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Looking toward the 'Francis revolution' still to come

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Amid the clamor over Pope Francis' comments on gays, women, the Vatican bank and other juicy topics during a July 28 in-flight news conference, one stray but revealing remark largely slipped through the cracks.

Asked if he had run into resistance to change in the Vatican, Francis delivered a mildly rambling response stressing the presence of many helpful and loyal people, along with the blunt judgment that the place's quality has declined from the era of "old curialists" who simply did their jobs.

Then came the telling line: "It's true," the pope said, "that I haven't done very much."

In a sense, of course, he was being modest. Francis has done a great deal, mostly to reverse negative impressions of the church and to afford it a new lease on life. Yet in terms of concrete acts of governance, he had a point.

Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, who helped elect Francis in March, told *NCR* during a July 24 interview that, among other qualities, the cardinals "wanted someone with good managerial skills." Dolan said that so far, that part of the equation "hasn't been as obvious."

"I would expect that after the summer lull, we'll see more signs of management changes," he said.

Dolan's forecast confirms something already clear five months ago: This Latin American outsider was elected on a strong reform mandate. The question is, once he gets down to brass tacks, what kind of revolution will Francis lead?

Four areas seem destined to form the front lines.

Finances

Left to his own devices, Francis might not have opted to start with the Vatican bank. He sees it as an important institution but, as he put it during a homily in June, necessary "only up to a certain point."

Yet circumstances have aligned to make the bank an acid test of Francis' commitment to change. Earlier this summer, the bank's top two officials resigned amid an Italian money-laundering probe and Italian police arrested a Vatican accountant on charges of trying to smuggle $26 million in cash into Italy and using his Vatican bank accounts to disguise funds.

On the plane from Rio de Janeiro to Rome July 28, Francis sketched out three options for the bank, formally known as the Institute for the Works of Religion:

- Turning it into an "ethical bank";
- Transforming it into a charitable assistance fund;
- Closing it.

Most observers regard the third option as the least probable, if arguably the cleanest. The fact is, Catholic religious orders and charitable organizations that operate in different corners of the world, often in circumstances where financial systems are underdeveloped, need ways to protect their assets and transfer funds easily. If there were no Vatican bank, popes probably would face pressure to invent one.

The ethical banking option is considered the most likely outcome, even if the term itself is a bit nebulous. In general, ethical banks share three characteristics: commitment to "best practices" of transparency, with regularly published balance sheets and a receptiveness to outside review; use of assets for socially responsible purposes, often by accepting lower profit margins than regular commercial banks; and the involvement of stakeholders and community members in governance.

In Italy, the Banca Popolare Etica is often cited as a model. It is sponsored by labor and farm groups, shop-owner associations, even the Italian Scouts.

Signs of change are in the air. Vatican bank officials have hired the Washington, D.C.-based Promontory Financial Group to conduct a detailed review of accounts, and most observers believe it will become more difficult for individuals, as opposed to organizations, to use the bank's services. The bank also recently launched a website [2] that confirms the amount of assets under management ($9.4 billion) and the number of account holders (18,900).

As hard as fixing the bank may be, however, it's only a preliminary step to the bigger challenge: promoting transparency at lower levels of the church, where the real money is concentrated and where hit-and-miss oversight sometimes spells disaster.

That truth has been well-captured by a recent meltdown in Slovenia, where the country's two archbishops resigned amid the collapse of the Maribor archdiocese. After the country's emergence from communism, church officials in Maribor built a credit-driven financial colossus, at one point owning three holding companies that controlled at least 50 different firms, including a cable TV outlet that aired late-night porn.

The holding companies recently went belly-up with a debt estimated at more than $1 billion, equivalent to 2 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Among other things, a pension fund with the savings of some 65,000 small investors reportedly was wiped out.

Francis sent a signal of accountability by accepting the archbishops' resignations, just two years after the previous archbishop of Maribor was pressured to step aside for his role in the mess. The task now is to craft policies and to shape culture so that similar implosions are avoided elsewhere.

Sex abuse

Another front where critics believe the church needs more transparency is its response to the child sexual abuse scandals.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who has more than two decades of experience dealing with the scandals, recently placed two ideas on the table. In a July 26 interview with *NCR*, O'Malley said Francis should:

- Convene the presidents of bishops' conferences around the world and try to convince those who have not adopted strong anti-abuse guidelines to do so;

- Adopt the same anti-abuse protocols in the Vatican that have become standard practice in dioceses and other Catholic venues around the world, including background checks and screening of all personnel, training in abuse detection and prevention, and instructions in how to handle complaints.

It's not clear whether Francis will act on those recommendations, although O'Malley is in a unique position to move the ball. He's the lone American among the eight cardinals tapped in April to assist Francis in "governance of the universal church."

Francis made an interesting point about the issue during his onboard news conference, distinguishing between "sins" of one's past that may be forgiven and forgotten, and "crimes," such as "the abuse of minors," that require a different response.

It was a small but potentially telling sign that Francis intends to take a firm line. Many observers believe one test will be whether Francis extends the tough accountability the church now has for priests who abuse also to bishops who mismanage abuse complaints. Senior churchmen expressed confidence to *NCR* that Francis will do so, though to date there's been no clear move along those lines.

Collegiality

In some ways, Francis' most important step toward fostering greater collegiality may already have come with the April 13 decision to create the council of eight cardinals. The effect is to distribute power away from the Vatican and toward the heads of local churches.

Among other things, the decision implies clipping the wings of the Vatican's Secretariat of State. Already it has lost some of its power as a gatekeeper. For instance, O'Malley said that when he has questions or wants to make a report to the pope, his contact is directly with Francis rather than having to go through the Secretariat of State.

O'Malley also said the eight cardinals want to act as spokesmen for the concerns and ideas of other bishops. He's interviewing all the other cardinals in North America and has asked them for advice. Others are doing the same. Cardinal Francisco Errázuriz of Chile, for instance, polled members of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) during a recent meeting in Panama.

Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, the coordinator of the group of eight cardinals, met with Francis while he was in Brazil for World Youth Day in July. Rodríguez said he received approval to put together an *instrumentum laboris*, or working paper, that would outline recommendations for change.

Another front where Francis seems likely to move quickly is the Synod of Bishops, which was founded under Pope Paul VI as an organ of collegial governance. On the plane, Francis hinted at the need for reform in the "methodology" of the synod, which many observers believe is too large, too cumbersome and too focused on single topics to act as the sounding board a pope needs.

Cardinal George Pell of Sydney suggested in June that a smaller council of bishops could meet with the pope for several hours, two or three times a year, to discuss a specific topic at length. Francis said in his press conference that when the eight cardinals meet with him in October, they'll ponder changes to the system.

Marriage and divorce

There are also signs that Francis may be prepared to untie some longstanding pastoral knots, beginning with divorced and remarried Catholics. Under current discipline, those Catholics are unable to receive the Eucharist, a practice that has long been a source of heartache in the trenches.

In his remarks on the plane, Francis signaled interest in the "principle of economy" found in the Orthodox tradition, according to which a second union may be blessed after dispensing from the vows of marriage.

He also said the question has to be looked at in the wider context of the pastoral care of marriage, a theme he said the council of eight cardinals and a future Synod of Bishops will examine. The practice of annulments, he said, "has to be looked at again."

Resistance

In general, Francis appears open to allowing new pastoral initiatives to surface from below, instead of being driven from the top down. In a July 25 meeting with youth from Argentina during his Brazil trip, he pointedly encouraged them to "make a mess."

"I want the church to go out onto the streets," he said. "I want us to resist everything worldly, everything static, everything comfortable, everything to do with clericalism, everything that might make us closed in on ourselves."

But every revolution has winners and losers, and although Francis may insist he hasn't encountered any resistance, that's not to say it doesn't exist. So far, there are five circles where opposition to the "Francis revolution" seems to be emerging.

- The first is liturgical traditionalists, recently irritated with a decision to forbid the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate from saying the older Latin Mass without specific permission -- a decision, some argue, at odds with Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 ruling liberalizing use of the older liturgy.
- Second, Francis is drawing mixed reviews among some church conservatives not so much for anything he's said or done, but because of a diffuse perception that his emphases are not theirs. In a late July interview with *NCR*, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia said his sense is that conservatives "generally have not been really happy" with Francis.

Discontent may fester in pro-life circles, for instance, if Francis continues his policy of avoiding public commentary on issues such as abortion and gay marriage. Asked on the papal plane why he didn't discuss those matters in Brazil, a country that has recently liberalized both, he said that "the church already has expressed itself perfectly on this" and "it wasn't necessary to go back over it."

- Third, the secular right also has expressed some dismay. Reacting to his July 8 visit to the southern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, a major point of arrival for migrants from Africa and the Middle East, anti-immigration politicians in Italy suggested that the pope should mind his own business.
- Fourth, Catholic progressives may become disenchanted if their hopes for Francis do not match what he's able, or willing, to deliver. Already, some advocates for women priests and gay rights have taken to the blogosphere to grouse about what they see as a mismatch between the pope's talk about mercy and his concrete positions on those issues.
- Fifth, there's an ill-defined "old guard" in the Vatican that may be resistant to see its traditional power and privilege slip away. So far no one identified with this group has publicly broken ranks, although some have detected its fingerprints on a nasty scandal involving Francis' handpicked prelate, or delegate, to help reform the Vatican bank, an Italian cleric named Msgr. Battista Ricca. In mid-July, Italian journalist Sandro Magister published a sensational piece detailing charges that when Ricca was a Vatican diplomat

> in Uruguay from 1990 to 2001, he had a live-in male lover, cruised gay bars and was once beaten up, and another time brought a young man back to the embassy and ended up trapped in an elevator with him overnight.

For now, Francis appears to be standing by his man. Aboard the papal plane, he said a preliminary investigation showed "there's nothing to what they've accused him of." (It was a question about Ricca that elicited the pope's now-famous "Who am I to judge?" line about gays.)

However the Ricca case shakes out, anyone tasked by Francis with implementing reform probably can expect any skeletons lurking in his closet to be at risk of exposure.

A hot autumn

Though Francis is not taking the usual August break at Castel Gandolfo, most observers don't expect him to start rolling out significant structural reforms until the fall.

One highly anticipated decision is who he'll name as his secretary of state -- a position that, albeit diminished by Francis' tendency to reach outside the Vatican system, still packs considerable punch.

To date, the pope has not tipped his hand. Many observers believe Italian Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello, a veteran diplomat and currently head of the Vatican City State, is in pole position. Given Francis' capacity for surprise, however, conventional wisdom may not apply.

Francis also will soon face important choices to head flagship dioceses. In Cologne, Germany, Cardinal Joachim Meisner is 79, while Cardinal Antonio Rouco Varela in Madrid and Cardinal Francis George in Chicago both are 76 -- all beyond the customary retirement age.

Francis has laid out the kind of bishop he wants. In a speech in Brazil, he said, "Bishops must be pastors, close to people, fathers and brothers, and gentle, patient and merciful."

Bishops must be "men who love poverty, both interior poverty, as freedom before the Lord, and exterior poverty, as simplicity and austerity of life," he said. "Men who do not think and behave like 'princes.' Men who are not ambitious, who are married to one church without having their eyes on another."

The question is whether he can find flesh-and-blood prelates to match that vision, a defining challenge in a church where personnel often is policy.

The Roman stage thus seems set for what the Italians call *un autunno caldo* -- a "hot autumn." The trick for Francis, it would seem, is to keep the reform fires burning without making the pot boil over.

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