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Editorial: Time for courage from those who have most to lose

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Conclave 2013
Editorial

In the opening days of the general congregations, the series of meetings the College of Cardinals convene in the lead-up to the conclave that will choose the next pope, an idea was floated in the Italian press about a way to clean up the governance issues that have plagued the Vatican under Pope Benedict XVI?s reign. The idea was to elect one of the over-80-year-old cardinals as pope. Such a pope, a curial old hand, would have a clear understanding of how the Curia actual works and could rein it in. The candidate would have to be somebody tough enough to crack down on uncooperative dicasteries and end rivalries. Somebody with clear thinking and a firm hand -- that?s what?s needed. The idea -- like many floated in the Italian media these days -- didn?t get much traction.

We have also heard people longing for a return of someone like Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, a legendary substitute (assistant) secretary of state under Pope Paul VI. This guy knew how to run a tight ship. With Benelli in charge, everyone knew his job and his place and the work of the Vatican got done. A *TIME* magazine profile of him from 1969 describes how he prepared and organized newspaper clippings and reports and arranged them on the breakfast table every morning for Paul VI. He arranged papal audiences and appointments with similar efficiency. Though only an archbishop and only the No. 2 man in his office, he could make cardinals tremble in fear if they tried to circumvent or cross him. A new Benelli would turn this place around, they say.

A third idea has emerged in the last day or so. The new pope needs to be a modern CEO who would update church systems with modern management practices, understand finances and have a command of modern communication technologies. The idea is to shuffle a few MBAs among the theology degrees.

The flaw in these ideas is that they are really the same idea and they don?t address the major cause of the problem that plagues the Vatican bureaucracy. These are all top-down authoritarian models of governance and that is the problem. Even though talk about the modern CEO model includes use of shiny new accouterments like BlackBerries and flow charts, it lacks mention of other leadership elements necessary to the modern executive: broad consultation and a willingness to change.

The governance issues in the Vatican can?t be fixed by moving personnel or borrowing from high-powered models in the business world. The people in the system aren?t the problem as much as the system itself. (Writing about curial reform in *Commonweal* in 2008, Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese suggested that no Vatican bureaucrat should be made a bishop or a cardinal; this would make them easier to fire and it ?would also remind the Vatican bureaucracy that it is a servant of the pope and the college of bishops and not itself part of the magisterium.? That seems like a sound idea.)

As we noted in these pages last issue: We are essentially trying to govern a 21st-century global church with a 17th-century European-style monarchy. That is what must change, and in order to effect such change, those electing the new pope will have to do a great deal of soul-searching. For they?re the same ones who benefit

from the old, all-male palace culture. The difficult reality is that those who have the greatest power to make change stand to lose the most from any meaningful change.

No matter from what part of the world he hails, no matter what his theological or ecclesiastical pedigree, the best thing the new pope could do is to reclaim the Petrine ministry for what it is: Let him be the bishop of Rome, the first among equals. Our pick for new pope would be the man who embraces the Vatican II call for collegiality and acts on it. The new pope should re-empower national bishops? conferences, decentralize power, and allow national conferences to develop local agendas tailored to local needs.

Finally, the new pope should empower and use the greatest untapped resource the church has: laity. Never in the history of the church has it had a better educated and professionally trained laity. Why don?t we put them to work? Through the use of regularly held local, national and international synods, laypeople could have a true say in the life of the church, including electing pastors and bishops.

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