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Will Pope Francis the listener hear the church?

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NCR Today

The Vatican recently called for a broad-based world-wide parish-level input in preparation for the bishops meeting next year on pastoral challenges to the family.

Brian Roewe, in his exhaustive research in the Dec. 6-19 *NCR*, noted the great number of dioceses and other Catholic organizations that are calling on their members to fill out the Vatican questionnaire or some variation thereof.

What we've learned so far is confusing and troubling. New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan explained to a reporter last week that the questionnaire is really "intended for the bishop," as if to indicate who's really still in charge. Some dioceses announced they would retrieve input only from "targeted focus groups," that is presbyterial councils and other in-house church organizations. Suspicion grows that that some bishops will pass on only those lay responses that they deem "relevant." And there's the possibility that other bishops may edit responses to guarantee orthodox answers or simply dump those that seek changes on hot-button doctrines like gay marriage, women priests and contraception. In other words, there's reason to worry that all this excitement will be in vain and nothing will come of it.

And that would be a tragedy for the whole church. Pope Francis has consistently presented himself as a listener, someone eager to hear the honest views of the people. This Vatican call for input can be viewed as essentially his personal invitation for you and me to tell him what we think about the church today, especially regarding the delicate issues. It's therefore imperative that somehow, in some way, the responses of Catholics all over the world not be compromised or betrayed. Pope Francis has said a lot about what he wants us to do and how we are to live as followers of the gospel. Now it's urgent that he learn from us what we honestly believe and hope for and perhaps come to understand more clearly the split that's making the Catholic Church irrelevant to many of its members.

It's equally imperative that he get back to us with his reactions and views. Pope Francis has acquired an immense amount of respect and credibility in a short time. All that capital could be lost on the people in the pews if the word spreads that the Vatican, the Curia and the top bishops are just as much 'in charge' as they ever were.

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