

Some reflections on (the possibility of) sustainable reforms within the Catholic Church ¹

Is there any “Vatican spring” and, if yes, how deeply influential is it?



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As is obvious for many, a new wind is blowing in the Vatican, to the extent that some are speaking about a “new spring”, recalling the *aggiornamento* (update) of the second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in the years 1962 to 1965.

Two or three questions may be asked in this respect:

1. How deep are the present changes, and how desirable are they?
2. Are they sustainable?

However, some clarification is needed before those questions are answered.

1. What is the Catholic Church?

The Catholic Church is, undoubtedly, a major institution, but unlike others, it has a unique nature: it is both a State actor, the Vatican City State being internationally recognised as such, and the largest civil society network in the world with its estimated 1.2 billion members in 2012.

This last qualification may however appear as contradicting the first one. This is probably one of the reasons why the European Union decided, in the Lisbon Treaty, to include a separate provision on the

¹ First published in German under the title "*Sind nachhaltige Reformen innerhalb der katholischen Kirche möglich ? Zum Vatikanischen Frühling und seinen Auswirkungen*" in *Sozial Extra*, April 2016, volume 40, available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12054-016-0034-z> (access 14 May 2019).

dialogue with “Churches and religious associations or communities” (art. 17 TFEU)¹, distinct from the general provisions of art. 11 on civil dialogue and participatory democracy.

Beyond this double nature, the Catholic Church should also be considered from another perspective as it cannot be reduced to a mere organisation: according to its own representation, it also defines itself as the “mystic body of Christ”, the full meaning of this definition being only accessible through theology and spirituality.

Given this manifold definition of the Catholic Church, it is now clear that the two questions under review are likely to receive different answers.

2. How deep are the present changes occurring in the Vatican?

As we just saw, the Catholic Church may be considered from various perspectives, in particular from a political, a sociological and a spiritual perspective.

Our point of view will mostly deal with the second and third ones, i.e. with what is generally called “social doctrine” or “social teaching” of the Church, while making it clear that the word “social” may receive different meanings according to the context where it is used. It may indeed be interpreted broadly, in the sense of “societal”, or more narrowly, in the sense of all rules and function(ing)s related to solidarity.

A major breakthrough in the Catholic Church happened during the second Vatican Council mentioned above. Among its main innovations, we can stress the renewed vision of a Church, which is not anymore in a dominant position vis-à-vis society, but on the contrary, which is itself a part of society with a specific mission, in dialogue with society at large. A key notion in this respect is the “people of God” which, although a source of many misunderstandings, emphasizes that all men and women, being sons and daughters of the same loving God, and thus brothers and sisters, are equal in dignity.

There are different opinions on how much Vatican II changed the rules, mindsets and representations of Christians and non-Christians, endless debates bearing on whether changes to the tradition can be regarded as part of the tradition itself... Whatever those different opinions, there is a large agreement that the spirit of Vatican II became largely “lost in translation” during the 50 following years and that the present pope’s action can be looked at as an attempt to re-connect with the spirit and the conclusions of Vatican II.

Another major issue has to do with *governance*. According to the traditional vision, the Catholic Church is organized according to a “double-two-tier system”:

- A first distinction has to be made between clergy and laymen, the traditional (“clerical”) vision being that clergy has a privileged access to God and to eternal truths ;
- A second distinction separates bishops, defined as the followers of the apostles at the highest degree in the Church’s hierarchy, from all other human beings.

In essence, the Catholic Church should thus have a very “flat” structure, the only relevant entity being the diocese – irrespective of the major role also played by religious orders, which are organised according to a different pattern. However, the bishop of Rome was defined very early as *primus inter pares* (the first among equals), and its diocese and administration, the *Curia*, as the real center of

power. The present pope clearly wants to take distance with this state of things and national bishops' conferences to play a more important role both in a spirit of "decentralization" and "inculturation"².

It is symptomatic that in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*³, encyclicals being the documents with the highest authority in the Church, the pope quotes national and (sub-)continental bishops' conferences more than 10 times, whereas in all previous such documents, institutional self-reference was the norm, i.e. popes were mostly quoting themselves or their predecessors.

There is indeed a major practical as well as epistemological challenge in attempting to reform a "top-down" culture from the top. But there are many signs that changes in this respect are real. The next question is whether they are likely to succeed, and if yes, whether such successes are likely to be sustainable.

3. How sustainable are the present changes?

Here again, we will address the question through a double perspective: content-wise, and from the point of view of governance.

Content-wise, we have to remind ourselves that the present pope is the first non-European pope in history. This makes him probably more aware than others of some of the deep paradigmatic and cultural changes in the present world. The European population is expected to drop to around 7 % of the world's population in 2050, as compared with 14 % in 1950. Asia is the continent where Christian faith is progressing most rapidly, with a very different approach to theology presenting many commonalities with the so-called "liberation theology" of South-America, i.e. a theology starting from concrete issues and life situations rather than from a deductive approach strongly influenced by European deductive-logic philosophies. (There is thus a strong interrelation between this epistemological framework and the traditional top-down « habitus »⁴ of the Catholic Church mentioned above).

Such changes are largely structural. Thus, the pope's successes in confronting the Church with today's realities go to a large extent beyond a mere communication exercise.

From the point of view of governance, three evolutions at least deserve consideration.

The first one is the decision of the pope to entrust to a new body of 9 cardinals, the so-called "C 9", a major say in most reforms concerning the internal working of the church, in particular the curia². From the start, the pope, who is also the first Jesuit in this position, showed his ability to address the paradox mentioned above: by designing the C-9 in such a way that it includes various Church sensitivities, it provides a stronger backing to reforms than if they had been decided only by himself.

The second one are the nominations of bishops and cardinals. In less than two years, the present pope has nominated numerous new bishops and cardinals throughout the world, including much less European cardinals than in the past. Some of them were also chosen in accordance with the evangelical character of their lives and testimonies rather than for their academic records. This, too, is likely to have a lasting influence, although such changes are likely to be reversed as well.

² Currently, the Council of Cardinal Advisers consists of six members, following the decision by Pope Francis to remove three of its members in late 2018 (*editor's note*).

The third one is the reform of the financial administration of the Vatican, a necessity after the bank of Italy and international institutions such as the European Union and the Council of Europe expressed their concerns on the lack of clarity of operations involving this administration. Those reforms were decided quite rapidly and are not likely to be reversed before soon. This reform was among the first ones where the C 9 took responsibility, and it is expected that new reforms in other areas are going to follow.

4. Some illustrations from a social (thought and policy) point of view

One may wonder what the practical consequences of those evolutions are from a social (thought and policy) point of view.

They are in fact endless, and not always easy to figure out.

According to a traditional catholic representation, three missions lie at the core of any faith engagement: to announce (*marturia*), to celebrate (*leiturgia*) and to serve (*diakonia*). Community-building (*koinonia*) is generally also mentioned at the crossroads of all three.

In principle, all three have to be looked at in interaction, as each one is supposed to support and reinforce each other, like the three feet of a stool. In practical terms, the last child, *diakonia*, has very often been the neglected one. In his apostolical exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* mentioned above, the pope is putting things right, starting from evangelisation (announcement of the “good news”), then drawing a number of practical consequences and shedding a new light on some traditional concepts such as the common good, the preferential option for the poor and other similar or interrelated issues. Moreover, he develops further concepts such as the “economy of exclusion” and even creates new ones such as the “globalization of indifference”, after he could witness the martyrdom of asylum seekers in the Italian island of Lampedusa. This vision has the merit of simultaneously fostering practical and conceptual unity within Christian life, but also of urging Christians to “go forth”, to reach out to the boundaries of society, to the most excluded and vulnerable.

By this exhortation, all Christians and, beyond them, all men “of good will” are encouraged to abide more fully and consistently to their responsibility of advocates for a world with less poverty, less inequalities and less exclusion. This goes beyond mere “lip service”, as the exhortation itself, like the later encyclical *Laudato Si'* and many other public stances, are full of practical examples on how to proceed, even though the general nature of such calls always leaves room for discernment and interpretation according to one’s individual circumstances.

As the pope quotes his predecessor, Benedict XVI, “We need to be convinced that charity “is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)⁵⁹”.

Migration and freedom of movement are, obviously, among the favorite themes, where such practical paths are drawn. In §210 of the same exhortation, the pope writes: “I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis. How beautiful are those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate and favor the recognition of others!”

However, advocacy is not the ultimate duty for Christians. Reaching out to the poor also means listening, sharing experiences, assessing and, possibly, providing services. Here, the governance issue mentioned earlier also has practical consequences: a renewed vision of subsidiarity calls all components of society, from individuals to international organisations, to live up to their duty to foster the common good.

Conclusion

It seems self-evident that no straightforward answer can be given to the questions under review.

All in all, the many signs of the willingness to reform the Church as well as the pace of reforms indicate that important changes are going on.

Many signs indicate as well that those changes are likely to last, as they involve the very structures of the Church, not only in terms of organisation but also in terms of theological foundations.

Still, three threats remain:

1. Will those changes be deep and fast enough to ensure that the catholic Church still has a meaningful narrative to offer to today's and tomorrow's world? In view of the present challenges, some signs are encouraging: for instance, it is clear that the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* is having a major influence on the world's highest decision-makers in charge of environment. But no one knows how the future will look like, and the unavoidable pendulum's swing can also endanger a number of today's reforms.
2. In the big ongoing continental drifts, the future of the Catholic Church in Africa remains as an important question mark. It now plays a major role in substituting many failing States through providing education, health care and many other fundamental goods and services – but by doing so it also runs the risk of confusing its secular and its spiritual role, as has been the case in other continents throughout history. Theocracy is not an option anymore, and churches should never rule and organise societies on behalf of failing public authorities. On top of this, parts of the catholic Church of Africa also appear to be quite traditionalist on moral questions, as we could see once more during the visit of the pope in Africa in December 2015 where the issue of homosexuality could not be even brought to the fore.
3. Among the major ongoing reforms, entrusting bishops' conferences with more powers appears as somehow overambitious: on the one hand, many would support the decentralisation and inculturation it entails, as this decision level is obviously closer to local situations and communities than the Vatican Curia, in spite of the impressive effectiveness of the latter's information channels. Such a move would be fully in line with the subsidiarity principle, which states that decisions have to be taken at the most appropriate level, but as close as possible to local realities. However, the same subsidiarity principle has another consequence: if bishops' conferences would be entrusted with new competences transferred "top-down" from Rome to them, this could also happen the other way round, i.e. "bottom-up" from local bishops to their conferences, a move many of them would probably oppose...

There are, therefore, many grounds for being reasonably optimistic about the depth and the sustainability of the present changes, but we should remain aware that unrealistic expectations also do create major disappointments.

References:

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2. "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 "decentralisation"" Pope Francis (2013), Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican Press.
3. Pope Francis (2015), Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, Vatican Press.
4. Pierre Bourdieu (1972), *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, Librairie Droz, Genève.
5. Benedict XVI (2009), Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* , 2: AAS 101 (2009), 642.

Abstract : a short analysis of some of the major reforms presently brought in within the catholic Church by pope Francis seems to indicate that most of those reforms are indeed relevant and in-depth. Whether they are also sustainable and able to reach out to the grassroots level is another question, which should probably (and hopefully) receive a positive answer for a number of them, but resistance to change should not be overlooked either.

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