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Former San Francisco archbishop calls for papal reforms ahead of conclave

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 10, 2013 NCR Today
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With the world's cardinals set to choose a new pope, Emeritus Archbishop of San Francisco John Quinn on Saturday called for major church governance reforms, including changes in the papacy itself.

"Media reports dealing with reform tend to focus on clerical celibacy and on the ordination of women and on the reform of the [Roman] Curia. ... These are important topics, but it would be a mistake to stop there," Quinn said.

"Today, if we want to deal seriously with the legacy of Vatican II and issues of reform we must have the courage to consider the deeper questions. This is not possible unless the paramount issue of the exercise of the papal office is addressed."

Quinn, who spoke as part of a daylong symposium, "The Legacy of Vatican II: Personal Reflections," at Stanford University, called for major decentralization of Vatican and papal authority. He said this could be achieved through the creation of regional bishops' conferences and synods of bishops with decision-making authority.

This week's conclave, he said, has potential to be one of the most critical moments in the history of the church since the Reformation. The cardinals "need to see themselves and the whole Catholic church poised at a moment of far-reaching consequences," he said.

Key reforms intended by the bishops at Vatican II (1962-1965) have not taken place, Quinn told a packed audience here. The result has been ineffective and even dysfunctional governance in the years since the council, he added.

He said shared bishops' decision-making with the pope is needed. Such decision-making "is not the result of a juridical decree, not the result of the action of a council, and not the result of the decision of any pope." Rather, it is rooted in the ordination of the bishop and the doctrine that he is a successor to the apostles of Jesus, Quinn said.

He said shared episcopal decision-making was "the legacy of Vatican II."

"A very large number of bishops are of the opinion that there is not any real or meaningful collegiality in the church today," he said.

Years after Quinn served as archbishop of San Francisco from 1977 to 1995 and president of the U.S. bishops' conference from 1977 to 1980, he remains an important intellectual figure among the U.S. bishops.

In 1991, in response to Pope John Paul II's request for suggestions on how to reform the papacy he wrote a book on the subject, drawing acclaim at the time.

Quinn offered examples of the ways over-centralized church decision-making has hurt the church, running contrary to ideas of collegiality proposed at the council.

Quinn said local bishops now "have no perceptible influence" in the appointment of bishops. Instead, appointments are made in Rome, often by men who do not adequately know local diocesan needs.

"The bishops of the region may never have heard the name of a bishop sent to their area," Quinn said. "Often, bishops submit multiple names and none of them is accepted."

Quinn also cited changes in the words Catholics use during the Mass. He said the intentions of local bishops "who best understand local language and customs" was disregarded by the Vatican when it decreed new liturgical language norms two years ago.

"The observations of the bishops' conferences had little influence and at the end of the consultation with conferences a very large number of changes were made in the final text which the bishops had never seen," Quinn said.

He suggested two governance changes to rebalance church decision-making and to decentralize church authority. Both, he said, come out of church history and tradition: regional bishops' conferences and deliberative episcopal synods.

These moves, he said, would involve separating two aspects of the function of the papacy: "the unity of faith and communion" and administration. The pope would have "the burden of fostering unity, collaboration and charity, but church administration would become more regional."

In such a reconfiguration, the appointment of bishops, the creation of dioceses, questions of liturgy and other matters of Catholic practices would be up the regional bishops' conferences, Quinn said.

There is no doctrine of faith nor any provision of canon law that would prevent the creation of new patriarchal structures in the church, he said.

In the case of Asia and Africa, these would enable local churches to develop their liturgy, spirituality and practice in accord with their own cultures, he said, adding there has been a long-standing complaint from both Africa and Asia that "they feel impoverished and constrained in not being able to integrate elements of their culture into church life."

Quinn went on to say that at the end of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI called for the establishment of decision-making synods of bishops.

"To date," he said, "50 years after the council, no deliberative synod has ever been held."

Quinn said deliberative synods could be made up of the presidents of episcopal conferences and of the patriarchs and major archbishops of the Eastern Catholic Churches.

Full text of Emeritus Archbishop John Quinn's Stanford address [1]

[Thomas C. Fox is *NCR* publisher.]

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