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Reform & Pope Francis: Part II

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I began a discussion about Pope Francis and the evident mandate he received from the cardinal-electors to reform the Church. The Church is not a business, and so the most important reforms will be those of the heart, and such reforms are never easy to achieve, at least not through a management program. More on that at the end. But, let us look at what can be done to manage the curia more effectively and, especially, the relationship of the curia with the universal Church.

I noted yesterday that Pope Paul VI was the last pope to really govern the curia. In his post-conciliar reforms, he placed an enormous amount of power into the hands of the Secretariat of State, but also required regular meetings of the heads of the different Vatican curial offices with the Secretary of State, a collegial form of government akin to a Cabinet-style of government that one finds in most European governments. For different reasons (I am told the reasons are complex and opaque), and in different ways, both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI permitted this last, essential element of the Pauline reforms to lapse. Heads of the different dicasteries do not meet. Differences of perspective between different cabinet officials are left to fester or, if addressed, are filtered through the pope's personal staff in the "apartment" rather than being hashed out at meetings in the Secretariat of State.

As in the case of the executive branch of the U.S. government, where the role of the Cabinet in policymaking decisions has been diminished over time and power concentrated in the hands of the Executive Office of the Presidency, the "apartment" has become all important. Except that there really is no "executive office of the papacy." There is no regular 7:30 meeting, as there is in the White House, where the schedulers and the press people and the key policy makers and the key liaisons to Congress and to particular officials in the Cabinet are present. There is no chief-of-staff in the papal apartment. So, the

new pope is well advised to either create such an executive office or to embrace the Cabinet-style of governance, with regular meetings of the prefects of the key congregations and councils, under the auspices of the Secretary of State, and vest them with the power to make decisions after, and only after, they have had to sit around a table and make arguments, press for more information, discuss the potential pitfalls of any particular recommended course of action, in short, all the things that governance or management require.

A well governed institution also requires the right personnel. As I intimated yesterday, the new pope is well advised to think about why this or that person was assigned to any given prefecture. Does the person have a particular competence for the task? Or, as is often the case, is the head of a given dicastery there because he was a returning nuncio with a friend in the ?apartment? or a failed ordinary whose nuncio wanted to get him out of the country! The practice of promoting to remove must end. It must end immediately. This will require a deep and difficult attitudinal adjustment because it will force the new pope, and the entire structure of the hierarchy, to face and answer a question they have preferred to avoid: What do you do when you ordain a bishop, investing him with the fullness of Holy Orders, and he turns out to be a dud? Somehow, a way must be found to introduce a remedy that respects our theology of orders, but which spares the people of God in any given diocese from mismanagement. The remedy of ?promoveatur ut moveatur? is no solution. In the most obvious case, or at least the case most familiar to Americans, our late and beloved nuncio Archbishop Pietro Sambi wanted then-Archbishop Raymond Burke out at almost any cost, and he got his wish, but now Burke is a cardinal with a seat on the Congregation for Bishops, so it is not only St. Louis that suffers but the rest of the Church too.

A well governed organization also needs a culture that reinforces the goals its leaders wish to achieve. Let me provide a very mundane example from my days as a manager of a restaurant. After ten years of being general manager, I felt the need of a break, so for one year, I simply managed the bar staff, focusing on how to improve operations in the small but important part of the operations, not the restaurant staff. At the end of the year I went back to my old post of overseeing the entire shop. It occurred to me that the waiters in the restaurant were not helping each other out as much as they had before, specifically, they were not running food to the tables for each other, but only waiting by the kitchen to get their own food and run that to their own tables. As you can imagine, every once in awhile, the food comes out of the kitchen just as a given waiter has gone to a new table to take drink orders and the customers have lots of questions, the food is getting cold waiting to go to the table, and a different waiter is standing there, waiting for his own orders, unwilling to run the food for his colleague. It was intolerable, but how to fix it? So, for six months I put in a new rule ? no one could run their own food to their own tables. They had to count on one another to run each others? food to the tables. They had to cooperate. Now, it did not make sense to wait for your own food to come out, while someone else?s was sitting their getting cold. Within six months, we had very, very few instances of food being sent back because it had gotten cold. A little creativity, sometimes counter-intuitive creativity, can go a long way.

I do not know how to apply my little lesson to the operations at the Vatican, but surely, there is a way to adjust procedures in ways that encourage the goals the new pope wants. So, if the new pope wants the different dicasteries working together, in a more collaborative fashion, he could insist that a document from Congregation A, that involves an issue that will affect Congregation B, he must require A to talk with B and get their comments before presenting a report to the pope for a decision. If no such comments exist because the head of Congregation A doesn?t like the head of Congregation B and, so, ignored them, the new pope has to refuse to even read the report. And, he has to let the prefect of Congregation A know that he just earned Strike One. Everybody should get three strikes.

As mentioned at the beginning, the most important change that appears to be needed at the curia is a change of heart. Already, the new pope seems willing to teach by example. Will his simplicity of personal

style be mimicked by his new associates and will that simplicity carry over to their style of thinking, their manner of approaching problems? For example, you may agree or disagree with the decisions made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding any given theologian, but the whole process of examining theological texts should be re-worked, to introduce greater openness and accountability. You may like the appointment of culture warrior bishops or, like me, think it is a horrible development in the life of the Church, but why do Metropolitans and their suffragan bishops - and indeed the local clergy - no longer play any role in drawing up ternas for vacant sees? Wide consultation yields better information and, usually, a more balanced perspective. But, this kind of change is not intended only to yield more information, it is designed to end the sense among some nuncios and among those who work at the Congregation for Bishops that "they know best." Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't, but in all instances, people need to be ready to explain why they prefer this course of action over that, why they propose this candidate for the episcopacy rather than that candidate. It will not be easy to translate the humility we have seen in Pope Francis into decision-making and culture-forming, but I think he has a shot at it. In addition to his simplicity of style, there is a no-nonsense quality to the man. He puts me in mind of Pope Pius XI in this regard. Not once since his election has Pope Francis looked the least bit overwhelmed or unequal to the enormous burden that has fallen on him. Unlike his predecessor, who was a Number 2 for twenty-five years, Pope Francis was Number 1 in Buenos Aires for many years, and while it is difficult to compare Buenos Aires to Rome, the difference is less than the habits of mind that differentiate a Number 1 and a Number 2. I do not say this to demean Pope Benedict in the least. As everyone knows, I really, really love Benedict. But, it is clear, indeed it was obviously clear to Benedict, that the Church needs a new set of hands at the wheel.

I close with one observation, an observation that I will take up again tomorrow in an entirely different context. All this talk of curial reform seems like "small potatoes" when compared to the power of the image of Pope Francis washing and kissing the feet of young inmates in prison. Indeed, Pope Francis has warned against the Church becoming "self-referential" and urged us Catholics, clergy and laity alike, to go out into the world, to meet people where they are, especially to the poor and the outcasts. He told the priests gathered for the Chrism Mass that they should "smell" like the sheep in their flock. I do not want this Pope to get buried with a bunch of internal church reform efforts. If we all go out and truly engage the poor, we will engage Christ, and He and He alone can be the source of any true reform of the Church. Still, when I visit Rome, mindful that I will be doing a lot of walking, I eat a good breakfast before leaving the albergo. The reform of the curia is the good breakfast the new pope needs to be able to get himself in a position to go out into the world, to meet the poor and the outcasts. If we truly wish to embark upon a New Evangelization, if we truly wish to respond to the dangers of secularization, I believe that image, and that example, of Pope Francis kissing the feet of a Muslim girl on Holy Thursday is the way to do it. He just has to make sure that image and example is not in competition with a different image of curial dysfunction, leaked documents, cappa magnas, and palace intrigues.

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