

A Tale of Two Interviews

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 17, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

In all the excitement about the changes at the Congregation for Bishops yesterday, I was unable to write about [the Holy Father's interview with La Stampa](#) [1] published on Sunday. Much of it was interesting, especially his comment in response to criticism of his socio-economic views, specifically Rush Limbaugh's assertion that the pope was spouting "pure Marxism." Pope Francis said in the interview: "The Marxist ideology is wrong. But I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people, so I don't feel offended." If you got every great PR person in a room and asked them for the perfect response, they could not have crafted a better one.

But, what most struck me was the question and answer about the work of the eight-member Council of Cardinals the Holy Father has assembled to help him reform the curia and govern the universal Church. Here is the exchange:

Q: How is the work of your eight advisors on Curia reform proceeding?

A: There's a lot of work to do. Those who wanted to make proposals or send ideas have done so. Cardinal Bertello has gathered the views of all Vatican dicasteries. We received suggestions from bishops all around the world. At the last meeting, the eight cardinals told me the time has come for concrete proposals and at the next meeting in February they will present their suggestions to me. I am always present at the meetings, except for Wednesday mornings when I have the General Audience. But I don't speak, I just listen and that does me good. A few months ago, an elderly cardinal said to me: "You have already started Curia reform with your daily masses in St. Martha's House." This made me think: reform always begins with spiritual and pastoral initiatives before structural changes.

It has been a long time since we heard a pope say, "But I don't speak, I just listen and that does me good." But, it is his final point that warrants our attention today because it gets to the heart of what reform in the Church entails.

"Reformatio in capite et membris," was what the Council of Constance called for in 1414-1416. The phrase had earlier been used by the Council of Vienne in 1311-1312 and would be repeated at the Fifth Lateran Council held on the eve of the Protestant Reformation. Of course, each time, the powers-that-be defeated the reform efforts which only came to full flower at the Council of Trent. Can Pope Francis pull it off now?

The signs are encouraging, especially because of his recognition that "reform always begins with spiritual and pastoral initiatives." Yes, we can anticipate changes in the structures of the Vatican curia, which had grown so dysfunctional it ceased to serve the pope and ceased to serve the universal Church, not least because of the hopefully retired habit of making prefects out of failed diocesan ordinaries. The long-standing method of "promoveatur ut moveatur" will hopefully be consigned to history. And, the structures as well as the personnel

will be changed. But, none of that matters if it does not flow from a spiritual and pastoral sensibility.

Curiously, in his [already famous, or infamous, interview with ETWN](#), [2] Cardinal Raymond Burke said something unintentionally spot-on. He told Raymond Arroyo that any curial changes would have to build upon Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution Pastor Bonus because the Church is "organic." Indeed it is, but what Burke failed to acknowledge, and what Papa Francesco clearly sees, is that the organism was gravely ill. The curia existed not to help the pope govern the universal Church, nor really to help the universal Church function more faithfully and effectively. The curia existed to get red for those who worked there. It had become a greenhouse for ambition not evangelization.

Pope Francis wants the Church to re-focus on the need to evangelize and let that focus guide the structural reforms, allowing the culture of the curia to change "organically." The re-focus is vital and it is clear that Pope Francis and Cardinal Burke understand the task of evangelization quite differently. "What could be more important than the natural moral law?" Burke asked in his interview. Well, I actually have an answer to that question. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is more important than the natural moral law. Burke's comment is the precise, exact measurement of the degree to which he is himself, that great champion of orthodoxy, more than halfway down the hill of secularization, reducing religion to ethics where the forces of secularization wish it to remain.

Ethics has just enough of a focus on human beings to allow us to turn it into an ideology. That, too, was apparent in Burke's interview. When he spoke about abortion, he did not evidence any concern for the mother. In fact, he was oddly cold and abstract in discussing the unborn child. I cannot see into his heart, but I fear that some conservatives are upset about abortion not because it is such a terrible human tragedy but because it is a violation of the natural moral law. (Unless my liberal friends get too comfortable at this point, let me remind them of what I said last week "not wanting to get into an awkward conversation with one's peers or friends is not a very strong reason to avoid discussing abortion either.") This attitude came through in Burke's comments about Canon 915 and his oft stated concern to "protect the Sacrament." If our Lord and Savior feels the need of protection, I suspect He would turn to someone other than Cardinal Burke, don't you?

Pope Francis indicates that he is looking for concrete proposals at the February meeting of the Council of Cardinals. One does not get the sense that he intends to let the grass grow under his feet. He is 77 years old today "Happy Birthday Santita!" and has work to do. I wonder how many bishops, how many who work at the curia, grasp what he has been trying to explain to all of us about evangelization these past nine months? It is clear that Burke is clueless but I also suspect Burke is not alone. I hope the members of the Council of Cardinals are clear with the Holy Father on this point: The challenge is huge and the principal impediment to affecting the reforms may well be the leadership in the Church itself. That is why the shake-up at the Congregation for Bishops was so important. The newly constituted body must, repeat must, look for new bishops who grasp what the pope is trying to say.

And what is that precisely? I think the controversy over Time magazine's original statement accompanying a photo of Pope Francis when they chose him as Person of the Year, and the criticisms of *Evangelii Gaudium*, help to explain what he is trying to say. Originally, Time's editors wrote, "First Jesuit Pontiff won hearts and headlines with his common touch and rejection of church dogma and luxury." Of course, Pope Francis did not "reject" any dogma of the Church. The critics of *Evangelii Gaudium* tend to point out, rather patronizingly, that he doesn't understand economics and, besides, economic matters are matters of prudential judgment so one can disagree at will with the pope. It seems to me that the most consistent theme of this pontificate, from his choice of name through his first teaching document *Evangelii Gaudium*, is simply this: The core dogma of the Church is to proclaim God's love and mercy, and this dogmatic focus is only realized by a Church that is at the service of the poor. Our concern for the poor is not Marxist, it is dogmatic. That is what the critics from the right, and the editors at Time magazine miss. But, that is also what will, God willing, bring on the *reformatio in capite et*

membris that the Holy Father is calling for.

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[1] <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/30620/>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/burke-pope-should-highlight-abortion-didnt-write-officially-capitalism>