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Francis calls for doctrine within the spirit of charity

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The Francis Chronicles

In an important address to staff of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Francis today essentially said, "tone it down."

He called for Vatican doctrinal officials to work with a new spirit of service and charity and to cooperate more with local churches. He reminded the CDF that doctrine "must be taught and judged within the context of the needs of the community." In other words, he emphasized his pastoral vision, his Vatican II vision, as the primary vision of church. There can be little doubt this represents a major shift from the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

He said, "right from the earliest times of the Church there has been a temptation to consider the doctrine in an ideological sense or to reduce it to a series of abstract and crystallized theories." He went on to say that "doctrine's sole role is to serve the life of God's people and is meant to ensure a solid foundation to our faith," according to Vatican radio.

There is a great temptation, he continued, "to take control of the gifts of salvation that come from God to domesticate them, maybe even with good intentions, according to the views and spirit of the world."

In recent years, our church's doctrinal watchdogs, many church observers would say, have caused considerable pain. They have gone after Catholic theologians, picking their writings apart, even, at times, sentence by sentence, looking for error. The impact has been twofold: It has discouraged theological engagement and it has dispirited wide segments of the church, including some of its more faithful followers. Consider, for example, the Apostolic Visitation of US women religious communities and the doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Francis explained to the congregation staff "safeguarding the integrity of the faith is a very delicate

mission entrusted to them ? and is to be ?in collaboration with local Pastors and with the Doctrinal Commissions of the Episcopal Conferences.?

Again we see Francis, in his gentle but firm way, reining in the Curia. He was commissioned to do this by the College of Cardinals who elected him.

If you were to ask many of our church?s theologians and certainly the religious who keep our church alive and growing, you would find a widespread consensus that the Congregation in recent years has seen itself above others and lacking even modest respect for other faithful Catholics. In this light, Francis? words today were aimed to pierce the heart of the Curial heart, the CDF, which has acted as its own inner-court within the court of the Roman Curia.

Francis significantly called upon the CDF to always ?maintain a constructive, respectful and patient dialogue with the other parties and show charity and fraternal help.? Remember, Francis has told the Curia is is no longer to view itself as serving the pope. Rather it needs to see itself as serving the faithful. Some, but not many, would characterize the CDF demeanor in recent decades as working in a spirit "fraternal help."

Francis concluded his remarks with a few words on the church?s handling of sex abuse issues, especially as they pertain to children.

He urged CDF staff to put the well being of children and young people first. The pattern over decades, of course, and to this day in some dioceses, court documents show, has been to place the well being of bishops first, throwing the children to the proverbial wind.

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Francis then said we are likely to see a link between the CDF and the special Commission he has established for safeguarding children.

Brick by brick, Francis is attempting to remove long hardened and dispiriting pedestals of privilege within the Vatican. It?s not an easy process, but Francis appears, in his gentle ways, to be very determined to do the task. Call it the end of monarchy, or at least its court.

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