

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 9, No. 3, September 2015

Pages: 518-526

A NEW ERA IN CATHOLICISM?

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Abstract

Are we witnessing a fundamental paradigm change in an institution that — with 2000 years of age — can perhaps be considered the oldest organisation in Europe? Will Pope Francis, and the Roman Catholic Church with him, finally follow the course set by the reformatory council, of which 50th anniversary is being celebrated? What are the implications beyond clerical circles that we can expect and hope for? This contribution makes an attempt to assess likely transformations of the 2000-year old vessel of the church — in the midst of a storm on the high sea, after a change of captain and direction — from the perspective of the Catholic reform movements.

Keywords: Laity, Liberation Theology, Reform Movements, Pope Francis, Renewal, Synodal Church

Are we witnesses of a fundamental paradigm shift? Will the Roman Catholic Church with Pope Francis now finally follow the course of the Reform Council, the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of which is celebrated this year? What impacts far beyond the space within the Church are to be expected there to be hoped for? And will under this Pope now religious reform movements be required at all?

1. Necessary Change of Course at the End of a Long Double Pontificate

The Argentine Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio, elected on March 13, 2013, as 'Bishop of Rome,' is the first pope who dared to call himself

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after St Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226), the mendicant monk and church reformer in one. The fact that after almost 800 years a non-European became Pope, gives us hope that the Catholic Eurocentrism is systematically reduced, and it signals the vision of a church that stands for justice on a global scale.

Just in time for the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council on 8 December 2015, the Cardinals have elected a new 'Bishop of Rome,' who takes the Reform Council from a whole new perspective and with the experience of Latin America in the view, the continent in which more than 40 percent of the world's Catholic population lives, and where the visions of the Council have been implemented most intensively.

Francis could have been chosen already in the conclave in 2005. However, after the nearly 35 years double pontificate of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the latter having much impact already during his 23 years as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, and after the revelations of Vatileaks, the electing cardinals understood the need for a change of the course.

The resignation of Pope Benedict in spring 2013 was a historic occasion and has changed the papacy from the inside in a good sense, has relativized the entire hierarchical structure and opened for his successor new freedom and opportunities for development.

The decisive factor will now be whether Francis will succeed in reforming the Roman Curia, which has solidified over the centuries to an absolutist power block, thereby restoring the credibility of the church leadership. Francis is considered to be value-conservative; but in any case he had a greater willingness to listen and to learn. The abolition of compulsory celibacy for Catholic priests seems to be possible for him. The door to the priesthood for women he sees as closed — but at least he speaks of a door, for which theology can indeed find a key.

How strong the resistances is to any kind of reform within the Vatican itself, is shown by the fact that he felt compelled to express sharp criticism of the Roman Curia at Christmas greetings 2014.

From the start, to a great extent Francis has the support of the people in the pews. A survey published in December 2014 by the Pew Research Center (Washington, DC) in 43 countries shows an average approval for Pope Francis of 60 percent and only 11 percent rejection. Particularly high approval ratings have been found in Europe (84 percent), United States (78 percent) and Latin America (72 percent).

The American news magazine *Time* declared Pope Francis as the 'Person of the Year 2013.' *Fortune* magazine placed him in 2014 at the top of the 'World's 50 Greatest Leaders.'

2. Renewal from the Periphery — Francis' Experiences from Latin America

The Argentine bishop, Bergoglio was designated as an advocate of the poor. At the same time the expectation grew that with him the awakening of the church renewal from within will come. The claim that the Church must be a Church for the poor, and the need for structural church reform go hand in hand with Francis. Even before his election, he expressed this very succinctly in the non-secret pre-conclave on March 9, 2013.

At the first press conference after his election, with the phrase to 'How I wish a poor church for the poor,' he established connection to what Pope John XXIII had formulated before the Second Vatican Council as his vision. It is a vision that most intensively continued to live in the following years in the Latin American Church and has survived despite the most massive political and ecclesiastical oppression. This hard-won and in practice matured vision has now returned with Bergoglio 'from the end of the earth' into the Vatican. The Church in no other continent has such a post-conciliar history.

To this way belong many martyrs such as Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, whose beatification process Francis has opened again. From this history Bergoglio has been influenced. He himself has often had disputes with the Vatican and even personally experienced censorship.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio is a representative of the 'theology of the people,' the Argentine version of liberation theology that the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, and now emeritus Pope Benedict, has vehemently opposed for decades. Characteristically for Bergoglio and his theological teacher Lucio Gera, influenced by the Jesuit Karl Rahner, that theology arises from the ministry. As President of the Argentine Bishops' Conference, he decisively co-designed the final document of CELAM in Aparecida.

3. Return to Reforms of the Second Vatican Council

Now with Francis there is yet another chance that the epochal change continues, initiated 50 years ago by the Second Vatican Council. In many respects Francis continues on the political line and

the internal church reform projects of Paul VI (passing the tiara, social encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, visit to the UN, foreign travel, ecumenism, liturgical reform).

After two more restorative pontificates Francis is now undertaking everything to return the church to the reforms of the Council and to initiate processes that hopefully cannot be stopped. It is a fundamental cultural shift that now at last implements what the Second Vatican Council intended 50 years ago.

The Second Vatican Council emphasised collegiality and recognized that bishops as having a key responsibility in church leadership. What matters now is that the bishops around the world — along with all the baptized — are ready to fully assume their rightful responsibilities for their local churches and the universal Church. Subsidiarity must not only demanded for society and the state, but must be lived in the Church itself. 'If the church does not have the courage to reform their own structures, they will never have the moral strength to criticize the structures of society.' (Bishop Dom Helder Camara shortly after the Council).

In view of the (too) high expectations that are expressed in many quarters after this change of pontificate, it can be rightly feared that the expected course changes do not take place or not fast enough or not exactly in the desired direction. If Francis as a leader loses the goodwill of the people in the pews as well as of the public and of the media, and the hope for the so long awaited 'Good Shepherd' and 'good ruler' will be disappointed, the break with tradition could be much worse than in previous decades. This fear may perhaps still let many bishops hesitate to give Francis the full support he needs. There may also be Cardinals who, at his election, have recognized the need for a change of the course, but who now consider the change of the course to be too strong and too fast. Some may also fear a Gorbachev effect that with the decentralization, it will happen to the global Roman Catholic Church as it was the case with disintegrating Soviet Union.

4. Francis' Courage to the Synodal Way and his Commitment to Global Justice

The Roman Catholic Church is now at a critical crossroad. The tremendous backlog of reforms and the substantial failure of the Curia urgently require a new style of management and decentralization. Francis has opted for a synodal way and tries to initiate processes. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis expressively

designates his four principles for the process character: 'Time is greater than space', 'Unity prevails over conflict', 'Realities are more important than ideas' and 'The whole is greater than the part' (EG, 222-237).

This includes — despite some shortcomings in implementation — the broad consultation process in preparation for the Family Synod that Pope Francis initiated. 'Realities are more important than ideas' (EG, 231) is a core idea of Francis. This must have consequences. The Church's sexual teaching overall is understood neither in content nor in the form because it has lost touch with the reality of man. But the process character of the Synod requires patience and for some it is difficult to be understood.

Francis sees first and foremost the need for a change of mentality, especially among the bishops, and practices a dialogic and spiritual leadership style. But by that the deep church leadership crisis is far from being over. To safeguard the reform process put in motion by Francis theologically and in church politics, even much stronger support from all reformist cardinals, bishops and theologians around the world is urgently needed.

With his critique of capitalism Francis is not afraid of addressing the economically and politically powerful. As a common thread, the opinions of Francis run through the scandal of poverty and the option for the poor. Above all, his programmatic encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* and the sentence contained therein 'this economy kills' evoked the bourgeois public opposition and outrage. Francis' words leave nothing to be desired in terms of clarity, but correspond to the long tradition of church doctrine up to the statements of recent popes.

The Catacombs Pact of 16 November 1965, inspired by the idea of a 'church of the poor' by Pope John XXIII, won new relevance with Pope Francis. Francis was the first Pope, who invited the leaders of social movements from all over the world to a meeting at the Vatican. His sensational speech on October 28, 2014 was far more radical and more important than his programmatic encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*. Some have interpreted this speech even as a 'spontaneous encyclical on poverty and the environment'.

5. Process-oriented Change Management of a World Organization

Pope Francis relies on 'collegiality' instead of 'papal absolutism'. Two years after his election, the new course is increasingly apparent. Within the global Roman Catholic Church, a mood swing is

happening that during the long double pontificate of the last two popes nobody thought to be possible. But it is not only the new and spiritual leadership style. Francis has made numerous personnel and organizational decisions that encourage the hope for a basic reform.

As might have been expected, there are strong countervailing forces against any reform not only in the Vatican, but also by bishops and traditionalist groups around the world that operate behind the scenes, but increasingly also speak out. But the Jesuit Francis with his decades of leadership experience in the extremely difficult situation of the Argentine military junta seems to have already taken into account these reactions.

The convocation of international advisory bodies which already took place after a short time was an important step of a new collegial management style. The discussions so far, however, show how difficult a reform of the Curia is that which Pope Paul VI had tried. Particularly delicate areas of action are the fight against the crimes of abuse of minors by clergy and transparency in the controversial Vatican Bank and the opaque Vatican finances.

The Curia reform is for Francis not only the result of administrative reforms and modifying what have become obsolete and outdated structures, but rather the result of a vibrant new orientation to the principles of the gospel. It is therefore important not only to increase the effectiveness of the Curia, but that a spirit of transparency, a collegial pluralism and democratic foundation becomes effective.

7. At the Beginning of a New Church Era?

2015 is the year of anniversaries, major challenges and important decisions. 50 years after the end of the Second Vatican Council it will be seen at the Family Synod this fall, if the impetus for reform set by Pope Francis is consistently taken up and continued. We are experiencing a situation that has opened the possibility of a crisis, the possibility of repentance and turning. We cannot hope that the new church is given us from above, however. Rather, we must open ourselves, looking for the new things.

Also the Church Referendum *We Are Church*, launched 1995 in Austria, celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Worn by the vision of People of God of the Council, it had five points of the internal church renewal on the content: fraternal church, full equality of women, voluntary celibacy, an affirmative attitude to sexuality, good

news instead of threatening message. Until now, none of these demands are realized.

In common with many other reformers worldwide and in collaboration with a renewal oriented theology, it has been possible to advance a broad shift in consciousness in the church people, as studies and surveys have repeatedly shown. The five points of the church referendum, supplemented by the ecumenical movement, have become a global reform canon for a church that can concretize the theology of *communio* of the Second Vatican Council.

The shortage of priests and the associated current collapse of classical pastoral community come forward to the development, because there is no one who might patronize the communities. But dogma and canon law still try to impose an authoritarian pre-conciliar church image.

Francis and we still face a long way to bring the Roman Catholic Church back on reforms in the direction of the Second Vatican Council. Will the bishops manage to share the synodal way of Francis? Are they willing to go synodal also in their dioceses? And how it is possible to 'carry' the traditionally oriented believers? If no convincing solutions are obtained this year, the decaying of authority of the Catholic Church will be far worse than by the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

8. 'Global Player' with Great Responsibility

Of the estimated more than eight billion people living in 2030 on our planet, more than a quarter will belong to the Christian churches. For the Roman Catholic Church, one of the few 'global players', this means — not only in religious terms — a great responsibility far beyond their own faith community. Because it is of worldwide influence whether and how the largest single church interferes with the questions of survival of humanity, what ethical standards they proclaim and practise themselves — from sexual teaching to business ethics and to the ethical issues at the beginning and end of human life.

But even discussions on mandatory celibacy, priesthood of women and the use of condoms are, in view of the world problems, more than just the 'usual intra-Catholic controversial issues,' the issue here are all existential questions, namely how power is exercised, how men and women interact in the following of Jesus, how sexuality is practised responsibly and how the tensions between passing tradition

and the necessary renewal can be made productive. Church reform and survival issues facing humanity are so closely intertwined.

'The renewal comes from the periphery,' this word of Leonardo Boff seems to have become true with Jorge Mario Bergoglio geographically and by content. The deep crisis in the church leadership has not yet been overcome. Now there is at least reasonable hope for a change in the Roman Catholic Church.

The key question for the future I see is what religions can contribute to the solution of the immense global social and economic problems, but especially if they can arrive with each other to a peaceful coexistence. The liberating message of Jesus Christ, his commitment to the marginalized, his love of neighbour and even love of enemies can contribute significantly to addressing the fundamental problems of humanity. For this purpose, we urgently need new forms of participation in the central issues of future in order to take and to dare responsibility in the great upheavals.

All the forces of reform should support a determined and consequent course of reform of Francis to counter the still strong resistance within the Church. Let us cooperate in order to make it possible to initiate a process of change and make it irreversible, so that the Roman Catholic Church can carry out its tasks in the rapidly changing global community of humankind.

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