

POPE FRANCIS' REFORM OF THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

Pope Francis' reform of the institutional church is centered on the attempt to change the attitude of the clergy and laity who serve in the Roman Curia and other governing roles in the church. Although Francis has made some structural changes, particularly in the Roman Dicasteries, his reform is not primarily a plan to create more decentralized structures or to engage in a radical transformation of the structures of the church. (Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis*, 143, hereafter cited *LP*). The objective of Francis' reform is aimed more at a conversion of the mentality of the bureaucrats than at a reform of the bureaucratic management and administrative structures of the church. (*LP*, 148). Its guiding principle is to bring about a spiritual and ministerial transformation of those who serve in authoritative positions in the church.

In his reform efforts Francis has pushed for some decentralization in the church. His adoption of the synodal model is perhaps the best example of his approach to decentralization. The deliberations of a synod begin at the local level and include the voices of bishops, priests, lay women and men, pastoral and theological experts, and often invited guests. One of the distinctive elements of the synodal model is that the Roman Curia does not occupy center stage in convening or in the running of a synod. In his efforts to decentralize the church Francis has been open to giving more authority to regional and national bishop conferences. (*LP*, 147). Francis also has stated that the pope should not take the place of local bishop in the discernment of every issue in their territory. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 16) hereafter cited *EG*) However, Francis' efforts to give more power to the local global churches does not intend to give individual bishops absolute, dictatorial power in their own dioceses.

Pope Francis' movement to decentralize the church does not mean that he intends to completely abandon the need for a central level of governance in the church. (*LP*, 143).

In Francis' vision the papacy and the Roman Curia still play leading governing and teaching roles in the church. In creating the Council of Cardinals Francis has actually centered more power in the papacy and less in the Roman Curia. The synods are convened by the pope and they eventually meet in Rome. It is the pope who makes the final decision on the implementation of any new pastoral policies or procedures that are recommended in the final report of the synod. Although its role is somewhat reimagined, the Roman Curia still plays a central role in Pope Francis' view of the church. In his December 21, 2017, address to the Roman Curia, Francis stated that the Dicasteries "must operate in a way befitting their nature and purpose, in the name and with the authority of the supreme pontiff, and always for the good and the service of the churches." (See *LP*, 144.)

Another key element in Pope Francis' vision of reform is that he has chosen to adopt a more pastoral and kerygmatic approach to preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ rather than giving the priority to the dogmatic content of faith. The main purpose of a synod is not to discuss the traditional doctrinal truths but to discuss how the teaching of the church can be lived and applied to the changing context of the twenty-first century. Compared to John Paul II and Benedict XVI, "Francis is inverting the trend of the relationship between the Roman Curia and the church, from a dogmatic understanding of the government of the church to a kerygmatic one." (*LP*, 145).

Applying this kerygmatic emphasis to the magisterium, Pope Francis reminds us that the magisterium has a "listening role" as well as an authoritative teaching role. The role of the Roman magisterium is not just to make absolute, infallible pronouncements that everyone must

accept without question or dissent. In his December 21, 2017, address to the Roman Curia, Francis stated that the Dicasteries are “called to be like faithful, sensitive antennae: sending and receiving” (See *LP*, 144). This is why, that in the synods, Francis urges the formal magisterium to take on a “listening mode” and to be open to hearing the faith of the laity who participate in Christ’s prophetic office through the infallible “sensus fidei.” (*LP*, no. 137). According to Francis this also follows a principle dear to the church in the first millennium: *Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet* (What touches all must be approved by all). (“Address at Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015. Also see *LP*, 137). Francis also points out that unity of teaching and practice in the church “does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it.” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no 3). The magisterium has a responsibility to listen to the people of God and preach the Gospel in a way that meets the needs of Catholics today.

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