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Pastoral priorities from Pope Francis for the US bishops

Thomas Reese | Nov. 7, 2013 NCR Today
Fall bishops' meeting 2013

When the U.S. bishops meet Nov. 11-14 in Baltimore, people expect them to discuss the pastoral priorities facing the church in the United States. Instead, they are dealing with minor liturgical translations, a statement on pornography, and political conflicts over contraception and gay marriage. It is as if they have not heard anything Pope Francis said in the last eight months.

If Pope Francis dropped in on their meeting, what would he say to them? I doubt he would waste much time talking about their agenda. Instead, he would challenge them, as he did the Latin American bishops when he talked to them in Brazil [1].

In his July 27 address to the Brazilian bishops [2] and his address the next day to the episcopal council of CELAM [3], Pope Francis set forth his ecclesiology, his pastoral priorities for the church. In his address to the Brazilian bishops, he spoke of the church as a reconciler that restores what was broken and unites what was divided. He also spoke of a church of the heart that presents the beauty of God in a way that attracts and entices. He also called for the church to use simple language and avoid "an intellectualism foreign to our people."

Francis then presented practical challenges for the Brazilian (and U.S.) bishops that follow from this ecclesiology:

? "Unless we train ministers capable of warming people's hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness, what hope can we have for our present and future journey?"

? "There is need, then, 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 is "not unanimity, but true unity in the richness of diversity."

? The church's legacy is transmitted through witness, and "one needs to hand it over personally, to touch the one to whom one wants to give, to relay, this inheritance."

? "We need a church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of 'wounded' persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, love."

? "Let us not reduce the involvement of women in the church, but instead promote their active role in the ecclesial community. By losing women, the church risks becoming sterile."

In speaking to the coordinating committee of CELAM, Francis continued to flesh out his agenda for the bishops.

? "Do we see to it that our work, and that of our priests, is more pastoral than administrative?"

? "Are we creating a proactive mindset? Do we promote opportunities and possibilities to manifest God's mercy?"

? "Do we make the lay faithful sharers in the mission?"

? Do diocesan and parish councils, "whether pastoral or financial, provide real opportunities for laypeople to participate in pastoral consultation, organization and planning?"

? Do we give the laity "the freedom to continue discerning, in a way befitting their growth as disciples, the mission which the Lord has entrusted to them? Do we support them and accompany them, overcoming the temptation to manipulate them or infantilize them?"

The bishops would do well to listen to Pope Francis and discuss these pastoral priorities at the meeting in Baltimore.

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