

## The Call for Reform

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 12, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

[Yesterday, NCR reported](#) [1] on a talk given by Archbishop John Quinn, the Archbishop Emeritus of San Francisco, at Stanford University in which he called for two significant reforms in the Church, the adoption of patriarchal forms of local governance and making the Synod of Bishops a deliberative and responsible governing actor in the Church, not merely a consultative body.

Archbishop Quinn is on to something: Power within the Church has become far too centralized and the Church would benefit from the introduction of organization structures, like local patriarchal structures, that share in the decision-making in the Church. We forget that the Roman Pontiff only recently acquired the authority to name bishops throughout the world. In previous centuries, new bishops were nominated by local authorities, sometimes the canons of a cathedral, sometimes the secular authority. Even in the U.S. where there were no canons and the secular authority avoided all interference in the selection of bishops, the first terna for a vacant see was drawn up by the irremovable rectors of a diocese (the nineteenth century equivalent of what we call local pastors), and then another terna was drawn up by the bishops of the ecclesiastical province. Both ternas were then sent to Rome which would pick the new bishop from these lists.

Of course, Quinn's suggestion could be an example of the need to be careful in what one wishes. Given the current line-up of the U.S. episcopacy, I am not sure that progressive Catholics would be very happy with the decisions they would make. The USCCB is a far different place from what it was when Archbishop Quinn was a member.

The problem with the Synod of Bishops is partly that it is a consultative body, without any enforcement authority. It's bigger problem was one I highlighted last week ? the meetings are a series of speeches, there are no exchanges, no questioning, no real back-and-forth. In addition to being horribly dull, it is virtually impossible to get beyond the slogans, to challenge assumptions, to encourage a more thorough-going examination of issues. Only if the method of conducting the meetings were to change would it make sense to give the Synod of Bishops a decision-making authority.

According to countless news reports, during the General Congregation meetings of the cardinals over the past week and one-half, many cardinals argued that there needs to be reform of the curia. Our newest colleague here at NCR, [Father Thomas Reese, S.J., makes the salient point](#) [2] that reform can mean different things to different people. Many progressive Catholics consider Pope John XXIII their hero but, of course, on some issues, such as the sacred liturgy, John XXIII was very conservative. He loved all the hoopla and ritual, enjoyed his coronation as pope, and reveled in the baroque vestments he wore. Yet, he inaugurated the Second Vatican Council which really did bring about serious reforms in the Church.

It is not enough to hope that the trains at the Vatican run on time. We need to know that they are running in the right direction. A more efficient Vatican could be a decidedly mixed blessing if those who are running it remain deeply clericalist in their attitude, jealous of their personal prerogatives, and, most importantly, forgetful of the

fact that power in the Church is exercised in service. Indeed, I have long believed that the only justification for restricting decision-making in the Church to the clergy is because they are, in the confessional, ambassadors of God's mercy and only an ambassador of God's mercy, someone who is regularly confronted with the frailty of the human condition and the still miraculous grace of God's ineffable mercy, only such a person should make ecclesial decisions. I have come to modify that belief. One very concrete reform I would like to see in the next few years is to include within the College of Cardinals those non-ordained Catholics who spend their days performing the corporal works of mercy. The cardinalate, unlike Holy Orders, is of completely human origin and the new pope can change its composition with a *motu proprio*. Indeed, until John XXIII, cardinals did not have to be bishops. As late as the pontificate of Pope Pius IX, some cardinals were, for all intents and purposes, laymen. I would like to see the new pope select some religious women and make them cardinals. They feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowful, visit the imprisoned. They are well acquainted with God's mercy and, so, easily meet the criterion of being an ambassador of God's mercy as a prerequisite for decision-making authority that I hope the Church will never abandon.

No change in structures, however, is enough. I fear that the Church continues to suffer from the fact that Pope John Paul II was often a bad judge of character. It is not easy to see Cardinal Sodano presiding at this morning Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff. As my colleague Jason Berry has fully demonstrated, Sodano embodies exactly what needs to change at the Vatican. On the other hand, a change in structures often results in changes of personnel: A more collaborative form of government will, in turn, require that people appointed to positions of authority have the kind of personalities that are capable of collaboration. Princelings would not long survive a more dialogical papacy.

I do not know who will wear the Shoes of the Fisherman by the end of the week. I hope he is a holy man. I hope, very much, that he is a good judge of character. I hope he will have received from his fellow cardinals a mandate to clean up the Vatican of all the various types of corruption that exist there and that he will have the personal fortitude and wisdom to fashion a broom of appropriate size and clean house. I hope he will inspire in his colleagues a renewed awareness that they are there to serve, that the curia exists to help the pope govern the universal Church, not to get red for its workers. And, I hope the new pope will look to the Church's great traditions, as Archbishop Quinn suggested, for alternate models of governance that can inform what reforms are required. Most of all, I hope the entire people of God, in *caput et membris*, understands that the reform that matters most is conversion of heart.

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