

EXCLUSIVE

A profile of the next Pope, writes Cardinal

ECCLESIA

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The Daily Compass is publishing an exclusive document in six languages, intended to circulate among cardinals in view of the forthcoming conclave and among the faithful as food for thought on the priorities of the Church. The text was written principally by a cardinal after he collated the suggestions of other cardinals and bishops. They have chosen to remain anonymous for the reasons explained in the letter.

The Vatican Tomorrow

In March 2022, an anonymous text appeared – signed “Demos” and titled the “**The Vatican Today**” – that raised a number of serious questions and criticisms regarding the pontificate of Pope Francis. Conditions in the Church since that text appeared have not materially changed, much less improved. Thus, the thoughts offered here are intended to build on those original reflections in light of the needs of the Vatican tomorrow.

The concluding years of a pontificate, any pontificate, are a time to assess the condition of the Church in the present, and the needs of the Church and her faithful going forward. It is clear that the strength of Pope Francis’ pontificate is the added emphasis he has given to compassion toward the weak, outreach to the poor and marginalized, concern for the dignity of creation and the environmental issues that flow from it, and efforts to accompany the suffering and alienated in their burdens.

Its shortcomings are equally obvious: an autocratic, at times seemingly vindictive, style of governance; a carelessness in matters of law; an intolerance for even respectful disagreement; and – most seriously – a pattern of ambiguity in matters of faith and morals causing confusion among the faithful. Confusion breeds division and conflict. It undermines confidence in the Word of God. It weakens evangelical witness. And the result today is a Church more fractured than at any time in her recent history.

The task of the next pontificate must therefore be one of recovery and reestablishment of truths that have been slowly obscured or lost among many Christians. These include but are not limited to such basics as the following: (a) no one is saved except through, and *only* through, Jesus Christ, as he himself made clear; (b) God is merciful but also just, and is intimately concerned with every human life, He forgives but He also holds us accountable, He is both Savior and Judge; (c) man is God’s creature, not a self-invention, a creature not merely of emotion and appetites but also of intellect, free will, and an eternal destiny; (d) unchanging objective truths about the world and human nature exist and are knowable through Divine Revelation and the exercise of reason; (e) God’s Word, recorded in Scripture, is reliable and has permanent

force; (f) sin is real and its effects are lethal; and (g) his Church has both the authority and the duty to “make disciples of all nations.” The failure to joyfully embrace that work of missionary, salvific love has consequences. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:16, “woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel.”

Some practical observations flow from the task and list above.

First: Real authority is damaged by authoritarian means in its exercise. The Pope is a Successor of Peter and the guarantor of Church unity. But he is not an autocrat. He cannot change Church doctrine, and he must not invent or alter the Church’s discipline arbitrarily. He governs the Church collegially with his brother bishops in local dioceses. And he does so *always* in faithful continuity with the Word of God and Church teaching. “New paradigms” and “unexplored new paths” that deviate from either are not of God. A new Pope must restore the hermeneutic of continuity in Catholic life and reassert Vatican II’s understanding of the papacy’s proper role.

Second: Just as the Church is not an autocracy, neither is she a democracy. The Church belongs to Jesus Christ. She is his Church. She is Christ’s Mystical Body, made up of many members. We have no authority to refashion her teachings to fit more comfortably with the world. Moreover, the Catholic *sensus fidelium* is not a matter of opinion surveys nor even the view of a baptized majority. It derives only from those who genuinely believe and actively practice, or at least sincerely seek to practice, the faith and teachings of the Church.

Third: Ambiguity is neither evangelical nor welcoming. Rather, it breeds doubt and feeds schismatic impulses. The Church is a community not just of Word and sacrament, but also of creed. What we believe helps to define and sustain us. Thus, doctrinal issues are not burdens imposed by unfeeling “doctors of the law.” Nor are they cerebral sideshows to the Christian life. On the contrary, they’re vital to living a Christian life authentically, because they deal with applications of the truth, and the truth demands clarity, not ambivalent nuance. From the start, the current pontificate has resisted the evangelical force and intellectual clarity of its immediate predecessors. The dismantling and repurposing of Rome’s John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family and the marginalizing of texts like *Veritatis Splendor* suggest an elevation of “compassion” and emotion at the expense of reason, justice, and truth. For a creedal community, this is both unhealthy and profoundly dangerous.

Fourth: The Catholic Church, in addition to Word, sacrament, and creed, is also a community of law. Canon law orders Church life, harmonizes its institutions and

procedures, and guarantees the rights of believers. Among the marks of the current pontificate are its excessive reliance on the *motu proprio* as a tool for governance and a general carelessness and distaste for canonical detail. Again, as with ambiguity of doctrine, disregard for canon law and proper canonical procedure undermines confidence in the purity of the Church's mission.

Fifth: The Church, as John XXIII so beautifully described her, is *mater et magistra*, the "mother and teacher" of humanity, not its dutiful follower; the defender of man as the subject of history, not its object. She is the bride of Christ; her nature is personal, supernatural, and intimate, not merely institutional. She can never be reduced to a system of flexible ethics or sociological analysis and remodeling to fit the instincts and appetites (and sexual confusions) of an age. One of the key flaws in the current pontificate is its retreat from a convincing "theology of the body" and its lack of a compelling Christian anthropology . . . *precisely* at a time when attacks on human nature and identity, from transgenderism to transhumanism, are mounting.

Sixth: Global travel served a pastor like Pope John Paul II so well because of his unique personal gifts and the nature of the times. But the times and circumstances have changed. The Church in Italy and throughout Europe – the historic home of the faith – is in crisis. The Vatican itself urgently needs a renewal of its morale, a cleansing of its institutions, procedures, and personnel, and a thorough reform of its finances to prepare for a more challenging future. These are not small things. They demand the presence, direct attention, and personal engagement of any new Pope.

Seventh and finally: The College of Cardinals exists to provide senior counsel to the Pope and to elect his successor upon his death. That service requires men of clean character, strong theological formation, mature leadership experience, and personal holiness. It also requires a Pope willing to seek advice and then to listen. It's unclear to what degree this applies in the Pope Francis pontificate. The current pontificate has placed an emphasis on diversifying the college, but it has failed to bring cardinals together in regular consistories designed to foster genuine collegiality and trust among brothers. As a result, many of the voting electors in the next conclave will not really know each other, and thus may be more vulnerable to manipulation. In the future, if the college is to serve its purposes, the cardinals who inhabit it need more than a red zucchetto and a ring. Today's College of Cardinals should be proactive about getting to know each other to better understand their particular views regarding the Church, their local church situations, and their personalities – which impact their consideration of the next pope.

Readers will quite reasonably ask why this text is anonymous. The answer should be evident from the tenor of today's Roman environment: Candor is not welcome, and its consequences can be unpleasant. And yet these thoughts could continue for many more paragraphs, noting especially the current pontificate's heavy dependence on the Society of Jesus, the recent problematic work by the DDF's Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, and the emergence of a small oligarchy of confidants with excessive influence within the Vatican – all despite synodality's decentralizing claims, among other things.

Exactly because of these matters, the cautionary reflections noted here may be useful in the months ahead. It is hoped that this contribution will help guide much needed conversations about what the Vatican should look like in the next pontificate.

Demos II