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New Secretary of State Parolin on celibacy, democracy

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 11, 2013 NCR Today

Comments on celibacy and democracy in the church by Italian Archbishop Pietro Parolin, whom Pope Francis named as the Vatican's new Secretary of State on Aug. 31, are raising eyebrows today, with some wondering if they herald looming changes in Catholic teaching and practice.

In truth, Parolin's comments represent what might be termed the standard moderate Catholic line ? priestly celibacy is a discipline, not a dogma, and can therefore be revised, but it nonetheless has value, and the church is not a democracy but it can and should be more collegial.

Those points have been made many times by many different voices, and they don't necessarily point to any specific policy decisions. If anything, Parolin seems to want to temper expectations that Francis will turn the church on its ear, stressing the theme of continuity.

In other words, what the interview confirms is not so much a spirit of revolution on Francis's watch, but rather the generally pragmatic and moderate stamp of his papacy.

The following is a provision translation of Parolin's comments, which came in an interview with the Venezuelan newspaper *El Universal*.

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Parolin: The church has a role of continuity in history, based on what Jesus Christ founded. It needs to be loyal to itself. The church can never change to the point of completely adapting to the world. If it did so, it would get lost in [the world] and would not accomplish its mission of being salt and light.

Question: Do you mean that the approach to reform implies a return to early Christianity?

Yes, taking into account that we also have two thousand years of history. This history has not happened in vain. It is not simply about returning to the past, at least in the most radical way, but a return to the fundamental principles of the church. I want to underline the theme of continuity because sometimes it seems, and I don't know if I'm exaggerating here, that Pope Francis is going to revolutionize everything, he is going to change everything.

Isn't that what is expected of him?

We expect him to help the church to be the church of Jesus and to fulfill its mission. That's what all popes must do. But the church has a constitution, a structure, a content that are those of the faith, and no one can change those.

Aren't there two types of dogmas? Aren't there unmovable dogmas that were instituted by Jesus and then there are those that came afterwards, during the course of the church's history, created by men and therefore susceptible to change?

Certainly. There are dogmas that are defined and untouchable.

Celibacy is not --

It is not a church dogma and it can be discussed because it is a church tradition.

That goes back to what period?

To the early centuries. After its implementation, it was applied during the first millennium and after the Council of Trent, the church enforced it. It is a tradition, and the concept lives on within the church because during the course of all these years things have happened that have contributed to develop God's revelation. This was completed with the death of the last apostle, Saint John. What happened afterwards was an increase in the comprehension and the living out of the revelation.

Speaking of celibacy --

The work the church did to institute ecclesiastical celibacy must be considered. We cannot simply say that it is part of the past. It is a great challenge for the pope, because he is the one with the ministry of unity and all of those decisions must be made thinking of the unity of the church and not to divide it. Therefore we can talk, reflect, and deepen on these subjects that are not definite, and we can think of some modifications, but always with consideration of unity, and all according to the will of God. It is not about what I would like but what God wants for His church.

What does he want?

God speaks in many ways. We must be careful to this voice that guides us on the causes and solutions. We have to take into account, at the moment of taking a decision, these criteria as well as to the opening to the spirit of the times.

When the pope asks himself, "Who am I to judge gays?", what is he saying?

He is saying that the church's doctrine is very clear on this moral point.

Jesus Christ accepts us all as we are?

Yes, but he also asks us to grow and adapt to the image that he has inside us. Our individual conduct is judged only by God, and the pope has said this.

You have said that changes must be made without dividing the church. Don't you think that a way to decide on its application would be by consulting the whole church, its bishops? Wouldn't it be a democratization?

Certainly. It has always been said that the church is not a democracy. But it would be good during these times that there could be a more democratic spirit, in the sense of listening carefully, and I believe the pope has made of this one of his pontificate's objectives. A collegial movement of the church, where all the issues can be brought up, and afterward he can make a decision.

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