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Keeping the Church Lean and Clean

Ken Briggs | Dec. 29, 2013 NCR Today

Pope Francis has loudly proclaimed that riches and privileges of power are among the greatest threats to the church's mission. He speaks of form fitting function: how an institution preaching an authentic Gospel must take on the simplicity and humility of Christ in order to be credible. He points to the tendencies of swagger and opulence among the hierarchy as symptomatic of hypocrisy. He surrenders luxuries of the papacy to demonstrate what this identification with the poor means to him on a personal level. This is quite the opposite of the way the church has done business; it's fine for a few dedicated souls to adopt the look of the least among us, but a whole church? That's what he's saying, isn't it? That it's not just a few individuals here and there giving witness to the harmony between Jesus' way of life and his mission but a fundamental requirement.

Meanwhile, Catholicism at the Vatican and in many locations around the globe exhibit worldly wealth and reflections of medieval royalty. Most are, arguably, the beneficiaries of the profit madness the pope has recently condemned. Francis appears to be dead set against such expressions of power and money, but he inherited an office which has depended on it. Under John Paul II, authority spiraled upward and Catholics with great riches were treated deferentially to say the least. Groups such as the Knights of Malta and Opus Dei have long gained influence by courting the influential.

For a pope who has castigated the untamed forces of capitalism, decried "trickle down" economics and warned of money-worship as the "new tyranny," this is a perplexing situation. How can a frugal pope in the tradition of first century Christianity afford to float his barque on the money streams of the rich while advocating consistency between message and messenger? I know, who will pay for the cathedrals and the seaside retreats and the affluent lifestyles?

One means of achieving a lifestyle the pope envisions might be to limit contributions that go directly to maintain the institutional at a basic level. In the manner of political campaigns which put caps on giving in an effort to curtail special personal interests, restrict annual giving by individual Catholics to something like a few hundred dollars a year ($500? $800). That would entail, from the parish on up, hard decisions about ends and means. It would presumably mean losing ground to rather than keeping up with the Joneses as a way of fitting the church to the Francis-inspired values of its mission. Beyond that limit anyone could give freely to Catholic ministries to those in special (Catholic Charities, etc), all of which would be chartered independently from the reach of diocesan treasuries.

Reduced income to the church itself -- whether through something like a cap or other strategies-- would require the most searching discussions over how material goods relate to spiritual purposes. Those are the very kinds of discussions which virtually never take place. The subject is too tender, especially in America where the Francis' "idolatry of money" warning has particular relevance.

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