

Pope Francis and the Challenges Facing the Catholic Church

A Quest Paper by Robert Nance

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Introduction

The Catholic Church is no stranger to challenges and controversies. Throughout its history, the Church has endured many ups and downs, from the persecutions of the faithful in its formative years, to the support of Emperor Constantine, to the Inquisition, to the financial scandals that sparked the Reformation and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. That the institution has survived for centuries is a testament to its ability to endure its challenges, albeit in a rather cautious and considered manner.

Not all Catholic history is controversial; in fact, the church has been at the center of many important advances in human history, including education through the establishment of schools and universities, health and human services through the creation of hospitals and providing for the poor and the persecuted.

Today the Catholic Church faces significant challenges that include the salient matters of evangelization and a shortage of priests, the polarization between traditionalists and progressives, institutional corruption, clergy sexual abuse, the ordination of women, homosexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage.

The new Bishop of Rome has a great weight upon his shoulders. He succeeds a Pope for whom the challenges before the Church required a younger, more

vigorous servant than he, and thus became the first Pope in centuries to resign. He inherits a Church that, in his view, has lost touch with the very people for whom the Church was instituted to serve. And he is leading this great institution in an era that some have called, “the second dark ages.”¹

By virtue of his deeds in the first 8 months of his papacy, the world has already received significant signs that his ministry will be marked by the healing of the sick, a tolerance for all people, and a style that can be best described as “leading by example.” His stated goals are to be with the people, just as Jesus is, where healing takes place first and, once needs are met, meaningful dialogue ensues. In his view, one born of his Jesuit roots, this approach best enables the work of Christ.

Pope Francis

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was elected to succeed Pope Benedict XVI (16th) on March 13, 2013. He is the first Latin American and the first Jesuit to be appointed Pope. He is also the first to take the name Francis. His reasons for choosing Francis are most likely a tribute to two beloved Catholic saints: Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Francis Xavier.

Saint Francis of Assisi founded the Franciscan Order of Friars in 1209, and was known for renouncing wealth and living in poverty. This is an issue close to the heart of Bergoglio, who has championed the poor throughout his ministry. When he was appointed Bishop of Buenos Aires, he chose to live in his own

¹ A time of disillusionment, where warfare is prevalent, economic disparity is rampant and religion is regarded more highly than science and reason.

apartment outside the city rather than take up residence in the Church's designated home for the Bishop. As he would say "...to live among the people, in community..."

By choosing the name Francis, perhaps his mission is readily perceived and more easily understood by the people. By choosing the namesake of one of Italy's most beloved patron saints also ties the new Pope to Italy, the homeland of the vast majority of Popes over the centuries, as well as the ancestry of the Bergoglio family.

The name of Francis also pays homage to Saint Francis Xavier, co-founder of the Jesuits in the 16th century, who travelled throughout Asia and converted more than a million people to Christianity. In his first words from the balcony at the Vatican, Pope Francis spoke of both Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Francis Assisi - a clear sign of his focus.

By virtue of his chosen name, one can expect that his Papacy will be distinguished by humility, charity, evangelism, and tolerance. So far his papacy has been marked by openness and dialogue, giving the highest priority to healing the wounds of the people, holding all God's children in highest regard, seeing their potential for good, and working to reform the institution so it may better reflect Jesus's call to service.

Historical Highlights of the Catholic Church

The history of the Catholic Church in the last 2000 years figures significantly and principally in the history of Christianity as a whole. During this time, the Church has been shaped by various forces that served to define its path for centuries at a time. The majority occurred early in the formation of the church, around 144

A.D. with Marcionism²; it then continued throughout history, including in 318 A.D. with Arianism³; in 325 A.D. with the First Council of Nicaea; in 500 A.D. with Pope Gregory “the Great”; in 1054 A.D. with the East-West schism of the Catholic Church with the Eastern Orthodox Church; in 1517 AD with the Protestant Reformation; and finally with the Second Vatican Council in 1962.⁴

The church has been a key force in the shaping of history, including the evangelization of Europe and Latin America. It has shaped human civilization through the founding of universities, monasteries, the development of art, music, literature, architecture, the scientific method, and trial by jury. It has been a political force, through such events as the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe in the latter part of the 20th century.

Early Christians were not a popular bunch. They were largely persecuted until Emperor Constantine came into power, who was at the very least a sympathizer if not an outright believer. Legend has it he had a vision that he would be victorious in battle if he fought under the symbol of Christ. With many of his army being Christian, he attributed his successful rise to power in the year 312 to the Christian God. Christians now had a powerful advocate. Through the Edict of Milan in 313 AD he declared the Roman Empire neutral towards religious views, ending state established persecution of Christians. And in the year 315, Constantine granted the church the right to hold property and then donated the Lateran Palace

² the Christian heresy of the 2nd and 3rd centuries that rejected the Old Testament and denied the incarnation of God in Jesus as a human.

³ an influential heresy denying the divinity of Christ, originating with the Alexandrian priest Arius (c. 250– c. 336). Arianism maintained that the Son of God was created by the Father and was therefore neither coeternal with the Father, nor consubstantial.

⁴ The Second Vatican Council was started by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and closed in 1965 by Pope Paul VI.

to the church; the Lateran Basilica became then the episcopal seat of the Bishop of Rome. The seed of the Church institution began to take root.

Catholic doctrine teaches that the Catholic Church was founded by Jesus Christ. It interprets the Confession of Peter as acknowledging Christ's designation of the Apostle Peter and his successors to be the temporal heads of his Church. The Bishop of Rome, therefore, has the sole legitimate claim to Petrine authority and the primacy due to the Roman Pontiff. The Catholic Church claims legitimacy for its bishops and priests via the doctrine of apostolic succession and authority of the Pope via the unbroken line of Popes claimed as successors to Simon Peter.

The struggles of the Early Church were lessened by Emperor Constantine I in 313. In 380 AD, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire by decree of Emperor Theodosius I. This continued until the fall of the Western Empire, and later, with the Eastern Roman Empire until the Fall of Constantinople. During this time, there were considered 5 primary sees: Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria, known as the Pentarchy⁵.

After the destruction of the Western Roman Empire (circa 476 AD), the church in the West was a major factor in the preservation of classical civilization, establishing monasteries, and sending missionaries to convert the peoples of northern Europe, as far as Ireland in the north. In the East, the Byzantine Empire preserved Orthodoxy, well after the massive invasions of Islam in the mid-7th century. The invasions of Islam devastated three of the five Patriarchal sees,

⁵ Pentarchy is a term in the history of Christianity for the idea of universal rule over all of Christendom by the heads of the five major episcopal sees of the Roman Empire: Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria.

capturing Jerusalem first, then Alexandria, and then finally in the mid-8th century, Antioch.

The whole period of the next five centuries was dominated by the struggle between Christianity and Islam throughout the Mediterranean Basin. The battles of Poitiers, and Toulouse preserved the Catholic west, even though Rome itself was ravaged in 850, and Constantinople besieged. In the 11th century, already strained relations between the primarily Greek Church in the East and the Latin Church in the West developed into the East-West Schism, partially due to conflicts over Papal Authority. The fourth crusade, and the sacking of Constantinople by renegade crusaders proved the final breach. One see remains: Rome.

Pope Sixtus IV built the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican archives during his papacy, which was 1471-1484. During this time he also made six of his nephews cardinals and was purportedly involved in a murder plot.

One of his nephews, Pope Julius II, was patron to the artists Michelangelo and Raphael from the years 1503 and 1513, during which time he commissioned Saint Peter's Basilica. To pay for the Basilica, money was raised by selling indulgences to reduce punishment for sinners. This practice had a disastrous effect for it ultimately led to Martin Luther's 1517 pinnacle publication entitled, "The Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" which is widely accepted as the document that catalyzed the Reformation Movement. Despite its rather scandalous beginning, today Saint Peter's Basilica now stands as one of the great icons of Christendom and one of the greatest representations of Renaissance Art and Architecture.

In response to the 16th century Protestant Reformation, the Church engaged in a process of substantial reform and renewal known as the Counter-Reformation. In subsequent centuries, Catholicism spread widely across the world despite experiencing a reduction in its hold on European populations due to the growth of Protestantism and also because of religious skepticism during and after the Enlightenment.

The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s introduced the most significant changes to Catholic practices since the Council of Trent three centuries before. Known as The Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church, Pope John XXIII (23rd) convened Vatican II in 1962, which continued beyond his papacy into 1965. Vatican II redefined Catholic self-image. The liturgy became more inclusive, vernacular language favored over traditional Latin; the church hierarchy was enhanced with a participatory image of the people of God; freedom of religion was embraced and the secular state embraced as normative; and the Council declared that the Catholic Church was to live in, love and provide service for the modern world.

Current Challenges Highlighted

Evangelism: the Church as a Field Hospital

Pope Francis has identified healing the wounds of God's people as the church's priority. Through this principle of ministry, one can witness to the Christian faith. Evangelism cannot come before healing. "What the church needs most today," says Francis, "is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after

battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol [or blood sugar]! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else...you have to start from the ground up.”

Vatican Structure

The structure of the Vatican invites intrigue because the organizational model tends to be secretive and therefore suspect. Finding the right balance between transparency and secrecy is a challenge that requires due diligence, which the very “open” Pope Francis has already begun to address. In recent years, the culture of secrecy exacerbated the clerical sexual abuse scandals, and even prompted charges that the Vatican bank laundered money and funded questionable projects around the world. But this is nothing compared to more ancient scandals. The Renaissance popes purportedly bribed their way into office, openly kept mistresses and families and appointed young nephews as cardinals. Alexander VI, whose pontificate from 1492 to 1503 is generally agreed to have been the worst ever, was said to have presided over more orgies than Masses. He is also said to have died from eating a poisoned apple.

The structure of the Vatican is geared to administer the mission of the church, but more often than not, it becomes the protector of the status quo and a major resistance to change. Since Vatican II, the polarization between Catholic Traditionalists and Progressives has been exacerbated by Vatican legalities. Pope Francis has noted that the ‘legalistic’ tendencies of the church cannot be the principal basis for the ministry.

Sex Abuse Scandals

Since 2002 when reports of sexual abuse rocked the Boston diocese, sexual scandal has seemed rampant due to aggressive reporting by the media. Abhorrent behavior among the clergy, from sexual scandal to fiscal corruption has been a challenge for the church as the institution garnered power and position. Pope Francis has made dealing with this issue a priority and has stated that fighting this abuse is important to the credibility of the church. One hopes that the Pope's predilection for transparency and openness will help to significantly reduce or eliminate any ability of the institution to harbor such behavior.

Celibacy

Advocates see clerical celibacy as a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and their neighbor. It is considered a valuable discipline, and there are many fine examples in the church for which this discipline works well. There are those, however, for whom the need for celibacy among the priests is long since past and think the matter should be reconsidered. They suggest that mandated celibacy might actually encourage aberrant behaviors, particularly sexual abuse. They also suggest that abolishing this mandate would address the shortage of priests by increasing the number of available candidates for the priesthood.

Contraception and premarital sexual relations

In 1968, Pope Paul VI (6th) issued an encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* (Latin, "Human Life"), which reemphasized the Church's constant teaching that it is always intrinsically wrong to use contraception to prevent new human beings from coming into existence. This includes all forms of prevention, from *coitus interruptus* to condoms and the pill. The church also teaches that sexual love between a man and a woman is reserved to marriage; thus, premarital sex is forbidden.

The position against contraception is a challenge for the church what with the rise in teen sexual activity and the spread of diseases such as AIDS, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. With the rise in co-habitation and committed relationships outside of traditional marriage, the church finds itself to be rather isolated on these issues which appear irrelevant to the general population.

Homosexuality and the Institution of Marriage

The Catholic Church opposes gay marriage and the social acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex relationships, but teaches that homosexual persons deserve respect, justice and pastoral care.

During an interview conducted on a return flight from Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis said, "...if a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am not one to judge. By saying this, I said what the catechism says. Religion has the right to express its opinion in the service of the people, but God in creation has set us free: it is not possible to interfere spiritually in the life of a person."

The divide on this issue persists, particularly in pluralistic societies such as the United States. In September of 2003, The Administrative Committee of the U.S.

Conference of Catholic Bishops⁶ called for a constitutional amendment to protect the unique social and legal status of marriage.

In Catholic belief, "marriage is a faithful, exclusive and lifelong union between one man and one woman, joined as husband and wife in an intimate partnership of life and love," said the 47-bishop committee. "What are called 'homosexual unions,' because they do not express full human complementarity and because they are inherently non-procreative, cannot be given the status of marriage," the committee said.

It warned that "the importance of marriage for children and for society" is under attack in U.S. courts and legislatures and in popular culture and entertainment media, which "often undermine or ignore the essential role of marriage and promote equivalence between marriage and homosexual relationships."

As of November 20, 2013, just 10 years later, The United States Government as well as sixteen states, the District of Columbia, and various territories and tribal jurisdictions recognize same-sex marriage. The increasing acceptance of homosexuality as normative, the advances in science and the relaxation of laws permitting adoption of children by gay parents, all point to an ever increasing divide between the church and pluralistic society and will continue to pose a challenge for the church in the foreseeable future.

⁶ Ample information on the position of the Catholic Church can be found on their website, www.usccb.org.

The Ordination of Women and the Role of Women in the Church

Among the most vocal controversies in the Catholic Church in the late 20th and early 21st centuries concerns the ordination of women. As more Protestant denominations, including the Church of England, have begun ordaining women, the Catholic Church's teaching on the all-male priesthood has come under attack, with some claiming that the ordination of women is simply a matter of justice, and the lack of such ordination is proof that the Catholic Church does not value women.

Catholic teaching holds that The New Testament priesthood is the priesthood of Christ Himself. All men who, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, have become priests participate in Christ's priesthood. And they participate in it in a very special way: They act *in persona Christi Capitis*, in the person of Christ, the Head of His Body, the Church.

Christ, of course, was a man; but some who argue for the ordination of women insist that His sex is irrelevant, that a woman can act in the person of Christ as well as a man can. Catholic teaching holds that there are differences between men and women, which the Church insists are irreducible; men and women, by their natures, are suited to different, yet complementary, roles and functions.

The Church holds that the ordination of men is an unbroken tradition that goes back to the Apostles and to Christ Himself. The Catholic Catechism states: "Only a baptized man validly receives sacred ordination." The Lord Jesus chose men to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when

they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry. The college of bishops, with whom the priests are united in the priesthood, makes the college of the twelve an ever-present and ever-active reality until Christ's return. The Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible.

As a challenge, there are those who feel the church may well need to take another look at this matter. Considering the shortage of priests, the growing church and the needs of the poor, the church will at the very least need to expand on the 'complementary' role of women in the church, and may directly need to consider some level of ordination for women in order to meet the demand.

Factional divide: The Hierarchy versus Local Priests and the Laity

The Hierarchy tends to respond to movements within the laity with restraint, citing principally the God-given authority of the church to teach and govern. The rank and file, particularly in the western world, finds itself at odds with the Hierarchy over some of the basic tenants of Vatican II, namely *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae*.

Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, was one of the four Apostolic Constitutions resulting from the Second Vatican Council. The document is an overview of the Catholic Church's teachings about humanity's relationship to society, especially in reference to economics, poverty, social justice, culture, science, technology and ecumenism.

Dignitatis Humanae (Dignity of the Human Person) is the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom. In the context of the Council's stated intention "to develop the doctrine of recent popes on the inviolable rights of the human person and the constitutional order of society," *Dignitatis Humanae* spells out the Church's support for the protection of religious liberty. More controversially, it set the ground rules by which the Church would relate to secular states, both Catholic nations and pluralistic ones like the U.S.

The Catholic Church has historically been the custodian and promoter of knowledge, both new and old; thus it is ironic – though not surprising – to see the church resist advances on matters such as these. In the Renaissance, which saw the significant development of secular knowledge, the church monumentally resisted the ideas of Galileo. Perhaps this resistance can be attributed to the loss of control over information, and ultimately to its power. John Calvin's contributions to the Reformation were in part based on addressing the power differential between the church and the people through education, which he saw was the only way to safeguard the rights of ordinary people.⁷

It is probably not surprising that the hierarchical church tends to respond more slowly than the rank and file in each of the local parishes which have their own particular challenges and unique calling. Pope Francis has intimated in many interviews, that one of the challenges facing the institution is the ability to be more responsive, and a 'servant' to the people.

⁷ Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion. Geneva, 1536.

Conclusion

So long as there is a Catholic Church, there will continue to be challenges and controversies. I have highlighted but a few in this overview. To its credit, the Catholic Church lays no claim on perfection. It clearly reflects the tendencies of the human experience, with all its flaws and imperfections, as demonstrated in administering its mission to serve God's people in the ways of Jesus Christ. The Church has weathered many storms and is still the predominant institution of the Christian Faith.

Pope Francis has shown us that his papacy will be governed by a very basic goal to carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ: connecting with people, caring for the poor, healing the sick, and restoring their relationships with God. Openness and tolerance are mainstays for his ministry. Clearly for Pope Francis the divisive issues facing the church today, while important, are insurmountable in the absence of these key fundamentals.

Though not a Catholic, I find myself caught up in the excitement what some call 'Francis Fever.' Between the Pope App, the wealth of intriguing stories about the latest movement of the Pope, and listening to what might flow from the lips of Francis, I can safely say I'm hooked.

I admire his ability to engage people, where dialogue is valued above preaching, where witnessing to the power of God's love through his own experience is more powerful than telling people what they should think and do, all within the boundaries of respect and grace.

I wish him success in dealing with the many challenges before the church, and pray for his success in opening the hearts of all people to make this world a better place.

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