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Got A Good Platform for Running the Church?

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The upbeat refrain from some Catholic progressives is that Pope Francis is aiming to change how the church is "governed." To an extent, that hope has replaced initial elation that he would change unpopular church teachings.

But what would it mean to revamp governing? There seems to be ample confusion about this speculation.

If it meant keeping the power structure in tact but down-scaling its privileges and insisting that its members meet more often to talk more frankly about touchy subjects, that would be minimal. Open debate was the signature of Vatican II with many creative, innovative results. The directives were there for a different kind of governance, one that would be more inclusive and keenly attuned to the world's neediest.

The momentum slowed, however, and it took little more than 20 years to undo the Council's potential. By the 1990s, John Paul II had again centralized the ruling apparatus by weakening national conferences of bishops and demanding conformity from priests and bishops.

To govern differently means opening participation in real decision making to those who have been shut out. It usually means revolution. It took the overthrow of monarchy to make it possible for ordinary Americans (well, eventually) to have a direct vote in how things were to be run. It took the destruction of apartheid to make Nelson Mandela's South Africa.

The Catholic church is no less an entrenched regime, capped by monarchical power lines flowing to a select number of people. No matter how enlightened they may be, they will act in their own best interests to preserve the teachings and the institutions they had a hand in establishing and preserving. Vatican II took a half way measure by creating the illusion that "advisory" or "consultative" lay people had a

genuine say in the outcomes of church issues. Starting with Paul VI's tossing aside the recommendation that he accept artificial birth control from an advisory commission, the promise of influence by "outsiders" began its slide into fecklessness.

Francis' character doesn't seem congenial to confrontation over basic issues -- especially with Benedict XVI looking on from the wings -- but the "governance" option, it is said, would allow him to open up the legislative process, as it were, for the ruling bishops and cardinals to collectively do what he would personally like to accomplish. Francis presumably would have cover by dint of consensus or something like it.

That would hinge on the assumption that a hierarchy loaded with John Paul II and Benedict conservatives would see the light and forge a perspective that overturns traditions that many of them have fought tooth and nail to defend.

To change governance would require nothing less than inviting the laity, the "disenfranchised" Catholics, into the deliberations and the voting, men and women, rich and poor.

The allure of doing things differently is often vaguely linked with the pope's commitment to serving those who suffer most. He has set an example though by reaching out to people at the margins. So far his program for focusing the church on justice and human need hasn't taken a strategic, church-wide dimension. Maybe it will, but at the moment the pope seems content to preach compassion and hope for volunteers to make his vision possible.

If he intends to place the church itself primarily at the service of the poor, that would oblige him to devise strategies with which to achieve what volunteerism could not by itself. LBJ worked long and hard to put the Great Society into practice through new structures and changes in law. The church would need to do similarly if it were to take the mandate seriously. And, of course, it might fail in the face of fierce opposition from a variety of Catholics, but the attempt would be consistent with the preaching. It would surely entail the redirection of vast sums of money from a host of special interests. Real governing, however, is always about where the money is going.

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Finally, a new kind of governance would challenge the most basic claims of church authority, how church rule became the exclusive domain of ordained men. Were the ranks to open to lay people, another rationale would have to be found.

Francis may not have anything like a major overhaul of actual governing in mind. He may want to revive the Vatican II conclave style and hope for the best without coaxing from him. Perhaps change would take place, but perhaps appearance would belie reality.

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