

CURIA REFORM

The Vatican needs a DOVE, a department for efficiency

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I recently **wrote an essay** saying the Vatican needs a DOVE. It was a play on English words: the new Pope would benefit from a “Department of Vatican Efficiency” could build and improve upon Elon Doge’s DOGE. Let me explain.

Most observers say that the conclave which elected Jorge Bergoglio was not looking for a pope to “make a mess” doctrinally, morally, or disciplinarily. They were looking for a pope who, after the hands-off approaches of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, would take on, clean up, and reform the Roman Curia. If we measure the Francis pontificate through *that* lens, it was disappointing.

No doubt apologists will cite *Predicate Evangelium* to show Francis “reformed” the Curia. Three points. Why did it take almost ten years into his pontificate to produce that document? What really has changed (besides names) in the ensuing two-plus years? And, finally, can one honestly say that the Church administratively (or, for that matter, at large) is better today than it was on March 12, 2013?

Others will say that, like the apostolic constitution’s title, the Pope’s job is to “preach the Gospel,” not be an administrator. True. But it is disingenuous to pretend that a Pope primarily preaches the Gospel by what he says and where he goes. The Pope *also* “preaches the Gospel” by ensuring that the Church has the support infrastructure – financially, administratively, and people-wise – to carry out its mission.

There was a day when the “Church” was twelve Jewish guys, most of them fishermen, and their converts operating on the fringes of society. That day is long over. For all those who insist on adherence to Vatican II as a litmus test of thinking with the Church, the Council insisted on understanding the modern world and reading the signs of the times.

That does *not* mean accepting the modern world on its terms nor of adapting the Church to them, as if the *signa temporis* are some new revelation through which the “Spirit” is “conversing.” But it does mean knowing how that world works and, to the degree possible, meeting and working with it *to spread the unadulterated message of the Gospel*.

And, in the modern world, it means that the Church is also incarnate as an institution. Institutions necessarily have bureaucratic structures. They have to because, to accomplish their mission, teamwork will normally be required. Call it “collaboration,” call it “collegiality,” call it “the Mystical Body of Christ,” but – while it is the person who acts – it is rare that the Church’s mission can be advanced long term and broadly absent an institutional team.

The Curia (and demands for its reform) is nothing new. Every diocese has something like it in the form of its chancery. The Roman Curia is unique because the Holy See is unique: it “presides in love” by primacy over the Church Universal. The Roman Curia is, therefore, not just another overgrown (and comfortable) diocesan chancery. Its mission is unique and universal because the Holy See’s role is unique and universal. An efficiently functioning Roman Curia, therefore, can immensely facilitate the role of the Holy See.

Yet, as many concede, that is not the case.

Consider finances. The Vatican currently runs a serious deficit. At the same time, there have been serious cases of financial mismanagement and embezzlement in Vatican finances under Francis. They have been coupled with mutual recriminations of dishonesty versus frame-ups, an issue affecting admission to the conclave. Among the scandals associated with the late Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was his (and his proteges) practices of distributing cash in unmarked envelopes as “charity.” The American publication *Pillar* has documented multiple cases of priests pilfering the parish purse. This is not the ineluctable outcome of involvement with money. “Mammon” is not good or bad; it is. It’s what you do with it that matters.

In many ways, the Church’s attitude towards money is itself malformed. One is likely to hear much prattle about how we should have “a poor Church for the poor.” Well, no: a poor Church really stinks for the really poor. Radical poverty is an evangelical counsel, not a commandment. If we are reading the “signs of the times,” the Church might learn something about how capital is made, multiplied, and used in the modern world so that, being good stewards, she grows the finances she needs to discharge her Gospel mission effectively and autonomously everywhere and sustainably. That is a far different vision from “a poor Church for the poor.”

No doubt those addicted to poverty fervorinos will claim this vision fails to rely on divine Providence, etc. etc. I appeal to the Jesuit maxim: in the end, pray as if it all depends on God (which it does) ... but act as if it all depends on you. Even Jesus rebuked the steward who “played it safe” by burying his talent rather than even minimally multiplying it (Mt 25:14-30).

Catholics worldwide should have confidence that the resources they offer to the Church – whether the widow’s mite or the wealthy’s millions – are properly used. That means a Department of Vatican Efficiency audit that mandates across the Curia transparent standards of receiving, accounting for, investing, growing, appropriating,

and disbursing money according to recognized international standards for such transnational institutions as the Church. Yes, there are of course instances where such disbursements must be confidential. No doubt governments, too, must sometimes disburse money secretly – and not necessarily for immoral purposes. But norms are established even for such actions.

Consider administration. There are very few likely to hold up the Roman Curia or Vatican courts as models of efficient, much less expeditious, procedure. Take three examples:

- The ongoing scandal of the Marko Rupnik affair is supposedly advancing towards trial, but Cardinal Fernandez says he's still looking for judges for the case. Given the frequency of sex abuses cases in recent decades (please re-read *those ten words* if you doubt there's something seriously wrong in the Church) there should be sitting panels of qualified judges *in place* to be deployed as needed to provide swift justice. Swift justice is not necessarily mistaken justice; justice delayed is also injustice.

- The ongoing scandal of Rupnik art. The Dicastery for Communications obstinately insists on continuing to festoon Vatican publications with the ex-Jesuit's works, as if it has not taken a recent inventory of religious art in that repository known as ... the Vatican Museum. Pope Francis would take pictures with Rupnik art behind him. Of course, no one "said" this was "Vatican" policy – a plausible deniability was kept – but no one denied it, either. Cardinal Sean O'Malley in his official capacity pleaded in the name of Rupnik's claimed victims to stop these practices. This kind of equivocal and ambiguous public face should have no room in the Holy See.

- Holydays. When the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception falls on an Advent Sunday, the feast is transferred to December 9. Does the obligation to participate in Mass follow? An American bishop asked and, one month before the feast a document was released (supposedly written six weeks earlier) that said: "yes, transfer and obligation go together." Bishops then scrambled. A month *after* the feast, another Vatican office said, "well, actually, no they don't." Resolution of policy differences among offices with equities on an issue should occur before, not after, promulgation of a policy. Such failures of coordination only make the whole enterprise look like amateurs. In the area of administration, therefore, there needs to be standard operating procedures within and among curial entities that ensure policies are made, vetted, reviewed, and promulgated consistently (including with assessment of impact).

Finally, consider personnel. A story surfaced recently about Vatican bank employees

fired for entering into the sacrament of marriage. If there's anywhere that bank policies should not be a prohibitive impediment to marriage or employment, it's the Vatican. Yes, there is a need to avoid conflicts-of-interest but there are usually also ways that supervisory work-around accommodations can be put into place. It's also no secret that many Vatican employees complain about pay or morale. A Church that aspires to lecture the world about how to structure economies might consider first how to apply its own social justice magisterium to the members of its household.

As one can see, the reforms needed are *not just* "administrative." They are not just "paper-pushing" requirements for a new pope. They have ethical and moral dimensions. They bear witness to how the Church treats people, does justice, and exercises stewardship over resources that will always be limited vis-à-vis the poor one has always (Mt 26:11). They also enable a more powerful and better resourced proclamation of the Gospel.

"Doing good" is not inimical to "doing well." That perspective needs to inform a Holy See (and its curial support) operating in the modern world.