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Francis will be 'boon' to ecumenism, expert predicts

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 22, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

Rome ?For years, experts on ecumenism have said that the main stumbling block to putting the divided Christian family back together again isn?t so much the papacy, but a certain overly monarchical model of it. If we could find new ways of exercising primacy, they prophesied, unity might move a massive step closer to reality.

One veteran expert believes those ?new ways? may have arrived with Pope Francis, predicting that this pontiff will prove a ?boon? to ecumenism.

?He?s bringing to life what Vatican II added about the role of the papacy being understood from within the college of bishops and the communion of churches,? said Capuchin Fr. William Henn of Rome?s Gregorian University.

If anyone has his finger on the pulse of the ecumenical world, it?s arguably Henn, who originally hails from New Brighton, Pennsylvania. He currently holds the ?Robert Bellarmine Chair of Ecclesiology and Ecumenism? at the Gregorian, and serves as a consulter to the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. (He was first tapped to the role in 2002, and re-upped in 2008.)

Henn has also served as a Catholic delegate in official dialogues with the Reformed Churches, the Pentecostals, the Lutherans and the Mennonites, and he also serves as one of the Catholic representatives to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, which brings together over 350 churches worldwide.

Henn?s best-known book is perhaps *The Honor of My Brothers: A Brief History of the Relation between the Pope and the Bishops* (Crossroad-Herder, 2000). The title comes from a line by Pope Gregory the Great, who was once hailed by a sycophant from Thessalonica as the ?bishop of bishops.? Gregory replied that he wouldn?t be honored by any title that came at the expense of the ?honor of my brothers.?

Henn spoke as part of a round table discussion on Pope Francis Friday night sponsored by the ?Alberto Hurtado Center for Faith and Culture? at the Gregorian. The next day, he sat down for an interview with NCR.

You think this pope will be a boon to ecumenism?

I think so, yes. I remember being part of the Pentecostal/Catholic dialogue that ended a few years ago. At one stage we had a long discussion on restorationism, and the Pentecostals felt very strongly that the Constantinian tolerance of Christianity had been a disaster. They felt that a ministry regulated by the state and undertaken by people of prominence in society had led away from the primitive vision of the church as expressed in the Acts of the Apostles. The truth is, there?s something to that.

In the feudal era, we developed this notion of bishops as princes. I remember that the drafting session for our text on the church was held in Freising, where the most prominent building in town is the archbishop?s palace!

What we need is a vision of ministry that can sort of step aside from that impression, which isn?t essential to the church. Luther, you know, really had no problem with bishops, but with the way the church had taken on the power of the state.

With Francis, I think other Christians can see episcopal ministry more clearly as a service to communion, and will become more open to it. Many times in an ecumenical context, I?ve heard people talk very positively about recent popes. Timothy George and other Evangelicals, for instance, published a book of commentaries on the encyclicals of John Paul II called *Our Common Teacher*. Sometimes I?ve almost thought they wished they had a strong voice like that, if the incidentals of exercising this role didn?t get in the way. That?s happened in the past, but I think with Francis there?s a real possibility of moving ahead.

In your talk the other night, you cited a recent text from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches that coincidentally was released just a day after Francis was elected.

It?s titled *The Church: Toward a Common Vision*, and it represents only the second time the commission has published a paper citing a significant convergence on something. It?s the heir to *Eucharist, Baptism and Ministry* , published in 1982. This new text has some very interesting statements about primacy, expressed in four or five paragraphs. A key line in paragraph 56 states, ?All would agree that any such personal primatial ministry would need to be exercised in communal and collegial ways.?

When Pope Francis walked out onto the balcony after his election without all the refinements he could have had and asked people to bless him, that?s communal. When he emphasized his role as the bishop of Rome, that?s collegial. It almost seemed, watching him and hearing him speak, that he was expressing the vision of paragraph 56. I?m very hopeful that his style will be helpful ecumenically.

What?s the ecumenical importance of Francis talking about being the bishop of Rome?

It?s very significant. It goes back to a point made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its 1992 document on the church as communion, and by John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. Both distinguished between the essence of papal primacy and a particular way of exercising it. In 1996 the Congregation for the Faith organized a symposium on this subject that led a 1998 text on the ministry of the successor of Peter. The conclusion was that the essence of the ministry is to serve the unity of the whole church, unity in the universal sense, meaning the whole Catholic communion.

The document acknowledged that Vatican I saw the role of the pope as to preserve the bishops in faith and love, the idea being that the two usual motives for division in the church are sins against one of those things ? either heresy, which is a sin against the faith, or schism, which is a sin against love as expressed in fraternal communion.

That same 1998 document, however, went on to ask: What did Vatican II add to the picture? The conclusion was that Vatican II more clearly situates the role of the pope within the college of bishops, and within the communion of churches ? ?churches,? plural. The idea was to give value to the interplay of the local churches and their diversity, to emphasize that the ?one, holy Catholic and apostolic church? is fully present there.

I?d say that when Pope Francis presents himself as the bishop of Rome, he?s expressing and acting out the vision of that 1998 document from the Congregation for the Faith. He?s bringing to life what Vatican II added about the role of the papacy being understood from within the college of bishops and the communion of churches.

We?ve talked for a long time about finding ?new ways? of exercising the papacy to serve the cause of Christian unity. Does Pope Francis? willingness to break custom show this isn?t just talk?

It doesn?t all start with Francis. Like Congar would say, the popes of the last 200 years have been very different from the popes of the Renaissance or the 800s. The papacy is no longer a political football among the noble families of Rome. We shouldn?t diminish how innovative recent popes have been, all of whom faced difficult challenges and, in many ways, demonstrated a very selfless style of ministry.

Nevertheless, I think the capacity to embrace new ways of exercising the papacy may be clearer with Francis. The mere fact of being from a different continent is part of that new style. Europe in some ways is still associated with the era of the nobles and the monuments of the past. Francis is a man who?s walked through the barrios of Latin America and has developed a very personal pastoral style, which is a much stronger expression of change in the way of exercising the papal ministry than would have been evident from others.

What we?ve seen from Francis in the way he stood out on the balcony, in his choice of name and the reasons he gave for it, his emphasis on poverty, peace and ecology, all of that is something very fresh. Both popes and the doctrinal congregation have said that the forms of the papacy can change to serve ecumenical unity, and with Francis that seems to be coming to life. I?m very excited to see what might unfold.

What kind of reaction have you picked up among your friends from other churches?

My sense is that there?s real interest. I got an e-mail from a Baptist friend recently who?s very excited. Last week I heard from some friends in the Reformed tradition who are very pleased with what they?re seeing.

My suspicion is that many people from other Christian traditions believe that the model of the episcopacy in the Catholic church has been overly influenced by European history, with bishops traditionally seen as members of the upper ruling classes, and that?s been a negative impression. It?s colored discussions about authority, which have been behind so many divisions among Christians. This pope can create a very different impression.

There still are some who may see the pope as the anti-Christ, but that?s not a prominent view at all. Most other Christians appreciate much of what John Paul II and Benedict XVI were able to do in speaking for the Gospel in an effective way. John Paul?s funeral, for instance, drew an awful lot of interest among other Christians. In that context, I suspect that the new style of the papacy under Francis ? more personal, more collegial, and more communal ? will really strike a chord.

What do you think the first test will be of how much progress is reasonable to expect under Francis?

I don?t think there?s any particular moment that shapes up as a bellwether. I do hope that this very courageous statement from the World Council of Churches [on the church and primacy] will be interesting to Pope Francis. I?ve spoken to theologians from Argentina who say that the pope was very open to ecumenism in Buenos Aires, which actually surprised me a little bit, knowing that relations among the churches are sometimes a little tense in Latin America. I hope that this new text makes a splash and creates interest around the world.

Of course, the first time Pope Francis has to reaffirm Catholic teaching on matters such as gay marriage, abortion and women?s ordination, it may create negative feelings among some types of Protestants. On the other hand, the Baptists will be happier than ever, as will the Pentecostals.

Is Pope Francis a case in which changes in style at some point also become changes in substance?

Yes, because the style of episcopal ministry has long been an ecumenical stumbling block. If we had had a very

different style in the past, I don?t think many of these divisions would have happened in the first place.

Today we?re trying to understand each other better and to rebuild friendships. Trying to come to some mutually acceptable vision of authority can seem impossible, but I remember something that Cardinal [Walter] Kasper [the Vatican?s former top ecumenical official] said. Before the Berlin Wall fell, he once asked, who would have thought it was going to come down the next morning?

I don?t know that ecumenical unity will happen like that, all at once. It will probably come in stages, but Pope Francis may be a key to getting things moving seriously in that direction.

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