was collapsing, they stepped into the role of diocesan leaders, since the empire was organized into dioceses. They later stepped into the feudal lords' roles, since those were the roles that were visible at that point in time. They stepped into business roles when business leaders became the paradigm for leaders in civil society. We take on the trappings of the era. Paul VI trimmed away a lot of those trappings to bring bishops back to their role as successors of the apostles, and he did it in a very visible way, changing the insignia and all the rest. The church periodically has done that. It takes a while for bishops sometime to rethink their role.

You asked if bishops are responsible for the kind of disdain, or contempt, in which bishops are sometimes held by both left and right, for different reasons. The Second Vatican Council said we have to present the church to the world, and the truth of the gospel, and it said that you don't have to worry about people who don't believe. [The idea was that] this is so beautiful that they will come along and accept it, but that's not true. You have people who weren't catechized "not because they weren't told the truth, but because they weren't told "this is not the truth, and here's why." That's why I write about putting apologetics back into catechesis.

The bishops did that same thing for a while. They explained the documents of the council, they talked about the beautiful vision of a united world coming out of the council. They didn't pay attention to the fact that a lot of people, in order to understand, have to know not only the truth, but they have to know what's false. Now, the catechetical problem has been attended to, at least in theory, at our level "whether

or not it's the same at the level of teaching, I don't know.

There's something comparable that's happened on the governmental level. The council was the time for mercy, not justice, the time for persuasion and not coercion. When they redid the Code of Canon Law, it was assumed that if you just show the good, it will be so beautiful that everybody will follow. They didn't worry very much about what happens with people who don't, who are still caught in original sin. You not only have to say "this is good," you also have to say, "this is bad, and if you do it here are the consequences." Well, the consequences are minimal in the new Code. That's why it's a difficult document to use to govern, which became clear in the sex abuse crisis. We had to change the Code. Now they're looking at that, looking precisely at the penal sections of the Code, to see if they're adequate instruments of government. We have to do the same thing: We have to say that here's the good and here's the bad, and Catholics don't do the bad. When they do, of course, they're forgiven, but nonetheless they're told it's bad.

To play the Devil's advocate, if your diagnosis is that we have a culture that's overly legalistic, is tinkering with the Code the best response?

That's a good question in itself, except that we have to govern by the Code. You need an adequate instrument of governing, and you need law as part of governing. The church is a sort of civil society, even if it's not primarily that. You have to do it, or else we're struck again without the means to govern.

We have to govern by the Code, which is itself a contrarian sense of what the church is supposed to be in a Protestant culture. Luther burned the Code. Once you do away with Holy Orders, well then the visible government goes over to the Prince, and the church becomes a spiritual club. The teaching part of it goes over to the professor. The bishops are pastors but they're not teachers and they don't govern. Worship goes over to the laity. That's the unraveling of the church, once you do away with the sacrament of Holy Orders. That was the primary challenge of the Reformation - it wasn't the nature of faith, it was the nature of church governance, and therefore Holy Orders. All the Protestant churches did away with Holy Orders.

We are a Protestant culture, and even Catholics are influenced by that sense of what the church should be. "Why do you need a Code of Canon Law?" I get that question very often. When I make reference to the Code, they say, "You shouldn't have a Code." It's the same thing that the victims' associations were saying, just hand it over to the civil authorities. Of course, we do, but in the meantime we also have to take care of it internally, and that remains a contested area. Now, for other reasons sometimes they're saying that after we hand it over to the civil authority we're still responsible. But, we have to wait for the civil authority to act in every case.

In general terms, you sketch three options for living as a Catholic in contemporary American culture: liberal Catholicism, conservative Catholicism, and "simply Catholicism."

Yes, and the thing I meant to say was that I don't have in mind "liberal Catholicism" politically. That's a misunderstanding. Everything today is understood in terms of politics, but that isn't what [Cardinal John Henry] Newman was talking about. It's "liberalism" in the sense of what the pope means by "relativism."

Your notion of "simple Catholicism" is different from a meeting in the middle between liberals and conservatives?

It's completely different. It doesn't worry about that. In a certain sense, the church was that, at least the church in which I grew up in Chicago, before the council. It was very sure of its own identity, it formed us in that, and then it prepared us to go out and transform the world.

Yet you're not nostalgic for the pre-conciliar church?

Well, no! Not at all. I think the liturgical renewal, for example, is a wonderful thing. I think also the sense of governance in the church, how pastors govern united to their people through councils at all levels ? all of those things are absolutely necessary. I think the theology of ordained priesthood was clarified in the council. It isn't just vis-à-vis power to celebrate the Mass and to transubstantiate. Rather, you have that power over the sacramental body because you have the authority to govern the mystical body. So, you put the two together in ways they weren't together before. Pastoring was practical, and power was given for sacraments. Now they're held together in the headship of Christ, in our relationship to the church. There are all kinds of theological insights, such as the ecclesiology of communion ? my whole book is about that, at least the way I read the ecclesiology of the council. There were some tremendously good breakthroughs in theology itself, not just in practice.

If I'm nostalgic for something that happened before, it's not because it was marked by what people call the "pre-conciliar church." It's because in some ways the Chicago church I grew up in anticipated the council.

The sociological reality [after the council] was good in some ways, despite the almost internal dissolution that conservatives decry, and rightly so. That was not anticipated from the council, and maybe that's where we can say that the pastoral implementation of the council was inadequate. It wasn't meant to dissolve the church.

So you're not dreaming of a church that has passed us by?

Even if I were, it wouldn't make any difference. Life goes on.

You describe being "simply Catholic" as "a way of life bound up with being a disciple of Christ in his church." Where do you see that way of life most clearly today?

I think family life is always the paradigm for sanctification and the school of love that's inspired by the gospel. It's where we learn to put other people first, for the first time. John Paul II was convinced that it [discipleship] was in Mother Teresa. Not just her sisters, but people inspired by her ? that this was how the church was to bind up the wounds of a divided world.

It's a good question, because bishops are always looking for signs of life. Sometimes it's an individual, people who are paradigmatic for understanding what the council was about. You see people struggling ? doctors, lawyers, business people. They're good people, and they're shaped by the faith. Politicians, too, although I'm not sure I would point to any one person, because that's always dangerous. Politicians change, as they have to change in order to stay elected. Actors, lawyers ? there are some really exemplary judges and lawyers I've come across. They take it seriously, and they recognize the importance of the profession.

You referred earlier to the Catholic Worker movement. Would that be an example?

I'm not sure about it today, but in the 1950s when I first came upon it, it was clear that they were struggling to be simply Catholic ? maybe in a way that led them into a sectarian perspective. But if you go back, you see them struggling with the gospel reduced to its essence ... too much, maybe, to take proper account of all the history of the church, which is also providential, but nonetheless it called us back to something. If you look at the lay leaders and even the clerical leaders, people who were children or in high school in the 1950s, that movement has had enormous influence, more than most people think. They

don't recognize it, but it has. There's also a lot of coincidence between the Catholic Worker movement and Mother Teresa.

Looking at the American landscape, what do you think the sociological footprint is of liberal Catholicism versus conservative Catholicism?

I think it [liberal Catholicism] has the larger footprint, because we're a popularly liberal culture. Catholics are part of that. Even our conservatives are liberal, by European standards. We don't have any group that looks like Tradition, Family and Property. They don't exist. We go back to a liberal age, we were founded as a liberal country, and both today's liberals and conservatives take their meaning from that. The church does too. Catholicism in the United States is liberal in its basic way of seeing things.

What about the 'simply Catholic' group? What percentage at the grassroots would that describe?

That's a good question that I can't answer, because I don't know numbers. If you go back and think about the different movements that have defined the church, I would say that something like the Catholic Worker Movement was 'simply Catholic' at its inception. It very carefully removed itself from the whole liberal/conservative argument, and tried to go back to simple Catholicism and its basis in the gospel itself.

What about 'simple Catholicism' in an unarticulated, unreflective form? As you move about in parishes, do you get the sense that this is where most people are at? As you know, the hypothesis is sometimes advanced that the left/right polarization is mostly a phenomenon of the chattering classes in the church.

There's an element of truth to that. You see it in the lives of ordinary Catholics who just take for granted that we go to Mass, we say the rosary, without thinking very much about it. We contribute to Catholic charities and we take care of our neighbor in very spontaneous ways. You see it in family life a lot. Sometimes it's very intentional, trying to take out the televisions and so on, but sometimes they're just living as Americans like everybody else, but there's something underneath it that keeps them centered and keeps them related. They're aware of that, they don't want to break relationship with their pastor or with their bishop or with their cousin who doesn't like them. There's a sense of forgiveness and peace that pervades their life.

It's bolstered by Catholic practices, which are fewer now after the council. That's unfortunate, and I think I'm going to write something about that at some point, about restoring a Catholic way of life that would be marked by certain practices that would instill attitudes. They would not keep us above the fray, because we're still in it, but it would be a center within [the fray] that would permit people to keep their balance and be neither liberal nor conservative. I think you see it with people who don't just want to use the church to advance this issue or that issue.

You see people struggle, for example, with the fact that there's no political party that really does express who we are, so they'll go one way in one election and one way in another. They will choose to participate in one thing and not in another. If you ask them why they're making that choice, more than likely they'll say, 'Because we're Catholic.' You can see it. I see it going around.

Another hypothesis is that the left/right polarization is the product of a particular generation's experience (meaning the post-Vatican II generation), and that there's a new generation coming on the scene which doesn't carry that baggage.

I think that's true. The problem is, what do they carry? I'm not sure they carry 'simply Catholicism.' They carry the culture strongly. A lot of them carry it in a way that leaves them unsatisfied, but we often

haven't been very successful in reaching that generation. Sometimes when they do get it, and they grasp for the symbols of identity, for the prior generation that looks conservative.

Conservatives will often point to that hunger for identity among younger Catholics and say, "Look, we're winning!"

But I don't think that's the right way to see it. When [younger Catholics] use those symbols, they don't bring the history in the same way, they just use the symbols as markers. They don't know how those symbols were occasionally used to suppress in the past. You have to ask them, "What does it mean to you?" Usually you'll get something that's quite personal, something that falls outside of the liberal/conservative framework.

You said that you'd like to write more about the conservative Catholic position. What would you like to say?

What I'd say is that there are people who use the symbols [of the faith] to be so restrictive that we become a sect. If the liberals disappear into the world and become chaplains of the status quo, taking their agenda from the world, the conservatives risk isolating themselves. The council says you can't do that. The church says you can't do that, Christ says you can't do that. They become trapped in a kind of sectarian mindset that isn't Catholic.

You write a good deal about secularization, and you seem to suggest that if Europe has an overt secularization of hostility, the United States has a more subtle form, sort of a secularization of domestication. In other words, we don't reject religion, we tame it.

It's becoming a little more rejection now. The new atheism has its followers.

You're talking about Samuel Harris, Richard Dawkins, and so on?

Yes. In Chicago, we now have atheist clubs in high schools. We didn't have those five years ago. Kids I would have confirmed in the eighth grade, by the time they're sophomores in high school say they're atheists. They don't just stop going to church, they make a statement. I think that's new. That's perhaps a bit more like Europe.

Do you have a theory about where that's coming from?

I think it's something of a fad, because of the aggressiveness of this new atheism. It captures people.

It is highly evangelical, isn't it?

Yes it is, sure. Everybody has said that, and it's true. It's the mirror image of a kind of fundamentalism, because it's very restrictive in its use of reason. It's also very triumphalistic and self-righteous.

Your initial question was whether what we have for the most part is domestication rather than rejection, and I think that's a nice way of saying it. As you said, I didn't say it that way, but I think it's a good way of putting it. It's co-opted into a state that is a church, very often. That's American civil religion.

In a way, is a secularization of taming almost more pernicious ? kind of secularization that doesn't want to show its face?

I think so. At the same time, there is a kind of openness that isn't there in Europe. Paradoxically, there are more Catholic elements in the cultures of Europe. The civil holidays are still holy days in Europe.

Officially, we're far more secular, but culturally there's still an openness that often isn't there in Europe. That's what the Holy Father notes all the time [about the United States]. He says that's a wonderful thing, and you should try to keep it as open as possible.

I wouldn't disagree with what you asked, that it's more insidious [in the United States] because it can happen without your realizing it.

I want to press you to reply to a rhetorical question that you raise in the book but never directly answer. You write: "Schools and hospitals and works of charity, mercy and justice" have exhausted many of the resources of the Catholic church in the United States? Have our institutions demanded too high a price? Have we formed very fine professionals, but not formed disciples?? What's the answer?

I think we have done a better job of forming professionals than disciples in many institutions, there's no question about that. If you look at the careers of our graduates, they're wealthy, they've contributed to the society, they're good people, but their ethos is professional. When you push them on matters of faith, however, it's problematic. For example, in medical ethics, when you move beyond the fundamental principle of patient autonomy – which is a core principle of secular ethics, as it is in ours, although we wouldn't use that term – and try to get them to see the communitarian dimension, as we do in the bishops' Ethical and Religious Directives, there's a lot of resistance sometimes. They're more influenced by the profession that we've trained them to take on than by the faith that was the reason for starting the place to begin with.

Do you see this as something you can tackle in the here-and-now, or is it a question of a whole generation of leadership that has to change?

That's always been said, that you have to wait for certain people to die before a change takes place! But then, you also have to see to it that there's some formation for the new generation coming in. That's where I'm encouraged when I look at what hospitals run by religious are doing, trying to form people in the ethos of the congregation that started them. Now, they won't be the same, because they haven't made the same commitments – vows and the rest. But they'll have a sense that this is the spirit, in a large sense, of these places, and then they'll work it out. You have to trust that the Holy Spirit is helping them to work it out on their own terms. They may not look like what I'll live to see – you might. What you can do is try to create the formative experiences, and then trust them to work it out in their own circumstances and their own generation.

Are you confident things are moving in the right direction with regard to our schools, hospitals, and other institutions?

I think you have to look at it institution-by-institution. I wouldn't be prepared to say "yes" across the board. I think some institutions will make it and some won't, and it will depend on leadership. I can look at places where I think it's so thin on the ground, that probably the secularization is irreversible. On the other hand, there are places where it could go either way, and there are places that are pretty secure.

The question for that last group is, what are they secure in? Is it a conservative Catholic identity, a liberal Catholic identity, or it simply Catholicism? It is a kind of Catholicism that can do what Catholicism always has – be sure of its own identity, but be open to everything?

You write that the greatest post-Vatican II failure was the failure to form laity engaged with the world but on faith's terms. How do we do that today?

I think that's behind the bishops' concern about the universities, about education, about the reform of catechesis, all these formative influences. We don't have the sodalities anymore. Today there are the lay movements, but they're pretty restricted in their influence in the United States. They're more influential outside the United States, especially in Europe. There, it isn't the parishes that carry the identity anymore, it's the movements. With us, it still is the parishes. We do parishes well.

Is part of the problem, with the lay role in the world, that so much of the energy of our best and brightest laity over the last fifty years has been consumed by internal Catholic battles?

Yes, absolutely. The pope in his 2005 address to the Roman Curia, about the reform, was somewhat wistful about how we've wasted fifty years, forty years, so let's get on with it. I would tend to think that's true. We've wasted a lot of time. Instead of hearing what the council was really saying — and of course these were unusual conciliar documents, as everybody has said, because usually conciliar documents are simply declarative. Here they put the exhortation directly into the documents for the first time. That's pastoral, it was a pastoral council. Of course, you can take those pastoral elements in different directions, but I certainly think we went in the wrong direction when from the beginning we interpreted the council in liberal and conservative terms.

We forgot that it was supposed to be church/world, that those were the terms that were supposed to be used, not liberal and conservative inside the church. That was terribly destructive. People got caught up in that. Of course, their intentions were good, but they got caught up in it — religious orders got caught up in it, thinking they were being faithful to the council, but they weren't. They were being faithful to a particular interpretation of the council.

Left, right or center, the primary optic for reading the council has been *ad intra*, meaning its implications for the internal life of the church.

That's right. You asked a moment ago where are things working, and the answer is, look at those organizations and groups that don't worry about the internal dynamics, but who worry about the mission.

Something like Sant'Egidio?

I was just going to say that. You've got the Community of Sant'Egidio, which I really admire. That's why I've got the church I have. [George's titular church in Rome is St. Bartholomew's on Tiber Island, where Sant'Egidio often gathers.] I've admired them ever since I saw them at work in Namibia, when the Oblates were fairly strong on the ground there and were very concerned about the situation. Sant'Egidio carried it off, they made the peace in Namibia. Today Namibia has one of the best constitutions in Africa, and it's worked. They've been less successful in a few other places, but they've still been helpful.

That's the perspective of starting with the poor. That's the evangelical touchstone. You take a group that starts with the poor, and then you know that there's evangelical motivation. There's no power or anything else, because these people don't have power. They identify with the poor, and then they say, things have to change for the poor. We have to see that the poor are better served in the name of Christ. The church will follow along, if they know that you're changing the way that the world looks at the poor.

Also, Sant'Egidio from the beginning prayed together, in ways that the church recognizes as prayer. You've heard the way they pray — it's unbelievable. It's the way the poor in the mountains pray. It grinds on you, but it's the prayer of the church. It really is remarkable.

Could you make the argument that Sant'Egidio is what liberal Catholicism might look like, freed of itsad *intra* preoccupations?

That's right ? had it not gotten into politics and into power, but stayed with the poor. Of course, there are conservatives who are concerned about the poor too!

You spend a fair bit of space responding to the critique offered by Peter Steinfels in his book *A People Adrift*, but there's one point you mention and then let drop. He suggests, as many others have, that the American bishops are spineless when it comes to Rome ? that is, constantly looking over your shoulder at how people in Rome will react. Is there any merit to that?

I don't think so. People say that again and again. We have a very adult discussion with the Holy See, while at the same time acknowledging that the pope is our father too, and that the primacy of Peter is a datum of revelation that constitutes the church internally as well as externally. There's great respect, but bishops will go back to the Holy See again and again if they think there's been a mistake on the governmental level. It goes on all the time. We're doing it now, this week. This idea that we're all sitting around waiting to see what somebody over here in the Curia will do, whether to pat us on the back or to give us a slap on the hand ? I don't find that attitude at all, I really don't.

I think the bishops know that, by Christ's will, they are responsible for their churches. They're in Catholic communion, they're not franchises of General Motors. I think the Holy See knows that too ? it's a bureaucracy, of course, and like any bureaucracy, it's mixed, but on the whole they know it. They expect us to come back and say, "This works, this doesn't work." Why are they revising the Code of Canon Law? Because a bunch of bishops came back and said, "This doesn't work." Again and again, they'll do that.

Of course, they'll do that slowly. Rome has its own rhythms, and sometimes it feels like we'll all be dead before something happens. Often they can be too willing to say, "time will take care of this," when something really is urgent. That's a cultural problem.

You don't wake up in a cold sweat worrying about how Rome will react to whatever you say or do?

I don't know any bishop who fits that description. There may be, but it's certainly not the description of the conference and certainly not the description of the bishops I know. If people mean that we're concerned to be orthodox in our teaching, then sure, yeah. But if you're saying that the teaching is just defined by whatever the pope thinks of in the morning, no. The pope is also subservient to the gospel, as Benedict says very clearly, and to the tradition. He is a marker for it, and we look to see what he says, but because we want to be faithful to Christ, not because he says it.

There's a concern that we are faithful to the apostolic tradition, and the pope is a marker for that to which we pay attention, obviously carefully. But mostly it's our faith that makes us of one mind with the pope, it's not his commands. The same thing is true for governance generally, although it's a little different, because there's a little more independence, also in the Code itself. Still, you want to govern in communion ? the whole book is about that. There's a concern that we govern not just in communion with the pope, but with the bishops of Brazil, for example. Not in the same way, but we're a universal communion.

The concern for communion doesn't mean we're afraid of being reprimanded. The concern for truth doesn't mean that we're afraid of being scolded. Instead, it means that we're Catholic.

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