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The G-8 Cardinals Gather & The Most Important Reform

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 27, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The cardinals who comprise the special commission to advise the Pope, the G-8, begin arriving in Rome today for preparatory meetings. Next Tuesday, they begin meeting with Pope Francis for three days of discussions, followed by a visit to Assisi. There has been a great deal of analysis about what we should expect, much of it very good, much of it published here at NCR. I believe the most important reform to come from the G-8 meeting will be simple and far-reaching: They are going to re-arrange the furniture.

My colleague Fr. Tom Reese, S.J., has already noted [1] that in addition to the relatively simple managerial reforms, there needs to be a deeper reform of how the curia works and how it relates to the universal Church. There is talk about merging several Pontifical Councils into a large dicastry, perhaps even putting a layperson at its head. That would be great. Already, the G-8 will serve as a kind of check on the curia, a sounding board for the pope to see if the work of the curia is more of a burden or a blessing for local churches.

Some people advocate a wholesale change of doctrine, and I suspect they will be disappointed. Doctrine does not change, it develops. Those who invoke human dignity to promote this or that agenda item should always be mindful of the fact that there are few indignities greater than being a child of one?s own age. Conversely, those who insist that ?nothing changes? need to hit the library. The Church?s teaching developed on usury and mandatory clerical celibacy in the middle ages, it developed on papal infallibility in the nineteenth century and on Church-State relations in the twentieth. The teaching on usury is especially instructive. In a pre-modern economy, the charging of interest under any circumstances would exploit the poor. As a commercial economy developed, the need for credit emerged and the prohibition on all usury was likely to exploit the poor. The teaching on usury, then, changed in order that the fundamental, evangelical value, not exploiting the poor, could remain the same. The doctrine did not change. The ambient circumstances changed, so the doctrine needed to develop in order to stay true to its deepest meaning.

Back to the furniture. What am I talking about? You will recall in the early summer, when the Holy Father met with representatives of religious men and women from Latin America. The group is known as CLAR, and one of the participants spoke about the conversation afterwards, causing a sensation by relating that the pope had acknowledged there was a ?gay lobby? in the Vatican. But, the real sensation, for me at least, was the photo from that meeting. The papal throne was not on a dais. Instead, the pope had moved his chair, and the others had moved theirs, and they were all sitting in a circle. They were having a conversation.

The image contrasted sharply with the pictures of the U.S. bishops on their ad limina visits the year before. In those photos, the pope sat on his throne, the bishops sat in chairs in single file, facing each other across the room, lined up like altar boys. The pope read from his prepared remarks. They listened. No conversation.

Pope Francis has also shown a knack for setting aside his prepared remarks, giving a short, off-the-cuff summary, and then engaging in questions and answers with his audience. He has done this several times. His does not burn the official remarks, and he points out that they will be available on the web. But, he wants to use

the time together to engage in dialogue.

It has been said that, in a sense, his recent interview was an encyclical. It was certainly magisterial. The division between the ?official? and the ?unofficial? is real, but it deserves to be blurred. Pope Francis is blurring it. He seems thoroughly, steadfastly, resistant to being reduced to his office. He is putting the person into all the theoretical focus on personalism in the last few pontificates. It is more than refreshing, it is catechetical. The Pope, intentionally or not, is instructing his brother bishops, his colleagues in the curia, and the rest of us: Yes, we must study personalism, yes there must be official texts, but we must not be afraid to be persons too, we must not let our roles obscure our humanity, nor our ?small-minded rules? obscure our vocation to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Dialogue. Dialogue. Dialogue. The pope has repeated the call time and again and in different situations. This is the change that I suspect will emerge from the G-8. It is part managerial, to be sure. But, it reaches to that deeper reform, a reform of the culture of the curia, that alone will suffice to breath new life into the Church, to create new wineskins, to remind the Church that it is Christ, and He alone, who is ever new.

Certainly, this dialogue must be enfleshed. The role of the Synod of Bishops is likely to be expanded, but not only that. The structure of the Synods must change. If you have ever attended one, they are dreadfully organized. Each bishop gets up and gives his little five minute talk. After five such talks, there is a great deal of repetition. Most of the little speeches are heavy on quotes from the pope himself. There is no time for probing questions, although in the small break-out groups, there is discussion. Still, why not have Q-and-A in the main aula. When a prelate gives a talk and breezily condemns ?secularization,? his brother bishops should be able to probe: What do you mean by that term? How does it manifest itself? Are you talking about an aggressive mentality or about the emergence of modern means of analysis? Too many bishops throw around words like ?secularization? as a kind of bumper sticker, and one wonders if they have deeply reflected on what it means. This is what must change.

Within the curia, different cardinals establish fiefdoms. They are rarely brought together so it should not surprise that they do not work together, in concert, aiding one another, enriching one another. They need to meet around a conference table with some regularity.

I know that people will be looking for splashy changes, but cultures do not change over night. But, they change and Pope Francis is already changing the culture. One friend complained that a cardinal who was no longer a part of the papal household was still living in his room in the papal apartment. I replied, ?There is no more papal apartment, just a couple of large rooms that are usually empty. Who cares that this cardinal lives there?? This change is not only the result of the pope?s decision to live at the Domus Santa Martha instead of in the papal apartment. The change results from the fact that this pope picks up his cell phone and uses it, that the G-8 cardinals send memos direct to his email. In previous times, the first order of business was to find a way to get access to the pope. When, as in the long last years of Pope John Paul II?s pontificate, when his health compromised his ability to reach out to a variety of voices, the ?apartment? was especially powerful, blocking the investigation of Fr. Maciel, for example. The aides to this pope cannot ?block out? so easily when the pope they serve is willing to pick up his cell phone.

These are exciting times for our Church. And, the meeting of the G-8 cardinals is, in itself, a huge step forward. And, how blest the Church in the United States is to have representing it Cardinal Sean O?Malley, who is so obviously cut out of the same cloth as Pope Francis, even though they are men of very different temperaments. There are many bishops in the U.S. whom I admire, but none more than Cardinal O?Malley.

I do not know if we will get communiqués from the Vatican press office. None of us know if the cardinals will have action items ready for the pope, and that a series of motu proprios will be forthcoming immediately after their meetings. But, I will be looking for something else. I will be looking at the photos to see if they have re-

arranged the furniture.

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