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Pope Francis is still the key to reform

Pat Perriello | Mar. 21, 2014 NCR Today

Paul Baumann, editor of *Commonweal*, has written an extremely interesting essay for Slate [1] that should be read by all with interest.

He speaks knowledgably about the need for reform to come from the people. He mentions the danger of placing too much emphasis on one man and points out that no one man can make the changes needed in the church today. The pope cannot "alter the course of secular history or bridge the church's deepening ideological divisions" that continue to grow in today's church.

Baumann contends that such an intense focus on the current pope (or any pope) is not a good thing because it fosters the erroneous notion that one man can cure what ails the church. He goes on to note that the pope used to be the last resort in any ecclesial disagreement but now gets involved in everything from inclusive language in the liturgy to altar girls to the behavior of nuns in the United States. For Baumann, unity and vitality in the church will only come as "a gift that the faithful bring to the pope, and not the other way around."

While the Baumann analysis is certainly correct, he fails to give sufficient weight to the reality of the church as it is currently structured. Part of the problem he describes was created by the previous two popes. Their efforts to centralize control of the church at the Vatican have created a church where all parties are constantly looking over their shoulders to see if Rome approves. One or two popes have created that reality, and only a pope can change it.

At a minimum, we need this pope to clear away the obstacles to free and open discussion of the issues facing the church today. Before Francis, you could not speak of the people leading any kind of reform because to speak up was considered disloyal and an attack on the church. The rigidity, repression and unwillingness to brook dissent were palpable. No amount of agitation from below could be successful because it would all be seen as an attack on what is true.

While the assertions of Baumann ring true, there is still much this pope needs to do. There is every reason to keep eyes focused on his actions and to encourage him to push the envelope in Rome. He remains the key to getting reform started in the church. There will be and is resistance, but without the pope's leadership, there will be no reform. One pope made clear there could be no dissent, and there was no meaningful dissent. Now a pope requests opinions from the laity, and there are opinions. The pope is unleashing the whole church, and we must respond. Without his leadership, any response we have will have no meaning.

Of course, Catholics have for centuries lived their faith in their own homes and in their families as they saw fit. Whether it is issues of birth control, sexual behavior, or even attendance at Mass, individual conscience has always reigned supreme. In this sense, we are all the real church. But individual practices and beliefs are of no consequence in the institutional church unless they are allowed to have meaning. Pray God this pope will continue to allow the beliefs of the people to have meaning -- and the next pope as well.

It may be that at some point in time, we can relegate the pope and his actions to a back burner, and I believe this

is the ideal Baumann is describing. At the present time, however, the media, hierarchy, laity, politicians and all interested parties are right to focus heavy attention on the daily actions of Pope Francis.

I want to address one final issue. Baumann makes the important point that the documents of the Second Vatican Council can often be interpreted to mean whatever conservatives or liberals want them to mean. They are ambiguous. This is very true. Yet I think that fails to recognize the context and purpose of Vatican II. When Vatican II opened in 1963, the church had been operating under a set of categories that had been established in the 16th century under the Council of Trent. This was the only language the church had to speak in.

To look at the traditional language that is contained in Vatican II documents misses the point. It is the new and expansive language that contains the message of the council. The fathers of the Vatican council were seeking to express the need of the church to see itself differently in a new age. Their insights are contained in the nuggets of new language and new directions. Of course this new teaching is contextualized in some traditional verbiage as a starting point for proclaiming a new modernization of the church. That should in no way serve as a reason to back off from the reality of where Vatican II is leading us.

Vatican II was meant to be a starting point for moving the church forward into the modern world. Those who attempt to use it as a cautionary tale to remain mired in the categories of Trent are wrong. Pope Francis is trying to reignite the process begun by Vatican II. We can only hope that he will be successful.

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