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The new pope?s real target: clericalism

Robert McClory | Apr. 4, 2013 NCR Today

I?m beginning to think the many amazing choices Pope Francis has been making in these early days of his pontificate will have an important, long-lasting effect on the church of the 21st century. He is preaching almost daily a powerful, silent sermon denouncing the scourge of clericalism that is at the root of most of the problems bedeviling Catholicism.

It?s the simple way he lives; his decision to move into the visitors? quarters and eat his meals with them; his lack of interest in pomp and pageantry; his decision to wash the feet of prison inmates (including women) on Holy Thursday; his insistent concern for the poor and the state of planet Earth.

He hasn?t yet addressed any of the hot button items, including birth control, the aspirations of women, the collegiality of bishops or the Vatican?s failure to address the priest abuse scandal in a meaningful way. And I suspect he will not, at least for some time.

Instead, he may be building by example a case against the arrogance and self-satisfaction that provides the foundation for a multi-tiered, class-conscious society of those who make the decisions and those who don?t, those who have given up earthly rewards in favor of honorific titles, fancy liturgical attire and, above all, power.

Francis seems to be harkening back to an earlier age of the church when the equality of believers was at center stage and a feudal structure of society had not yet become the norm for both state and church.

For many generations earnest, young male seminarians have been taught that they are aspiring to a higher level not available to the laity, a level at which they will have the authority to teach, sanctify and govern those below. They will carry with them sacred powers that will accompany them even into eternity. For such privileges they promise to become eunuchs for the kingdom, and they pledge to defer their own judgments without reservation to the authoritative pronouncements of those on still higher levels, be it pastor, bishop or pope.

In effect, they become members of a kind of boys club that is warm, supportive and exclusive ? and never breaks ranks. For what they give up, they can expect a relatively high standard of living and the respect, even adulation (at least until the abuse scandal hit), of their grateful congregations.

Of course, priests have always been urged to develop an active spiritual life, to nourish virtues like humility and self-sacrifice. And a great number of the clergy do manage to live holy, creative lives and inspire their people with their integrity. Their membership in the boys club is loose.

But not everyone succeeds. Clericalism is contagious, breeding a kind of mentality that revels in ecclesiastical ambition, status and power. For some, especially those attracted to the episcopacy, it often leads to indifference toward the experiences and needs of ordinary Catholics. It encourages the creation (or repetition) of teachings and regulations worked out in ivory-tower isolation from the real world.

And now comes Francis.

It will not take him long to recognize the extent of clericalism rampant in the Curia and to realize how it corrupts the church and strangles the Holy Spirit. Even before he arrived for the election, he was undoubtedly aware of clericalism and its effects in other countries. I want to believe he is laying down a kind of platform to reconnect the church of this era to the Spirit that inspired the early Christians and authentic leaders, like Francis of Assisi, to both proclaim the gospel and live it.

When that happens on a wide scale, the hot buttons will surely be addressed but in a different way. No longer will they be so front and center. The church, possibly the larger Catholic church, could be involved in finding solutions to these nagging, peripheral issues, which deafen us from hearing the radical gospel message.

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