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Francis is the exclamation point on Vatican II

Thomas C. Fox | Oct. 22, 2013
Column

I already hear concerns that the reformist church of 76-year-old Pope Francis might not survive his pontificate. I hear talk that the anti-reformists who took back the Second Vatican Council will likely do it again once Francis is gone from the scene.

We ask: Will a church groomed by compassion and mercy, as Francis would have it, be the church of our future? Will our church be guided, as if with a compass, by the lives and needs of marginalized people? Can a pastoral Catholicism, embedded in the Beatitudes, be the Catholicism we offer the world?

Viewed solely as a moment in church history, the Francis moment might not last. Post-Vatican II history teaches us that entrenched forces have ways of enduring. In this view, Francis could be a passing fancy. However, from the long view of history, the Francis pontificate could well be the exclamation point on Vatican II -- change and reform is the default mode of operation, not a one-time activity.

Like Pope John XXIII, who brought us the council, Francis believes the Spirit is alive in the world. Like John, he believes the Spirit is not the sole possession of the Catholic episcopacy. In this belief, Francis affirms the theology of the council and unites to it in an inseparable way, effectively giving his pontificate greater reach, both backward and forward.

Francis has a close spiritual connection to his predecessor John. Both assessed the church and found it hurting, failing to meet the needs of the times. John called a council; we have yet to see Francis' full response. But he has told us there will be surprises. When Francis talks about "surprises," these are not secrets he's holding back from us. These are deeper, more profound surprises of the Spirit still to be discerned.

The pastoral church Francis is offering us comes out of a commitment to tradition, a grounding that actually liberates him to be all the more adventurous. After all, the church is much more than revealed dogma; it is about the fullness of life and how we respond to the world in which we live. This is where the surprises will be found, though this is difficult for some to understand.

As Francis' pontificate unfolds and we encounter its surprises, it will increasingly be seen as the embodiment of Vatican II, the flesh to the bones of the council. As this connection unfolds, it will only further compel the council's and Francis' vision forward.

Perhaps the core theological question faced by the council was "How does the Spirit operate in the world?" Is the life of the Spirit revealed fundamentally, even arguably exclusively, through the Catholic church hierarchy? Or is the Spirit found throughout creation, discerned by people of goodwill everywhere?

The council fathers affirmed the latter view. So clearly does Francis. This is what he said to his Jesuit interviewer in August, as reported in *America* magazine: "The complaints of today about how 'barbaric' the world is -- these complaints sometimes end up giving birth within the church to desires to establish order in the

sense of pure conservation, as a defense. No: God is to be encountered in the world of today. God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history. ... We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes."

For Francis, change is not only possible, it is required if the church is to be relevant. Yet he cautions patience. In his interview, he says, "Many think that changes and reforms can take place in a short time. I believe that we always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change."

In the end, the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* affirmed "the people of God" as the primary definition of church; the hierarchy came in second. Francis affirms this as well, saying: "All the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief ... When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. ... We should not even think, therefore, that 'thinking with the church' means only thinking with the hierarchy of the church."

So, again, is our church on an irreversible, ever-reforming path? Or will Francis fade like the council, a meteorite in the night sky? Francis is the first pontiff educated during the council. He is a product of the council. In this sense, he is the first post-conciliar pontiff. Further, he embraces the theology and spirit of the council with seemingly unbridled affection. The Francis era is really a new phase in an unfolding church reform story, one, as Francis reminds us, that will be full of surprises.

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