Pope Francis’ Call for the Conversion of the Church in our Time

Catherine Clifford

Abstract: In his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel, Evangelii Gaudium, a follow-up to the 2012 Synod on the new evangelization, Pope Francis issued a call for a “pastoral and missionary conversion” at every level of ecclesial life. This paper explores the nature of that conversion as Pope Francis envisions it in a return to the kerygmatic proclamation and witness to salvation in Christ, in the need for spiritual conversion to overcome the malady of pastoral acedia, and in the renewal of ecclesial structures and culture at the local, regional, and universal levels respectively.

Key Words: Pope Francis, conversion, ecclesial reform, papacy, collegiality, Evangelii Gaudium, discernment

The pontificate of Pope Francis, now approaching the end of its second year, has brought new energy to the Catholic Church. In recent months, in particular following the first of two synodal gatherings dedicated to reflection on the pastoral care of the family, it has surfaced fresh debate—debate which some consider worrisome, but which he himself considers a sign of health in the ecclesial body and part of a necessary process of ecclesial discernment. When asked in a recent interview why some in the church appear to be confused or disoriented by his message, to the point of claiming that the church has become like a “ship without a rudder,” Pope Francis directed the attention of his interlocutor to the program laid out in his Apostolic Exhortation of November 2013: “Check it out, it’s very clear. Evangelii Gaudium is very clear.”¹

To understand the agenda this pontificate then, let us take Pope Francis at his word and revisit this document which, he writes, has “a programmatic significance and important consequences” for the life of the Catholic Church today (EG n.25).² Evangelii Gaudium is a thick document. Not only is it lengthy (its 288 paragraphs and 217 footnotes fill over 200 pages in a paperback edition). In French parlance, one might call it dense—it is substantive; each pithy paragraph gives reason to pause and reflect. Evangelii Gaudium is not an easy read, and covers a lot of ground. It would be impossible to draw out all of the rich insights of this comprehensive document in a single essay. In this space I propose to focus on a number of key insights relating to what Pope Francis


² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. All subsequent references will be abbreviated simply as EG, followed by paragraph number.
calls the “pastoral and missionary conversion” of the church, the project at the heart of his exhortation. This reflection will be organized in three parts, each reflecting on a different aspect of this ecclesial conversion: first, a return to the kerygmatic proclamation of faith and witness; second, the spiritual conversion required to ground such a project; and third, the conversion of ecclesial structures required to renew the church in our day in view of a more effective proclamation of the good news. But before proceeding, a few preliminary remarks are in order regarding the unique character of this document and the vision of “mission” that informs it.

I. SOME DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF EVANGELII GAUDIUM

A Centripetal Dynamic: Receiving from the Local Churches for a New Catholicsity

This document, which takes as its theme the joy of the gospel, is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation. As such, it is intended to convey the concerns and the many recommendations surfaced by the bishops gathered for the international synod and to reflect on the ways and means to set the church on course for a new evangelization in such a way as to call the faithful to action. The international synod of bishops was established by Pope Paul VI during the Second Vatican Council as a collegial body to advise the pope on matters of concern to the universal church. Few would dispute the fact that in the past fifty years these gatherings have remained more an instrument of the papacy than the effective expression of collegiality hoped for by many council fathers. The bishops’ freedom of speech and ability to engage in open debate has been greatly curtailed by synodal procedures. Agendas are set and procedures determined by the popes who appoint many of the synod participants and prepare the final document. In some cases these texts have had so little resemblance to the “propositions” emerging from the bishops’ discussions, that a common witticism went around to the effect that the post-synodal documents were drafted before the bishops even arrived for the meeting. Under Pope Benedict’s leadership synodal procedures began to permit a freer exchange of ideas. At the most recent synod Pope Francis set the stage for a wide-ranging discussion of complex pastoral challenges and differing approaches to the care of Christian families.

Evangelii Gaudium may be one of the most collegial post-synodal apostolic exhortations to emerge from the papal magisterium. In all, it draws explicitly from the propositiones of the synod no less than thirty times. Remarkably, as if to underline the contributions of the bishops from each region to the universal church, Pope Francis cites

---


6 Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations contain abundant references to the propositiones of the bishops, though at times this has the feel of “proof-texting.”
messages and pastoral documents issued by nine different regional bodies of bishops from a wide diversity of contexts including those of Latin America (CELAM), Brazil, the Philippines, India, Italy, France, the Congo, the United States and Europe. While many have noted the frequent reference to the Aparecida document of the Latin American Conference of Bishops, a text in which Jorge Bergoglio had an important hand, it is important not to lose sight of this wider focus. Francis refers a dozen times to post-synodal apostolic exhortations issued by his predecessors following regional synods of bishops and draws from other papal addresses and homilies given in the context of such meetings in Asia, Africa, Oceania, America, Latin America, and the Middle East.

The recent tradition of the papal magisterium has left us with an overriding image of papal teaching as something which moves from the centre in Rome out to periphery of the local churches, or which comes from the “top” down to the bishops and the broader community of baptized faithful. We have conceived of reception as a unidirectional reality, forgetting that from the earliest times, the insights of local and regional churches and councils were often received by, and served to enrich, the wider church.

As but another expression of this trend, consider the extent to which our notion of the exercise of the papal magisterium has become highly personalized. By this I mean that we have become accustomed to looking in papal documents for the personal theological perspectives of the popes in whose name the teaching is given (This, even when we know that some of these documents—including papal encyclicals—are drafted with the help of competent committees and teams of theological consultants). Pope Francis has left his unmistakable mark on this document, as is clear from the direct and unvarnished style of discourse. When he writes of discernment and the perils of contemporary spirituality, the rich knowledge and experience of his Jesuit formation are clearly on display.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that Pope Francis has made every effort to integrate into these reflections the teaching of his brother bishops in such a way as to move back towards a consideration of the regional context as an integral part of what is being taught.


manner that the catholicity of the whole church might be enriched by the experience and wisdom from the many diverse contexts of the local churches where Christians strive to witness to the gospel today. I am not aware of any precedent for this centripetal movement in the recent history of the papal magisterium. Such an approach reflects more than a simple change of style. It might reasonably be argued that this entire document serves as a concrete example of a substantive shift toward a more collegial expression of the teaching office, one that understands reception no longer in unidirectional terms, but as a process of mutual exchange. *Evangelii Gaudium* is itself a concrete sign of the “pastoral conversion” of the papacy that Pope Francis is committed to initiating, as we shall see below.

**A Collegial Responsibility for the Project of Discernment and Conversion**

It is important to keep this perspective in mind when considering the comprehensive project for the conversion and reform of the church proposed in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Pope Francis has indicated on numerous occasions that this is not a “personal” project or vision of the church and its mission, but an expression of a collegial recognition of the necessity for such a conversion expressed through the international synod of bishops and by the College of Cardinals during the general congregations that preceded the conclave of election. These conversations within the college of bishops have given shape to the mandate for his pontificate. As a close reading of *Evangelii Gaudium* reveals, this reform project is far more extensive than a simple adjustment of structures for the management of Vatican finances or of the bureaucracy of the Roman Curia.

That said, *Evangelii Gaudium* is not a detailed program for the conversion of the church in view of the new evangelization. Pope Francis himself describes it as a set of “guidelines” (EG nn.17, 33) intended to assist the local bishops as they enter into a process of “pastoral discernment” to determine what is needed to return to the heart of the gospel today at every level of ecclesial life and witness. With a substantial dose of realism, he recognizes that it would not possible, from his vantage point in Rome, to determine the appropriate means for carrying out this “new phase of evangelism” in every context: “Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization’” (EG n.16). Seen in this light, Pope Francis’ exhortation might be seen a “charge,” a set of principles to guide the substantial task of discernment and reform to be undertaken by the bishops with the full collaboration of all the faithful. The predominant note is one of collegiality and co-responsibility.

---

9 In writing this Exhortation, Pope Francis writes, “I am reaping the rich fruits if the Synod’s labors” (EG n.16).

10 In his interview with Elizabetta Piqué, Pope Francis commented, “in pre-conclave meetings, as cardinals we demanded lots of things which we should certainly not forsake.” Cf. “God Has Bestowed on Me.”
II. A RETURN TO THE PROCLAMATION OF THE KERYGMA: CONVERSION TO CHRIST

Encounter with Christ and Renewal in the Spirit of the Beatitudes: Joy and Mercy

“The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew” (EG n.1). These opening words sum up Pope Francis’ invitation to return to the heart of the gospel through a renewed experience of personal encounter with Christ in daily prayer, in the renewed study of the scriptures, in the liturgical life of the church, and in service to the poor. From this personal encounter alone flows our deepest identity as persons and the communion we share with one another in Christ’s ecclesial body, the church. This relationship of loving communion overflows in loving concern for others, so that they too might come to know the merciful love of God. Encounter with the transformative love of Christ is the source of all conversion, revealing who we are most deeply as persons and as a community. It is the wellspring of genuine mission.

Thanks solely to this encounter—or renewed encounter—with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others? (EG n.8).

Joy is among the first signs of conversion to Christ: the joy at hearing the good news of God’s steadfast love and mercy that has entered into history through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. The Risen Christ continues to meet us today in our personal and collective history. Joy is among the most unmistakable gifts of the Spirit, second only to love (Gal 5:22–23). The joy of the gospel is the joy of the beatitudes—not the shallow and passing pleasure of worldly enjoyment—but the deep inner happiness that comes from the quiet yet unshakable conviction that we are loved unconditionally, with all of our faults and limitations. It is the joy of those who are poor in spirit, humble, mourning, hungering and thirsting for justice, merciful, pure of heart, making peace, and ready to accept persecutions because of Christ and the gospel. It is the happiness of the just who, says the psalmist, walks in God’s way (Ps 1). The joy of the gospel dwells in those who witness to Christ’s victory over sin and death (Jn 20:20). They walk in the confidence that love has triumphed and will have the last word.

The joy that is a fruit of God’s Spirit is intimately linked to the beatitude of mercy, the “greatest of all virtues.” Those who have received God’s free gift of forgiveness are

---

11 “Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met. To some extent this is because our technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy.” (EG n.7).

12 Edward Schillebeeckx notes that in the presence of the liberating love of the historical Jesus, being sad was an “existential impossibility.” Jesus: An Experiment in Christology. Trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Crossroad, 1979) 200–217.

13 Here Pope Francis cites the very traditional teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on the virtues: “Thomas thus explains that, as far as external works are concerned, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues: ‘In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their
moved to show mercy to others. As a consequence, “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (EG n.114). Mercy is not a reward for the deserving, but a free expression of God’s compassion toward those who are lost and powerless to change by their own effort.

God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy. Christ, who told us to forgive one another “seventy times seven” (Mt 18:22) has given us his example: he has forgiven us seventy times seven. Time and time again he bears us on his shoulders. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfalling love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew (EG n.3).

The joy of the gospel is neither a personal possession nor secret treasure meant for a chosen few or privileged elite. As Pope Francis reminds us repeatedly, God’s love excludes no one. It is Good News that cannot be contained. The missionary engagement of Christian is thus a free response to the unmerited gift of God’s reconciling love revealed in Jesus Christ. The love of Christ raises us up to our full dignity as human persons and at the same time impels us to transcend ourselves and reproduce in our own lives the pattern of God’s self-giving love. "When the church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfilment. For ‘here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means’” (EG n.10).

Christian joy carries us forth to share the love of Christ by our whole way of life, as leaven in the dough and salt for the earth. "Before all else, the gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured" (EG n.39).

The Kerygmatic Character of the Church’s Proclamation

Encounter with the person of Christ and the experience of God’s merciful love are to be at the center of all evangelizing activity. By inviting all Christians to return to the heart of the gospel message, Pope Francis echoes the personalist understanding of divine disclosure embraced by the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. The message revealed in Jesus Christ is not a set of propositional truth claims, doctrines, or moral principles to be adhered to, but is essentially a disclosure of God’s very self, poured out in love and inviting us into a life-giving and divinizing friendship: “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will, which was that people can draw near to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature” (DV n.2). All of the church’s evangelizing activity is to be directed toward this central message, and to accompany others as they seek to encounter the love and mercy of Christ.

deficiencies. This is particular to the superior virtue, and as such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree” (EG n.37). See Summa Theologiae II–II, q. 30, a. 4. The external works of mercy are rooted in charity, the form of all virtues.

14 This definition of mission is drawn from the Aparecida Document. See EG, note 4.
It is the message capable of responding to the desire for the infinite which abides in every human heart. The centrality of the kerygma calls for stressing those elements which are most needed today: it has to express God's saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part; it should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at times more philosophical than evangelical. (EG n.165).

In this vein, Evangelii Gaudium invites those entrusted with the tasks of preaching and catechesis to take great care in the preparation of homilies and lessons, to study the scriptures and attend carefully to the “central message” of the gospel (EG nn.148–149). Those engaged in pastoral ministry are invited to a renewed study of the scriptures (nn.145–150) and practice of lectio divina (nn.153–153), and to renew their attentiveness to the lives of those they serve (nn.154–155) so as to communicate the central message of the gospel with greater effect. Indeed, Pope Francis insists that “The study of the sacred scriptures must be a door opened to every believer” (EG n.175), since the Word is the basis of all evangelization. One might consider this as one of the yet-unrealized aspects of Vatican II’s project for ecclesial renewal, which sought to restore the central place of the scriptures in the life and teaching of the church. While the liturgical renewal brought a more ample selection of biblical texts to the hearing of the faithful, many ordinary Catholics remain unfamiliar with the scriptures today and are poorly schooled in the practices of meditation or lectio with the Word.

“All Christian formation,” writes Pope Francis, “consists in entering more deeply into the kerygma.” This is especially true of catechesis where it “constantly illumines” every other subject to be treated. Christian initiation and catechesis is a “progressive experience,” a process of growth which cannot be reduced to the purely cognitive or moral dimensions of learning, but requires “the integration of every aspect of the human person within a communal journey of hearing and response” (EG n.165). The catechist must therefore be attuned to the divine pedagogy which comes to meet each disciple as they are, adopting methods that adequately reflect the experience of encounter with Christ and progressive conversion. “All this demands on the part of the evangelizer certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental” (EG n.165).

**The Hierarchy of Truths and “a Fitting Sense of Proportion”**

Pope Francis identifies one of the most fundamental challenges to communicating the attractive message of the gospel today as the need for “a fitting sense of proportion” in preaching and in all pastoral activity (EG n.38). “The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ’s message” (EG n.33). He is the first Bishop of Rome since the Second Vatican Council to call for an intentional application of the “hierarchy of truths,” described by the Decree on Ecumenism (UR n.11), to

---

15 See, for example, Christoph Theobald, "Vatican II: Une vision d’avenir—une pédagogie de la foi—une manière de résoudre des questions particulières“ Theoforum 44/1 (2013): 9–25.
preaching, catechesis and pastoral practice of the Catholic Church (EG nn.36, 246).16

According to this principle, the truths of faith vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith, or to those truths pertaining to salvation in Christ and the Trinitarian communion of the divine Godhead. Only when a kerygmatic focus on the foundation of faith is maintained, he insists, can the meaning of the rich doctrinal teaching of the church—including her moral and social teachings—be rightly understood.

Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. ... The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing. All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead (EG nn.35–36).

Without wanting to set aside any of the rich heritage of the church’s teaching and tradition, Pope Francis nonetheless calls upon those charged with preaching and faith formation, and indeed all the baptized who are called to be "Spirit-filled evangelizers," to ensure that “the integrity of the Gospel message ... not be deformed.” “Each truth,” he observes, “is better understood when related to the harmonious totality of the Christian message (EG n.39).

Christ Summons the Church to Continual Reformation

At the same time, Francis recognizes, as did Pope John XXIII at in his opening speech to the bishops gathered at Vatican II, that in a context of rapid social and cultural change, the language and form of church teaching need to be adapted in order that the message, the perennial deposit of faith, might be more adequately expressed to contemporary people. He warns that even the well-meaning faithful can be led astray when they confuse form and substance, or when the form no longer succeeds in conveying the intended message.

There are times when the faithful, in listening to completely orthodox language, take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, because that language is alien to their own way of speaking to and understanding one another. With the holy intent of communicating the truth about God and humanity, we sometimes give them a false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian. In this way, we hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance. This is the greatest danger (EG n.41).

Thus, “a fitting sense of proportion” extends to the language of the church’s teaching, preaching, and catechesis. The expression of doctrine itself must be renewed in order to

---

communicate the truth of faith with greater effect. This discussion is somewhat reminiscent of the Decree on Ecumenism’s recognition of the need for “continual reformation” in the life of the Catholic Church: “Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment” (Unitatis redintegratio n.6; emphasis mine). Evangelii Gaudium invites consideration of where the expression of church teaching stands in need of such a reformation or reformulation today.

Similarly, we are invited to re-examine the many customs, rules, and disciplinary precepts of the church to ask whether they continue to communicate the gospel effectually. Some may simply have outlived their original purpose. As a criterion for discernment Pope Francis proposes a principle of moderation: “Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God ‘are very few.’ Citing Saint Augustine, he noted that the precepts subsequently enjoined by the Church should be insisted upon with moderation ‘so as not to burden the lives of the faithful’ and make our religion a form of servitude, whereas ‘God’s mercy has willed that we should be free’ (EG n.43). The way of Christian discipleship is not a heavy burden (1 Jn 5:3). The most effective teaching, customs and precepts of the church are not those imposed by an external authority, but rather those that speak to the inner dynamism toward truth and goodness within human persons, who elect freely to set out on this path knowing that it will lead to a fuller and more authentic life.

In these few lines we might discover a clue to the orientation that Pope Francis has given to the discernment of the church’s pastoral care of Christian families in the context of the synodal process presently underway. Without questioning the substance of the church’s conviction regarding the indissolubility of Christian marriage, he has opened a space for reflecting together on whether the present expression of the church’s teaching, canonical procedures, and pastoral practice adequately respond to the needs of those entering into the covenantal commitment of marriage and family life today, or to those of many sincere Catholics whose marriages are irreparably broken. We may rightly ask whether the church’s teaching and pastoral practice convey an adequate appreciation of the complexity of marriage and human sexuality to the world of contemporary culture. Do they adequately succeed in bringing men and women into contact with the merciful love of God, of which Christian marriage and family life are to be a sign?

---

17 Here Evangelii Gaudium cites John Paul II’s Ut Unum Sint n.19: “the expression of truth can take different forms. The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning.” The entire discussion is an unfolding of the principle laid out in the Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis redintegratio n.6: “Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment.”
III. Discerning the Movement of God’s Spirit for a Spiritual Conversion of the Church

Shortly after his election, Pope Francis was asked what it meant for him as a Jesuit to be called to serve the church as the Bishop of Rome and what aspect of Ignatian Spirituality might help him to live this ministry. He replied immediately, “Discernment … Discernment in the Lord guides me in my way of governing.” It is against the horizon of the spiritual gifts that we have explored above, in particular those of love, joy, mercy, and in light of the centrality of personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit, that Evangelii Gaudium turns to reflect upon the need for spiritual conversion within the life of the church. Again, the tone is set and the necessity for discernment is identified from the very outset. Pope Francis observes:

> Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ (EG n.2).

In a chapter dedicated to the “crises of communal commitment” Pope Francis describes a number of challenges in contemporary culture and, within this context, the temptations faced by pastoral workers in the church. In a world where the role of civil government in service of the common good is severely challenged, where the values of the market dominate and a dehumanizing system that serves the interest of a few and breeds outrageous poverty and social inequity, those called to service in the church are tempted to place their own comfort and self-interest above that of others. In effect, their comportment spawns unjust structures within the church that neglect genuine pastoral needs, in particular the spiritual needs of the poor. Pope Francis deplores the fact that “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care” and calls every Catholic to translate the church’s preferential option of the poor into concrete action (EG n.200).

> He recognizes that when faced by the challenges of secularization and undifferentiated religious pluralism, pastoral workers—be they religious, lay, or ordained—often prefer to retreat into themselves. Tempted to despair, they fall prey to what Pope Francis aptly calls “pastoral acedia” (EG nn.81–82). Despondent, their evangelical fervor is stifled by “defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists.” Instead of radiating gospel joy their faces are those of “sourpusses” (EG n.85). They tragically lose touch with the lives of those whom they are called to serve, having become blind or indifferent to the needs of others, especially the poor.

Pope Francis reserves his fiercest critique for the condition that he has dubbed “spiritual worldliness”—a theme he returns to with some frequency—most recently in his Christmas Address to the members of the Roman Curia. Spiritual worldliness is a subtle

---

18 Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” America (30 September 2014): 14-18 et varia, at 17

19 Pope Francis, “Presentation of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia” (December 22, 2014) at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_
malady of the self-absorbed parading behind “the appearance of piety and even love for the church” (EG n.93). A self-referential church, Francis if fond of repeating, is sick; it has a developed a false notion of mission and identity. He observes that among those who remain entrenched in a "Catholic style from the past ... a supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying” (EG n.94). Their concern is neither for Jesus nor those whom they serve. This same malady manifests itself in “an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the church's prestige.” It is equally reflected through a certain “pride in [the] ability to manage practical affairs, or an obsession with programs of self-help and self-realization” (EG n.95). A careful reading of these few paragraphs should give us to understand that Francis is not simply targeting groups on the right or left: none are immune from the temptation of self-righteousness and complacency. The worst manifestations of spiritual worldliness are found in the air of superiority or elitism that lead one to dismiss the views of those who differ, or to abandon and neglect those in need of healing and mercy.

Those who have fallen into this worldliness look on from above and afar, they reject the prophecy of their brothers and sisters, they discredit those who raise questions, they constantly point out the mistakes of others and they are obsessed by appearances. Their hearts are open only to the limited horizon of their own immanence and interests, and as a consequence they neither learn from their sins nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness. This is a tremendous corruption disguised as a good (EG n.97).

Such persons have ceased to recognize the face of Christ in others.

**Spiritual Blindness, Unauthentic Traditions, and Conversion**

Pope Francis considers these variously self-absorbed comportments, in their social and structural consequences, “adulterated forms of Christianity” (EG n.94). They have become structural or habitual obstacles to the proclamation of the kerygmatic heart of the gospel and prevent the church from leading others to the joy of encountering the merciful love of Christ. In his incisive commentary on the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, Joseph Ratzinger once observed that while the council succeeded in placing the person of Christ at the heart of its proclamation, it missed an opportunity to acknowledge the possibility of real distortions entering into tradition itself.20 In a similar vein, Bernard Lonergan, when discussing the dialectical processes that contribute to the ongoing self-constitution of the church, identifies one of the important tasks for theology as the discernment of “inauthentic traditions”—self-perpetuating expressions of faith that have become detached from their origins in the love of Christ.

---

20 “We shall have to acknowledge the truth of the criticism that there is, in fact, no explicit mention of the possibility of a distorting tradition and of the place of Scripture as an element within the Church that is also critical of tradition.” Joseph Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, chapter II,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*. ed. H. Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) III 192-193.
He contends that the effects of unauthentic traditions can only be overcome by engaging in the intentional operations required to bring about genuine conversion. A return to Christ and to the central message of the scriptures is key to discerning the inevitable dissonance between the call of the gospel and the reality of the church’s life and witness.

_Evangelii Gaudium_ might be seen as a reflection that is engaged in, and providing the impetus for, just such a discernment. It calls for the conversion of these inauthentic attitudes and traditions through a return to a focus on Jesus Christ and on the poor—to the heart of the Gospel: “God save us from a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings! This stifling worldliness can only be healed by breathing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God” (EG n.97). The reader may be taken aback by the intensity of Pope Francis’ critique, particularly when he repeats the ominous words of John XXIII’s historic speech inaugurating the Second Vatican Council:

“At times we have to listen, much to our regret, to the voices of people who, though burning with zeal, lack a sense of discretion and measure. In this modern age they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin … We feel that we must disagree with those prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. In our times, divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfillment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church” (EG n.84).

One might recognize in Pope Francis’ teaching an echo of John XXIII’s invitation to read the signs of the times. When the Pharisees came to Jesus asking for a dramatic indication of God’s work in the world, he rebuked them for failing to recognize in his daily teaching and healing ministry the many signs that God was well and truly present and active in history (Matt 16: 1–4). In our own day, some have come to interpret the notion of the “signs of the times” in overly negative and apocalyptic terms. Contemporary prophets of doom see the sky falling all around and are blind to the healing presence of Christ in moments of quiet authenticity in the movements of human history and in human interactions, where simple acts of loving presence, forgiveness, and mercy are at work to heal and reverse the wounds of sin and alienation.

The great tragedy, as Pope Francis seems to indicate, is that many who hold important responsibilities around the Bishop of Rome are deaf to the still small voice of God in history. The very seeds of the kingdom are found in the fragile lives of the poor and the ordinary as they seek the face of God. The drama of our predicament is that many of those to whom Pope Francis must now entrust the work of discernment and reform suffer from spiritual blindness and may not yet have the capacity to recognize the unfailing signs of hope around them. Viewed in this light, spiritual conversion might be considered a

---

21 “[T]radition may be unauthentic. It may consist in a watering-down of the original message, in recasting it into terms and convictions of those who have dodged the issue of radical conversion.” Bernard Lonergan, _Method in Theology_ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 162; see also 80 and 299.

greater priority than institutional reform. Yet spiritual conversion cannot be dissociated from the reform of ecclesial structures. Although the former precedes the latter, the movement of God's Spirit shapes and reshapes the concrete lives of the faithful both as individual persons and as a community. Indeed, without clarity of spiritual vision any attempt to renew the structures of the church will fall flat. Without liberation from the spiritual blindness that Pope Francis has described, one risks perpetuating unauthentic traditions, substituting empty observance and doctrinaire solutions for slow and steady progress along the fragile path of authentic human existence – the only path to holiness open to us.

The "pastoral" character of the Second Vatican Council outlined by Pope John XXIII consisted in the effort to reformulate the expression of church doctrine, to reform the liturgy and church structures so that they might faithfully proclaim the message of the gospel to men and women of the late twentieth century. The principal mode for the church's proclamation was to be dialogue with contemporary culture and society. As Lonergan describes the council's vision, the church's communication of the gospel must employ the language and culture of the receivers "so that the Christian message becomes, not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within the culture." His reflection on the pastoral nature of the council enables us to understand the priority of the kerygma in that dialogical engagement and the relative role of doctrine in the communicating the good news.

But if one first clarifies the meaning of "doctrine" and then sets about explaining the meaning of "pastoral," one tends to reduce "pastoral" to the application of "doctrine" and to reduce the application of "doctrine" to the devices and dodges, the simplifications and elaborations of classical oratory. But what comes first is the word of God. The task of the church is the kerygma, announcing the good news, preaching the gospel. That preaching is pastoral. It is the concrete reality. From it one may extract doctrines, and theologians may work the doctrines into conceptual systems. But the doctrines and systems, however valuable and true, are but the skeleton of the original message. A word is the word of a person, but doctrine objectifies and depersonalizes. The word of God comes to us through the God-man. The church has to mediate to the world not just a doctrine but the living Christ.

Pope Francis' call for the pastoral and missionary conversion of the church is very much in line with the pastoral intention that informed the Second Vatican Council. It must be seen as an invitation to carry forward the central orientations of the council's vision and teaching in our time.

23 In his interview with Elisabetta Piqué, Pope Francis indicated that "spiritual reform, the reform of the heart" was a principal concern, with reference to his upcoming Christmas message to the members of the Roman Curia on December 22, 2014. "God has Bestowed on Me a Healthy Dose."

24 Lonergan, Method 362.

IV. THE PASTORAL AND MISSIONARY CONVERSION OF ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES

Against the horizon of spiritual conversion and the priority of the kerygma in the communication of the Christian message, we now turn our attention to the pastoral and missionary conversion of church structures and practices required in view of the overarching aim of Pope Francis’ exhortation: a new evangelization. The missionary nature of the church is to be the guiding principle for this renewal, which, he insists, cannot be deferred.

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with him (EG n.27).

Profoundly conscious that the church is a human community moving—with the help of God’s Spirit—toward an eschatological horizon, Pope Francis prefers the image of the church as the pilgrim people of God over that of a hierarchical institution. “She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary” (EG n.111).

The image of the church as people of God inspires an eschatological humility that enables us to consider institutional structures, customs, and practices in their proper perspective. Structures, customs, pastoral and canonical norms exist to lead us to an encounter with the living Christ. A kerygmatic focus helps us to understand that increasing church demographics is not the immediate goal of evangelization. The Christian community undertakes a mission of proclamation and service without concern for its own survival. The way of the gospel is a way of self-forgetfulness and self-giving love, not of self-interest. The church is not a closed community of the elite, but is willing to risk all, to live in a culture of encounter with others, ready to learn and deepen its comprehension of the very message it wishes to proclaim. “It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (EG 45). The church is not a human project, but a response to the work of God in us. “The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that ‘he has loved us first’ (1 Jn 4:19) and that he alone ‘gives the growth’ (1 Cor 3:7)” (EG n.12). With this confidence, Pope Francis invites us to re-examine the extent to which ecclesial

---

26 I am indebted to for this expression, which he often uses to characterize the pilgrim nature of the church in history. See Richard R. Gaillardetz The Church in the Making (New York: Paulist, 2006) 56.

27 In this regard, Pope Francis has often repeated that “it is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.” See EG 14, where he cites Pope Benedict XVI, “Homily at Mass for the Opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (13 May 2007), Aparecida, Brazil,” AAS 99 (2007), 437.
structures at every level serve or inhibit missionary outreach which is “paradigmatic of all the church’s activity” (EG n.15; italics in the original).

**Conversion of the Local Church**

_Evangelii Gaudium_ envisions every parish community as a center of “constant missionary outreach” where all activities are aimed at forming true “evangelizers,” men and women whose lives speak to others of the love of God. Parishes ought not to become a haven for the self-absorbed, but are to be in close contact with the genuine lives and concerns of their members, discerning where and how the gifts of the community might be placed at the service of others. Living in a world dominated by the economic metaphors of production and growth, we may be tempted to measure the “success” of parish pastoral ministry by the number of people in the pews, by the number of baptisms, confirmations, and marriages, or by weekly revenues. According to the principles that Pope Francis has laid out, these are “worldly” measures of success and not the true measure of divine grace. He invites us to ask instead, have the poor and the wounded found a home here? Are the members of this community being formed to be the “spirit-filled evangelizers” that the world needs? Is this community fully engaged in serving the needs of the poor and broken in the wider neighborhood? Is this parish a place that radiates the joy and mercy of the gospel? Francis has sometimes used the image of the church as a “field hospital” to speak about its outward engagement.

The church is not the “front line,” the ultimate object of parish ministry. It is a center of healing and support, equipping the faithful for the daily struggle of life and witness.

Pope Francis acknowledges frankly that efforts of renewal have not yet succeed in creating parishes that are “environments of living communion and participation” (EG 28) where the gifts and insights of the lay faithful are nourished and welcomed as a valuable contribution to the church’s missional activity. One might also ask whether parish and diocesan structures provide sufficient formation in the habits of dialogue and discernment needed to live as mature adult Christians within the complex context of contemporary culture. Within each diocese bishops are exhorted to develop the necessary processes and structures for ongoing communal discernment. Where diocesan and parish pastoral councils have been poorly implemented the laity have little experience of co-responsibility for the mission of the church, and their pastors are cannot reliably discern the true pastoral needs and priorities of those entrusted to their care.

Pope Francis calls upon all members of each local church “to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.” He warns that any “proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory” (EG n.33). The pastoral discernment envisioned here is not to be undertaken in isolation, but in a mutually supportive community and in the set of synergetic relations that characterize genuine ecclesial communion. The bishop, whose task is “to foster this missionary communion,” must know when to lead and when to walk in the midst of his people. He has a particular responsibility to develop the structures of dialogue and participation in the church, not merely for the sake of organizational efficiency or

28 Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God” 24.
expediency, but with "the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone" (EG n.31). In his own ministry of service and pastoral discernment, the bishop must be one who listens—not only to those who share his views to tell him what he wants to hear—excluding no one from his concern.

If this call for conversion is to truly take effect, a wide ranging effort of spiritual and pastoral formation will be needed to uproot the deep seated attitudes of clericalism and passivity that are so much a part of the contemporary Catholic ethos. Pope Francis’ diagnosis of "pastoral acedia" is most apt in this regard. Acedia is an infectious malady. Its remedy, in the tradition of the church fathers, is a return to the word of God and compunction in the awareness of how far we have stayed from God’s desire. True compunction is a sign that God’s word has pierced and softened our hearts. With genuine humility our sorrow turns to compassion and the joy of knowing God’s forgiveness and healing love. In some contexts, true pastoral conversion will require public and communal exercises of discernment and repentance. Some communities have been chastened by the scandal of sexual abuse which has revealed, at times painfully, the lack of authenticity not only on the part of individual offenders and their misguided protectors, but more pointedly in a culture of silence and false deference toward the clergy, in a practice of ministry that neglects the most vulnerable, in a misguided exercise of church governance and canonical discipline. This is but one example of where customs, practices and an overall ecclesial culture have failed to serve the gospel. Only a humble and authentic communal examen and repentance can lead a community to recognize where it stands in need of the grace of collective conversion.

**Conversion of Regional Structures: Toward Genuine Collegiality**

_Evangelii Gaudium_ admits the necessity of re-examining the status of the regional and national conferences of bishops as part of a broader project for the pastoral conversion of the papacy. Recalling the invitation issued by Pope John Paul II, in his 1995 encyclical letter on Commitment to Ecumenism, _Ut Unum Sint_, to seek together “a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation,” Pope Francis concedes, “We have made little progress in this regard” (EG n.32). As part of advancing along the path of a truly pastoral renewal of the papal office, he invites a reconsideration of the status of the episcopal conferences. The role of the latter was greatly circumscribed by the 1998 Apostolic Letter of John Paul II, _Apostolos Suos_, which was widely experienced as an effort to centralize the governance of the local churches, reversing a process of devolution begun by the Second Vatican Council with its affirmation of the collegial exercise of the episcopal office.

In theological circles the argument of _Apostolos Suos_ that a genuine exercise of collegiality could not be ascribed to the regional gatherings of bishops, but belongs properly only to the entire college of bishops with and under the Bishop of Rome, raised concern.

---


31 John Paul II, _Apostolos Suos_ especially nn.10–14.
In contrast, Pope Francis now notes that the attribution of a genuine doctrinal authority belonging to the bishops when they exercise their pastoral teaching office through the means of an episcopal conference “has not yet been sufficiently elaborated.” Further, he affirms, “Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach” (EG n.32). An overly centralized system of governance can diminish the responsiveness of the bishops’ conferences and of the bishops in their particular churches, who, because of their proximity to the people in their care, are best equipped to discern what is needed. In hindsight, Pope John Paul II’s attempt to “rein in” episcopal conferences in the hope of attaining a more unified witness may have been comprehensible in the turbulent period of the late twentieth century that witnessed an unprecedented expansion of the global Catholic Church. The Catholic Church of the twenty-first century is the most populous and diverse global Christian community the world has ever known. The election of a Latin American pope is itself a sign of the coming of age of a world church whose centre of gravity has now moved to the southern hemisphere. Francis has recognized instinctively, and no doubt from his concrete experience as an archbishop from the global south, that the center will not hold if there is not adequate freedom for the local churches in all of their diversity to discern the forms and structures of life best suited for the enculturation of the Christian message in their context.

The bishops’ conferences in the various regions were among of the principal structures established by the Second Vatican Council to give shape to the collegial exercise of the episcopal office. Pope Francis affirms the need for further development in this area. When he speaks of how much the Catholic Church can stand to learn from and receive from the insights and practices of other Christian churches, he pointedly cites the example of collegiality and synodality modelled by the Eastern Orthodox Churches (EG n.246). North American Catholics have witnessed a continuous downsizing of the structures and budgets of the episcopal conferences in recent years. While this reflects a genuine decline in available resources, it has sometimes been justified in the name of the ecclesiology contained in Apostolos Suos. If today a serious devolution of discernment and decision-making is really in the cards, then bishops may need to reconsider the importance of strong national structures and the pooling of material and personnel resources to carry out new tasks and equip the church for mission in a changing context.

Perhaps the most neglected of the synodal structures envisioned by the renewal of the Second Vatican Council was the restoration of provincial councils. To my knowledge, only two of these have been held in the past fifty years (in India and the Philippines). This omission is most regrettable, especially in areas where many individual dioceses are challenged by limited resources. Provincial councils might provide an important opportunity for a pooling of resources and for the particular churches of a given region to support one another in the process of discerning the pastoral mission of the church in our time. The American ecclesiologist Francis A. Sullivan recently suggested that a restoration of provincial councils might come to play an important role in the nomination of bishops, a

---

32 Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishop, Christus Dominus, nn. 5, 36.
33 Ibid. n.36.
function that many desire to see devolve to more regionally or locally based instances of authority and discernment.\textsuperscript{34}

The final structure envisioned by Vatican II as an expression of the co-responsibility of the episcopal college in the governance of the universal church is the international Synod of Bishops.\textsuperscript{35} In his leadership of the two synods focussed on the call of the Christian family in the contemporary world, Pope Francis has shown a desire to see the synod function as a space for genuine dialogue and discernment. He made it clear from the outset of the synod that he considers "speaking honestly ... with parrhesia"—candidly and without holding back—and listening with humility the two fundamental pre-conditions for the practice of synodality.\textsuperscript{36} In planning for two successive synodal gatherings to reflect on the same pastoral concern, Pope Francis is also demonstrating that discernment is a process. It takes time. Genuine pastoral conversion cannot be satisfied with the perfunctory application of pre-cooked responses to the complex realities of peoples' lives. Through the experience of honest and transparent dialogue, the bishops can come to understand more deeply that the pastoral challenges of Christians in one cultural context may differ greatly from those experienced by the people of God in another. They are more likely to come to an appreciation of the need, in the diversity of today's church, for a more differentiated pastoral response and of the inadequacy of uniform solutions. Such understanding and respect will be vital to grounding the genuine bonds of communion among the local churches, and to envisioning a pastoral response appropriate to the complexities of family life in today's cultural context.

One hopes that the synod will continue to evolve from an instrument of occasional consultation to a more permanent body that can offer advice in an ongoing manner on how best to respond to a wide range of questions as they arise. A genuine synod would also be much more of a deliberative body than we have known since Vatican II. Pope Francis took pains to ensure that the voting of the October 2013 synod on the family be published.\textsuperscript{37} Will he consider himself bound by the voting patterns of the bishops as the synodal process moves forward? This would be consistent with his experience as a superior in the context of a religious order where the counsel emerging from consultative processes is understood to have a binding effect. It would also mark a move toward a synod with a more deliberative character.

\textit{The Pastoral Conversion of the Papacy}

\textsuperscript{34} For a solid reflection on the history of provincial councils and their potential role in the present context, see Francis A. Sullivan, "Provincial Councils and the Choosing of Priests for Appointment as Bishops," \textit{Theological Studies} 74 (2013): 872–883.

\textsuperscript{35} Second Vatican Council, \textit{Christus Dominus} n.36. The international synod of bishops was in fact established by Pope Paul VI, prior to the promulgation of this conciliar text. Paul VI, "Motu Proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo (15 September 1965)," at http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html.

\textsuperscript{36} Pope Francis, "Greeting to the Synod Fathers."

\textsuperscript{37} See the official press release, a Latin version, at: http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/18/0770/03044.html. The English translation of the final relatio at the Vatican web site does not list the votes.
In his personal style and in the many reforming initiatives that he has undertaken, Pope Francis has demonstrated an unambiguous desire to give shape to a substantially different exercise of the pastoral teaching office by the Bishop of Rome. He has sought to simplify ceremonial aspects, to live in greater simplicity and proximity to those with whom he serves. By being more accessible to the press corps, giving extended interviews to some, he has shown a preference for direct and personal conversation over the formality of prepared texts and theological discourse. His actions belie a consistent commitment to go out to the poor, from the refugees of Lampedusa to the homeless victims of typhoon Haiyan and the homeless on the gates of the Vatican City.

Much of Francis’ attention over the first two years of his pontificate has been consumed by the reform of structures of the Roman Curia, including those for the oversight and administration of Vatican finances and the various dicasteries that exist to assist the Pope and the bishops in the governance of the universal church. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he admits without hesitation that “the papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion” (EG n.32). While it is widely expected that a substantial revision of the Roman dicasteries will be announced in the coming year, Pope Francis and his advisors have already given important indications of what can be expected: fewer prelates, more members of the laity and women in key offices; improved international representation, clearer limits on terms of office; the amalgamation and streamlining of offices with overlapping concern (e.g. the Pontifical Councils for Justice and Peace and for the Pastoral Care of Migrants; Social Communications, Vatican Radio and *L’Osservatore Romano*). New offices may be established to reflect the pastoral priorities of the present day. This reform is aimed not simply at streamlining the Vatican bureaucracy, but seeks also to address a deep seated papal-centric culture that has become more self-serving than mission oriented. As one of the pope’s advisors intimated, “There is a longing for a curia that encourages the new evangelization and acts as a body to serve the Pope and the dioceses, not as a control centre.”

*The “C8”: An ad hoc Committee with No Future?*

To help him in this reforming task, Francis has established a new structure, an advisory group composed of eight cardinals chosen to represent the continental groups of bishops and the Eastern Catholic Churches. The members of the “C8” have carried out, in turn, a wide consultation of the bishops in each region. They have been meeting at a rate of about once every three months. While Pope Francis has also carried out a wide-ranging consultation of the members of the curia concerning this reform, by taking his cues principally from the bishops, he is attempting to arrive at a set of structures that will best serve the missional needs of the local churches, the communion over which he presides. The agenda is not being set by the apparatus, but by the concrete pastoral needs and priorities of the particular churches.

It is worth asking Pope and the members of the C8 whether they envision this group as an ad hoc initiative or see it becoming a permanent structure. Will it outlive this

---

extraordinary moment of discernment and structural reform? Might it come to serve as a permanent body that links the Bishop of Rome to the continental groups of bishops in a more sustained and direct manner than the international synod or some other body within the curia (e.g.: The Congregation for Bishops)? Since 1978 the Archbishops of Canterbury have met regularly with the presiding bishops or Primates to reflect on matters of common concern and to strengthen the bonds of communion among the various provinces of the Anglican Communion. Might the C8 evolve into a kind of Catholic “Primates’ Meeting”?

Pope Francis seems to be drawn instinctively toward an unmediated contact with the bishops, one unencumbered by a curial office functioning, however unwittingly, as a tertium quid between himself and the leaders of the local churches. A number of studies in recent decades have called for the strengthening of continental bodies, even envisioning the development of new continental “patriarchates” adapted after the model of the early church. They suggest that new continental structures might embody the kind of devolution required by the reform of the papacy, and serve the inevitable diversification needed for a fuller enculturation of the gospel. Further, they insist, such a reform must also be accompanied by a clarification and differentiation of the various functions of the Bishop of Rome as bishop in the local Church of Rome, Patriarch of the Western Church, and Primate of the universal church. A permanent group of cardinals or primates might provide a forum for dialogue and consultation between the Pope and the continental groups of bishops. Should a permanent structure such as the group of eight cardinals be deemed desirable, it would be important to delineate clearly its terms of reference and the criteria for the appointment of its members. As this juncture, the C8 remains a hand-picked body of cardinals, an instrument of the papacy. Were the criteria of selection or even election from among the leadership of the bishops’ conferences to be made more transparent, such a group might also come to be recognized as having a truly representative character in relation to the continental groups of bishops and their churches.

Reform of the College of Cardinals

Somewhat surprisingly, Evangelii Gaudium makes no reference to the challenge posed by the College of Cardinals, a body whose medieval origins point to its principal function as a college of electors. In the history of the church, no group is more notoriously emblematic of spiritual worldliness than these ecclesiastical princes. If Pope Francis is serious about combatting spiritual worldliness, then perhaps he will do us the favor of abolishing once and for all the obsolete and inappropriate title, “princes,” which can still be found in some

---


40 In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI dropped this title from among those listed in the Annuario Pontificio as he considered it “obsolete.” It is regrettable that he preferred to abandon this title, missing an opportunity to clarify the role and the various functions of the papal office—a matter of great ecumenical significance, as indicated by Orthodox reactions. Cardinal Walter Kasper provided an explication for Pope Benedict’s decision in, “Press Release Regarding the Suppression of the Title ‘Patriarch of the West’ in the Annuario Pontificio, at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/christuni/general-docs/rc_pc_christuni_doc_20060322_patriarca-occidente_fr.html.
of the official documentation pertaining to this office. He often affirms that ecclesiastical office is to be understood primarily as a call to service, insisting that the episcopate is no place for those who have the "mindset of princes."

Francis has not refrained from appointing a number of men to the cardinalate as a dignity or honour in recognition of their accomplishments. The example of last year’s appointment of the 99 year old Bishop Loris Capovilla, former personal secretary to Pope John XXIII comes to mind. During the pontificate of Pope John Paul II three major theologians were named to the College of Cardinals late in life (Henri de Lubac, Avery Dulles, and Yves Congar). With respect, and in view of a genuine and theologically consistent pastoral reform, it must be asked whether there not a more appropriate manner of recognizing the important contributions of members of the church that would not entail the bestowal of ecclesiastical office? Even though these nominations were made with the very best of intentions, they betray a most unfortunate theological ambivalence. The practice of honorary appointments belies a confusion of priorities and reflects an incongruity that is both theological and pastoral. These may seem like harmless and insignificant examples. Yet they are highly symbolic of the confusing set of roles and expectations that have accrued to the office of cardinal through the centuries virtually unchecked.

In his thoughtful response to Pope John Paul II’s invitation to dialogue on the reform of the papacy, Archbishop John Quinn devotes an entire chapter to a reflection on the necessity for a reform of the College of Cardinals. He is especially concerned that its role expanded greatly under Pope John Paul II, who increased the frequency of consistories and thereby enhanced its role on church governance. According to Quinn, the fundamental problem posed by the College of Cardinals is that it functions as a college within a college “in a sense making the rest of the college of bishops a body of second rank.” He observes further, that the expansion of the consultative role of the consistory of cardinals threatens to undermine the role of the international synod of bishops and impede its full flourishing. As if to confirm the concerns expressed by Quinn, Pope Benedict took to referring frequently to the cardinals as the “Senate of the Church,” a juridical term adopted from the structures of the Roman Empire and deliberately abandoned by the 1983 Code of Canon Law (CIC 230). The unintended effect of these developments has been the emergence of “a kind of bicameral structure.” These are serious concerns and most worthy of consideration in the present context.

---

41 In June 2013, in an address to a gathering of papal nuncios, Pope Francis warned against appointing as bishops men who have “the mindset of princes.” In this document, he attributes his notion of “spiritual worldliness to Henri de Lubac. Méditation sur l’Église (1952). “Address of Pope Francis to Participants in the Papal Representatives Days (June 21, 2013),” at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130621_rappresentanti-pontifici.html. Another problematic practice, from an ecclesiological perspective, is the continuing practice of appointing “titular” bishops. While Pope Francis’ intention to reduce the number of curial officials that hold the office of bishop is most welcome, he has not yet shown a comprehension of the serious contradiction between his theology of ministry as service, and the existence of “pastors” without a flesh and blood community over which to preside. A truly pastoral conversion of the episcopal office would require an end to such appointments.


44 Quinn, Reform of the Papacy 150.
Of the three structures under consideration here, the relationship of the College of Cardinals to the local churches is the least obvious. This derives from the lack of clear consideration of representativity in the criteria for the selection of cardinals, and secondly, from the inordinate number of “titular” bishops who belong to the College of Cardinals, many of them heads of the various offices of the Roman curia. While many members of the College undoubtedly carry out important responsibilities on various advisory commissions, they often appear as a coterie of hand-picked “party men.” According to the Code of Canon Law, the Pope chooses men for this office who are “outstanding in doctrine, morals, piety, and prudence in action” (CIC 351, §1). Traditionally, the Archbishops of primatial, metropolitan, and historically significant churches have been appointed to the cardinalate, but even this principle finds no echo in the canons.

In his recent appointment of new cardinals, Pope Francis does not appear bound by convention. He has made a number of innovative appointments of Archbishops from some of the poorest and most under-represented constituencies of the church. His instincts here may suggest the need for more comprehensive and transparent terms of reference for such appointment, so that a greater balance might be achieved. Ideally, a college of electors should faithfully represent the diversity of the local churches.

A comprehensive reform the collegial structures which serve the universal church would see the College of Cardinals return to its principal mission as a college of electors, responsible for electing the bishops of Rome. It would have less of a governing role, avoiding the impression of a “bicameral” structure, or of the College of Cardinals usurping a role that belongs properly to the international synod. During the Second Vatican Council, Maximos IV Saigh pleaded for the establishment of a permanent synod to assist the pope in the daily governance of the church. The inadvertent expansion of the role of the consistory might be seen as filling a void left by the absence of such a structure. In any case, it would appear to confirm the need for a more effective permanent structure to collaborate with the Bishop of Rome in the governance of the universal church. Consideration might be given to a co-ordination between a small body of continental primates and a larger, international synod of bishops made up of representatives of the conferences of bishops. As these structures continue to evolve in response to the changing needs of the global Catholic Communion, it will be important to define the mission of each and to avoid the danger of the competitive dynamic against which Archbishop John Quinn has justly cautioned.

**CONCLUSION**

Beginning from a consideration of the principle orientations of the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, I have attempted to explore, in broad strokes, the implications of Pope Francis’ call for a pastoral and missionary conversion of the church in our day. The purpose of such a reform is to enable the church to return to the kerygma, to the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ. Like all Christian conversion, it must begin through spiritual renewal and encounter with Christ, and lead to the transformation of persons, communities, attitudes, customs, policies and institutions. The centrality of the

---

45 See note 4, above.
kerygma, supported by a return to the study of the Word of God, and the recognition of the gifts of God’s Spirit—joy, humility, mercy, peace-making—are to be the guiding principles in a concerted effort to discern how existing ecclesial structures, customs, and practices might better proclaim the living God to men and women of our day, in particular to the poor.

I have suggested that the exercise of collective discernment that must ensue, if we heed Pope Francis’ call, might be seen as an effort to discern and uproot not only the personal attitudes that prevent us from knowing and proclaiming the joy of the gospel, but also the distortions that have crept in to our practice – the unauthentic traditions which make a sham of the church’s witness and obstruct its ability to reflect the joy of Christ. Pope Francis has invited a consideration of every level of ecclesial life from the parish, to the diocese, to conferences of bishops, and the papacy itself. In the hope of contributing to the indispensable dialogue that belongs to the process of collective discernment initiated through his exhortation, I have attempted to reflect on some of the questions to be faced at each of these levels. The vision that Pope Francis sets before us is a comprehensive one. It entails nothing less than a rediscovery and deepening of the missionary nature and identity of the church. How powerful would be the presence and service of the church in the world, if every Christian could say, “My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We … regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing” (EG n.273).

Author: Catherine E. Clifford is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. She is the author of Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Ongoing Reception (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2014), and co-author, with Richard R. Gaillardetz, of Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012).

Email: cclifford@ustpaul.ca

© 2015 Catherine E. Clifford