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Looking for change in the church in 2014

Pat Perriello | Jan. 3, 2014 NCR Today

Pope Francis brought an undeniably new attitude to the church in 2013. His pastoral approach and focus on the poor is genuine and significant. As we enter 2014, however, the questions become: How much substantive change can we expect? What will it look like?

There are a few areas where Pope Francis has already made clear change will occur: There is an expectation of greater transparency and a reform of the operation of the Vatican bank.

Reform of the Curia also seems high on the agenda, but we do not yet know what actual changes may take place. Certainly one would expect changes in personnel, yet perhaps the more important change may be in the consolidation of agencies and a reduction in the power of those that remain. The establishment of Francis' Cabinet-like structure of eight cardinals appears to be a step in that direction.

The sex abuse crisis continues to bedevil the church, and many of the victims and their families seem unconvinced and unsatisfied by the moves the pope has made thus far. There will be many watching in the new year to see what develops in this area.

The changes that have been made on the Vatican's Congregation of Bishops [1], which oversees the appointments of bishops throughout the world, are hopefully a sign of real and meaningful movement.

Certainly, we will all be watching the appointments of 2014 to see if new appointments might appear to foster long-lasting changes in church governance.

There is a February meeting planned [2] for the pope's Cabinet. This should be a time when real moves begin to occur. They have already had two structural meetings, and for a pope with a limited amount of time, this would seem to be an excellent opportunity for his substantive agenda to begin to unfold.

The Synod of Bishops planned for October [3] focusing on family issues offers hope for some real change as well. The effort of the Vatican to gather input from the laity throughout the church augurs well. Discussion of the possibility of the reception of Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics suggests one real possibility of change that is under consideration.

What progressives in the church are waiting for are signs that there might be areas where additional meaningful change is possible. Substantive changes on mandatory celibacy, the role of women in the church, more power for regional bishops' conferences, and a greater role for the laity in the church are all potential areas for movement.

I believe we will see some modest changes on mandatory celibacy this year. It might be regional at first. The first step might be requests from certain bishops' conferences to experiment in this area.

A series of articles on the theology of women is starting up in *L'Osservatore Romano* [4] this year that deserve

to be watched. Hopefully this effort will prove to be a serious attempt to address women as equal partners in the growth and development of the church. The fact that this topic is being discussed is an important beginning.

What I most want to see in 2014 is real change in the way bishops and clerics respond to their people. We know where Francis stands in his attitude toward his flock. We need to see a more pastoral tone coming not just from Francis, but from the bishops around the world.

For me, that needs to start with the American bishops. I want to see ended the actions being taken against the hard-working nuns putting the spirit of Francis into practice. The bishops also need to focus on the importance of this country's uninsured receiving adequate health insurance instead of continuing to fight with the administration over a distorted notion of what the Constitution actually means by "religious liberty."

There is a great danger that 2014 could turn into a year of disappointment. After all, Francis is the head of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. What can we really expect? It is unquestionably possible to overreach in our expectations. Many of us will not be satisfied until everything is operating the way we would like it to, but we cannot discount 2,000 years of history and tradition.

There are undoubtedly forces of resistance arrayed against Pope Francis. We need to pray for Pope Francis and his success. We should offer encouragement for steps taken in the right direction, even if they don't go as far as we may like.

Francis has already shown us the way in what is possible. We can and should expect a church that is more caring, more understanding, more pastoral, and more Christian. We should be looking for that in our individual parishes and dioceses. We should also look for meaningful changes that can be expected to flow from these changes in attitudes.

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