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Francis pre-conclave remarks echo in first general audience

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 27, 2013 NCR Today

Consider the similarity of remarks the future Pope Francis made to the church's cardinals regarding the fundamental mission of the church before the conclave and those he offered today in his first general audience. In both, the pontiff stressed that the work of the church must be out in the world. Moreover, he told the cardinals that the church, as institution, is often tempted into a kind of "theological narcissism."

We learn of Francis? pre-conclave remarks [1] through the archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino, who Saturday read from a document given him by Pope Francis, outlining his pre-conclave speech. Ortega had been so impressed with the speech he asked the then-Cardinal Bergoglio for a copy of the intervention. Ortega received permission from Francis to share the information.

Bergoglio said to the cardinals that evangelization implies apostolic zeal and that it ?pre-supposes a desire in the church to come out of herself.?

?The church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery.

When the church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick. The evils that, over time, happen in ecclesial institutions have their root in self-referentiality and a kind of theological narcissism.

When the Church is self-referential, inadvertently, she believes she has her own light; she ceases to be the *mysterium lunae* and gives way to that very serious evil, spiritual worldliness. It lives to give glory only to one another.

Put simply, there are two images of the church: Church which evangelizes and comes out of herself, the *Dei Verbum religiose audiens et fidente proclamans*; and the worldly church, living within herself, of herself, for herself. This should shed light on the possible changes and reforms which must be done for the salvation of souls.

Thinking of the next pope: He must be a man who, from the contemplation and adoration of Jesus Christ, helps the church to go out to the existential peripheries that helps her to be the fruitful mother, who gains life from ?the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing.?

Stressing the need to go out in the world, in his first general audience today in St. Peter?s Square, Francis, spoke along the same line [2], even using some of the same words he used two weeks before.

Following Jesus, living Holy Week, Francis told the assembled, means ?learning how to come out of ourselves - as I said on Sunday - to reach out to others, to go to the outskirts of existence, to be the first to move towards

our brothers and sisters, especially those who are most distant, those who are forgotten, those who are most in need of understanding, consolation and help. There is so much need to bring the living presence of Jesus, merciful and full of love!?

?Following, accompanying Christ, remaining with Him requires a stepping outside. Stepping outside of ourselves, of a tired and routine way of living the faith, of the temptation to withdraw into pre-established patterns that end up closing our horizon to the creative action of God. God stepped outside of Himself to come among us, He pitched His tent among us to bring the mercy of God that saves and gives hope. Even if we want to follow Him and stay with Him, we must not be content to remain in the enclosure of the ninety-nine sheep, we have to "step outside", to search for the lost sheep together with Him, the one furthest away. Remember well: stepping outside of ourselves, like Jesus, like God has stepped outside of Himself in Jesus and Jesus stepped outside of Himself for all of us"

Much of the debate surrounding church mission since Vatican II has stems from varied theological understandings of how the Holy Spirit operates in the world and how the Spirit guides the church. The council taught that the Spirit infuses creation, that creation is fundamentally good, a revelation of God, and that Christians are called to discern the Spirit throughout creation. In the years following the council, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI retreated from this more optimistic view of the world, seeing a world filled with sin and darkness, in need of redemption by the church. Through their eyes, the church possesses the light, and the Spirit operate through the church, through this light to the world, guiding it to redemption of the world. This understanding of the Spirit's work is more dualistic.

The problem with such a dualistic view, especially in the extreme, is not so much that the world is dark, but rather that the church is light, and reform is unnecessary. Further, it means that the church has little or nothing to learn from the world. Clearly latter view is not the view of Pope Francis. The way he has approached other Christians, members of other religions, and non-believers indicates he sees the work of the Spirit active throughout the world, starting within other religions.

Francis' interpretation of Spirit and of church mission - a Spirit active in the world and a mission aimed at working to build the reign of God within the world, reaching out to the neediest - the view of church, which came out of the Vatican Council. We might be seeing the next round of the council coming to life within our church and wider world.

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