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Pope Francis to us: 'I am Vatican II'

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 16, 2014 Bulletins from the Human Side

Simple, spare life summations have great power to arrest our attention and to set us thinking. These range from the tombstone legend about the little girl who died going west on the pioneer trail -- "She done what she could" -- to longtime Jersey City, N.J., Mayor Frank Hague's boast, "I am the law." The Bible is better, of course, with Jehovah's magisterial "I am who I am" and Satan's still-smoldering "I am legion."

The greatest of these, of course, is a phrase of inexhaustible richness: "I am the good shepherd."

When 17-year-old Bernadette asked the "small young lady," as she described her, who appeared to her in the cave grotto at Lourdes who she was, she answered, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

Comparable summations for Pope Francis are suggested almost daily, ranging from "street pope" (*Commonweal* [1]) to the "Man of the Year" (*TIME* magazine [2]). Some waggish observers call him the "cold-call pope [3]" because he often dials the telephone himself to talk to people, most of them ordinary rather than celebrated. On the basis not only of what he has said and done but the simple way he has said and done it, perhaps a fitting standalone description for Pope Francis is "I am Vatican II."

Pope John XXIII, to whom many already compare Francis, opened the Second Vatican Council with a talk he titled *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* [4], "Mother Church Rejoices." Perhaps the most important document of Vatican II is "On the Church in the Modern World." The document's identifying words, *Gaudium et Spes* ("Joy and Hope"), link it to John XXIII's opening talk as well as Francis' first exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel."

From his first hours as pope, Francis has re-enacted or spoken of the great pastoral transformation of Vatican II as his own agenda. Francis' actions parallel the simple, ever-human gestures of John so that the world soon recognized him, as it does Francis, as a man it can approach easily because he strives to understand and love its people rather than to condemn and make its people anxious about their salvation.

Just as John quickly liberated the caged bird that had been his predecessor's sole mealtime companion and ended the custom of the pope's eating alone by inviting guests, so Pope Francis, gracefully rather than grimly, has ended centuries of the pope's dwelling high above the people in hierarchical splendor to live on the same level with them in what we might term a "Vatican This Old House" before the remodeling.

When asked by a young girl why he lived this way, Francis teasingly replied that he did it for "psychiatric reasons." In short, to keep healthy, he needs close contact with people.

So, too, he has repeated John XXIII's visiting prisoners with a trip to a Roman detention center, where he washed and kissed the feet of, among others, women and Muslims. Far from sitting in judgment of the world, Francis has spoken consistently of God's love for sinners, his readiness to forgive them, and the church's need to be in its midst, serving its needs more than condemning its faults.

Francis' pastoral vision of the church involves seeing "the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds." This preferential option for those hurt by life reflects John XXIII's reply when asked why he convened Vatican II: "To make the human sojourn on earth less sad."

Pope Francis was in a Jesuit seminary during Vatican II and was ordained in 1969, just as the fruits of that great gathering were being harvested. Francis refers to the major teachings of Vatican II in *Evangelii Gaudium*, emphasizing, as the council did, a renewal of our relationship with the world.

The world had, in the Vatican I church, always been regarded as part of a sinister triumvirate with the flesh and the devil. Nothing good was ever said about them, as they pursued our downfall by tempting us to commit to, or even have a passing thought about, what old-time clerics considered our distinguishing characteristic, our everyday readiness -- not to say eagerness -- to commit grave, mostly sexual, sins.

Francis in one of his weekly talks on the nature of the church called Vatican II's unmistakable language "a mystery that we all live and in which we take part," adding that "the Church is not an organization born out of an agreement between some persons," but rather "the work of God," born out of his desire to bring all mankind to himself.

Francis spoke in similar mystically oriented Vatican II language at Mass on the feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary that, as water is a symbol of mystery and salvation, the "strength of the church is concealed in the deep waters of God."

In outlining priorities for the bishops of the United States, he described the church's relationship to the world [5] as "a reconciler that restores what was broken and unites what was divided." He spoke also of "a church of the heart that attracts and entices," adding that "unless we train ministers capable of warming people's hearts, of walking with them in the night, and dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness, what hope can we have for our present and future journey?"

As he did in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis recalled a central emphasis of Vatican II that his predecessors had overridden in many documents, especially in *Apostolos Suos* [6], that gutted local churches or national conferences of issuing pastoral letters not approved in Rome before they were written and again before they were issued.

Francis, however, observes [7]: "There is need ... for a greater appreciation of local and regional elements. Central bureaucracy is not sufficient; there is also a need for increased collegiality and solidarity." What is needed, he said, is "not unanimity, but true unity in the richness of diversity."

That Francis might be understood symbolically as Vatican II is bolstered by his strong rejection of anti-Semitism in a meeting with 30 members of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. Francis explicitly cited the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, which said Jews could not be blamed for the death of Jesus. "Due to our common roots," Francis said [8], "a Christian cannot be anti-Semitic."

Pope Francis has frequently spoken of Vatican II's renewal of its relationship to the world that had so often been rejected as dangerous and inimical to religion. Nonetheless, Christians belong in its midst. Thus he spoke to the Catholics of Rome [9], noting that the city "*full of tourists but it is also full of refugees*" and asking Romans if they have become involved in addressing the city's problems, especially the poor, who "in the end ... and from the beginning, whether we like it or not, are our brothers and sisters."

Francis gave a similar pastoral injunction to superiors general of religious orders in a November meeting at the

Vatican, telling them [10] their members should "wake up the world" by being "real witnesses" in a countercultural way motivated by generosity and self-forgiveness.

In this address, Francis spoke in the deeply understanding way of John XXIII and the council, saying, "We all make mistakes and we need to recognize our weaknesses." This realization of our sinfulness "does not negate the witness that he is called to give, rather he reinforces it, and this is good for everyone."

Francis may, as a side effect of his being a Vatican II bishop and pope, reveal to Catholics who have accepted a caricature of Vatican II as a vast error that obscured the true teachings of the church an incarnation of that council, emphasizing the evangelical missionary nature of the church, its sympathy for sinners, and its commitment to the poor. The council will thus be integrated into their lives as a reform that is truly and deeply Catholic, a church in which they will be comfortable because it celebrates rather than denies the richness of its past.

Then we have the predator media pumping up a mirage of a pope who might change church teachings on abortion and other matters with which they disagree. Francis does not condemn them. He talks easily with their members and continues, as sensitive to and as friendly to the world and as sympathetic to its failings as the great St. Francis whose name he has taken as his own, to embrace the needy world in a way that emphasizes his un-self-conscious, undefensive, and unmistakable self-presentation: "I am Vatican II."

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