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Imagining a new spring, along with Pope Francis

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NCR Today

Pope Francis

Among the many questions Catholics wait eagerly to see answered by Pope Francis is if he will have will and stamina necessary to reform the Roman Curia in ways yet to be imagined.

Yes, the recent world focus on the Vatican might have provided some suspense and some interesting television, but few Catholics, let alone a global audience, believe the men they saw gathered in red vestments and fine lace surplices on St. Peter's Square are shaping their spiritual lives, answering personal moral questions, or giving new insights to the deepest mysteries of their lives.

To the contrary, what drew many into the Vatican story was the very distance of it from our lives. Intrigue, yes; meaningful, no. It was pomp and European court images out of a distant, if imagined, history. And did any of it really connect us more deeply with our faith? Or was it the trappings of an old, tired religion discarded by many in the West?

Add to this distance even more distance, caused by the tragic, decadeslong story of episcopal cover-up of child sex abuse, among the offenders some of the same seemingly self-satisfied performers on central stage, and the performance smacks of no little hypocrisy.

Alas, our church's current inbred clerical structure, most visibly at play on the Vatican stage, is a structure plausibly justified until the 20th century. That's when the laity first became educated and could study Scripture and the faith themselves. The old justification for a unique clerical hold on all matters of faith has long since collapsed. Indeed, women are now theologians, offering new insights into our relationship with the divine, creation, and the human condition. The exclusion of women from all essential decision-making within our church is a crime, a moral outrage. It is an offense against the Word of God.

Old structures die hard, and only with considerable struggle and force. There is plenty of reason to think Pope Francis will fail if he tries to undo centuries of a stubborn structure, out of step with 21st-century realities.

Major tests await him, especially as he confronts the Roman Curia. Not many are holding their breath while waiting for him to succeed.

Most observers give Francis a small window before he, too, gets sucked into the Vatican black hole. We know curial corruption and power-mongering eventually did in Pope Benedict. He told us as much. He said he needed to leave the work for a stronger, younger pope.

Of course, there is irony in Benedict's admission. He, more than any other prelate, helped centralize the Vatican operation. First as prefect to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Pope John Paul II and then as Pope Benedict, he disemboweled national episcopal conferences, taking away their legitimate authority, while replacing decision-making within the Vatican. This move ran contrary to the intentions of the bishops who gathered during the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s in Rome.

They talked about the need for collegiality. Those bishops had a decentralized church in mind, one based on the early church idea that local churches are primary, that local bishops fully represented the local church, and that all the bishops are descendants from the apostles, Peter being one among them, the sign of unity, not the absolute monarch.

Vatican II's effort to modernize the church came in the wake of a still-emerging post-colonial world in the wake of the emergence of a global church and in the awakening of new sensitivity to cultures and religions. The one-size-fits-all Roman model was not functional and no longer fit the aspirations of the People of God, those bishops concluded.

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However, those council conclusions did not stop the Vatican Curia from reasserting its desire to keep decisions in hand inside the Vatican walls.

The men at the top were to have their way once again. This was especially easy for the manipulative Roman prelates as Pope John Paul II saw himself as a preacher and Pope Benedict saw himself as a theologian. They left administration to others -- and those others eagerly carried out the tasks, albeit ineffectively.

Catholics who question how this affects their faith lives need only consider the awkward words they say at Mass -- words Rome-based prelates demanded over the wishes of U.S. bishops.

Back to Francis. Can we really expect him to reform the Curia?

We know the conclave cardinals who elected him did so with the hope he would clean up the Curia. We know because many told us so.

In this light, there is something interestingly counterintuitive about Francis' early approach to church reform, assuming he has Roman reform in mind. Every one of his utterances so far has had nothing to do with structure and everything to do with mission. He has called us to become focused on the pressing needs of the environment, on the pressing needs of the human family, on the poorest among us.

This is the path to church reform?

Well, perhaps yes.

Those who study institutions and examine how they operate will quickly tell you that reform or renewal first requires a radical focus on mission.

They will say: You must know and understand your mission. You must preach your mission. You must live your mission. You must be persistent. You must stay focused. You cannot let go.

These organizational analysts will say that if you truly live your mission, especially if that mission is authentic, the rest will follow and reform will happen as day follows night.

Is this the counterintuitive approach of Pope Francis? Does he understand that through focus outside church structure, reform will occur within? It is too early to say. But he is likely to have the backing of many organization analysts.

After one week, Francis is calling us back to a sharp focus: to live and preach the Gospels. Clearly, he sees at the center of the Gospels calls to mercy, forgiveness, inclusiveness and love.

Are we hearing him? Are the Roman prelates hearing him? If, as the People of God, we refocus on the mission of our church, will we see change occur? If, as the bishop of Rome, as the sign of unity, if Pope Francis keeps a radical focus on mission, will change occur almost naturally? Of course, this remains to be seen. But some very accomplished people who work in the arena of organizational reform would seem to support this approach.

Many I speak with say they feel new hope but quickly add that Francis comes to us with unknowns and unsettling questions. We have been bruised and dispirited for so long we shy from allowing ourselves to become vulnerable.

Yet we hear Francis act and preach. And what he does and says is, indeed, hopeful.

He has already spoken in simple words about the infinite mercy of God. He is compulsively inclusive. He has not wagged a finger, not once.

Is this the long-awaited new spring for our deeply hurting church? Is this too much to suggest?

It's been said that for something to be built, it must first be imagined. Well, for the moment, the former Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, seems to be imaging something big -- very big.

Why not imagine as well?

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