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Reforms We Need

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 7, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Calls for reform of the Roman Curia have been around for a long time. The great medieval Councils urged such reforms, concluding with the Council of Constance?s classic formulation ?reform of the Church in faith and morals, in head and members.? The Fifth Lateran Council, held on the eve of the Reformation, repeated the call but did not enact the kind of precise direction that would effect it.

What, today, is needed by way of reform? Let us not look at personalities today, although the Church in Rome, like the Church in the U.S., still suffers from the fact that Pope John Paul II was not the best judge of character. Let us instead consider a few structural reforms that could improve the workings of the Vatican Curia.

First, the Vatican needs the equivalent of the Executive Office of the President, not so much a large organization with many staff as the president has, but as an attitude and a meeting. It need not be large ? four or five core members would do ? but their focus is simply functional. They would not be a decision-making body, more like an early-warning radar system. The key is that every morning, there is a meeting that poses the same questions: What is happening today? The rest of the week? What long-term projects are stalling or in risk of stalling? The meetings would emphasize on scheduling, public relations mine fields, additional consultation, planning and implementation of decisions, and following up on that implementation. The meeting must include the pope?s private secretary whose job it would be to advocate for the pope?s needs, especially regarding the schedule. The press person would have to be there to raise red flags. The Sostituto, who serves as a kind of chief-of-staff, or one of his staff would have to be there. If, say, the pope meets with the prefect of the CDF on Friday, at the Saturday morning meeting, someone from CDF would be in attendance to discuss any needed follow-up to that meeting. The same with the other prefects. The idea is that potential problems could be flagged in advance and avoided, the regular operation of the curia would have a layer of oversight on the pope?s behalf, but because the group is directly answerable to the pope, they could avoid some of, or at least ameliorate, any turf wars. If the group fails to reach consensus on any given issue, you can be sure the issue will also divide the curia. So, if the morning group cannot find consensus on something, they bring it as a group to the pope immediately, or at least the two people whose views are most divergent. They make their case and he decides before the issue starts causing division throughout the entire curia.

A second reform is to establish regular meetings among the various curial departments to address common needs and problems. It is stunning that there are not such regularly scheduled meetings now. The cardinals in the curia should meet with the pope on a monthly basis at least, not count on information filtering through the various levels of the Secretariat of State.

A third reform extends beyond the curia but it would be necessary for the regular meetings to work: The Vatican needs to learn how to conduct a meeting. Look at these General Congregations of Cardinals. Each cardinal gets up and gives a little talk. Then the next. Etc. There is no dialogue and there is much repetition. It is the same at meetings of the Synods of Bishops. Evidently, at yesterday?s General Congregation, one of the curial cardinals expressed frustration about the leak that made it into the Italian press. The decision was made to stop the press briefings by the U.S. cardinals. Huh? When the complaint was lodged, there was no opportunity for a cardinal to

stand up and say, ?Don?t blame us! We didn?t leak anything to La Stampa.? There was no opportunity for someone to point out that in the absence of press briefings, it is precisely the lone leaker who gets to determine the news coverage, and it is better to have regular press briefings because reporters need something to write about and it is better to write facts than speculation. At a Synod, if someone identifies secularization as a problem, there is no chance to ask him in detail what he means by the term, how he thinks secularization advances, the degree to which secularization is an active, hostile agent or simply the playing out of deep-seated cultural trends, etc. Better meetings lead to better decisions.

Another reform that the Vatican Curia needs is a personnel board. Currently, you are given your assignment with no chance for input by the people being considered. But, surely, everyone knows that a person who actually wants to do a certain job is more likely to succeed in that job than someone who does not want to do that job. The personnel board could also require self-evaluations of personnel, identifying that person?s goals in each year and the degree to which they met those goals, and comparing the results with comments from others assessing the person?s performance. The personnel board could, through the diplomatic corps, solicit comments from the bishops around the world about the performance of key curial departments: Are your letters acknowledged promptly? Do you get a speedy decision if one is needed? Are the procedures of a given department transparent enough for a bishop to understand them and get a fair hearing?

As you read this list, you are noticing that much of the decision-making done by the curia is not exactly pastoral work. It is time to include more lay people and religious women and men in the curia. If the diplomatic corps sniffed at Cardinal Bertone?s comment that he wanted to be a ?pastoral Secretary of State? because they thought that was like saying one intended to be a ?pastoral Latin teacher,? let them think about the implication of that sniff. If the job of Secretary of State is not a pastoral assignment, it need not be entrusted to a pastor. Indeed, back in the good old days, key cardinals would be deacons, but this at a time when there was no deaconate. They were clerics in name only. Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, who served as Vatican Secretary of State from 1848-1876, was one such cardinal, a laymen in all but name. He was also a fierce reactionary so those who think introducing lay people into the Vatican administration will necessarily result in more progressive policies should think again.

There is one reform that is nearest to my heart and it has nothing to do with the Vatican curia. The practice of translating a bishop from one diocese to a larger or more prestigious one must stop. A bishop is supposed to be married to his diocese, and each such promotion requires a dispensation from Church law. I tease one friend who has had four dioceses that he has been divorced and remarried three times and yet he still takes communion! Cardinal Ouellet spoke about ending the practice when he took over as Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, but has not made any moves to implement such a change. It would require taking longer to find the right person for a large archdiocese, to be sure. But, it would not only conform our practice to our theology, it would have two very practical effects. First, a bishop would not make decisions based upon how they look to others. Because he would be living with the consequences of the decisions he makes, he might be more inclined to make decisions that are good for the diocese, not good for his advancement up the hierarchical food chain. Second, and as the first suggests, it would leave little oxygen for ambition in the ranks of the hierarchy. If a man wants to be the Bishop of Timbuktu, let him know he will be there for the rest of his life, and not see that diocese as a stepping stone to becoming an archbishop in a larger see.

So, these are the reforms I would like to see from the new pope. They have nothing to do with ordaining women or the sex abuse crisis or any of the hot button issues that tend to dominate discussions of reform, but they would make it more likely those hot button issues would be addressed more effectively. The trains would run on time. The people in the curia would be in jobs suited to their talents and their hearts? desire. The meetings would really be meetings, and not joint, simultaneous speaking engagements, and there would be less ambition in the hierarchy. These are reforms that might help the Church set goals like the New Evangelization and realize them.

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