

Can Pope Francis Save the Catholic Church?

Frank Regan weighs up the chances.

The simplest answer to the above question is: No. However the No answer might be too simplistic because Pope Francis is creating an ecclesiastical situation in which voices not heard for many years are now speaking up. After the stifling and asphyxiating papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis has uttered an *'Epphrata'* and many tongues have been loosed.

Pope Francis himself is a frail man getting on in years. Yet he has a certain talent for symbolic actions and pastoral words which are striking chords in all of the universal church. For example, his first Holy Thursday gesture of washing the feet of 12 prisoners, two of them women, one of them a Muslim, was like a shot heard round the world. Worship directors (liturgists) quaked in their boots. Clergy were shocked. Lay people were thrilled. When asked on another occasion about the church's treatment of LGBTQ persons, he did not rush to judgment. This permitted a whole chorus of clergy and laity to open out to the experience of gay persons and to support them in the struggle for their human rights and dignity. More recently the Spring number of *The New Statesman* features an article on 'Pope Francis, the Socialist Pope'. It points out that Francis is speaking much more on social equality than on sex and contraception.

The papacy that Pope Francis inherited from Pope Benedict was one in total disarray. His curial bureaucracy was mired in political infighting. Cliques and power groups were hollowing out the Vatican, emptying it of any theological significance or pastoral leadership. Benedict's persecution of new theological ideas, the scandal of covering up clerical crimes of paedophilia and of permitting the Vatican Bank to develop into a money laundering facility of the Sicilian mafia made of the Ratzinger papacy a nest of intrigue and backstabbing. Ironically it was a humble butler who leaked damning documents which brought the edifice down.

The Wojtyla papacy was dedicated to halting the church's forward thrust towards a post-Vatican II encounter with post-modernity and its secular challenges. Pope John Paul II fancied himself the leader of a grand mass of Catholic faithful who followed his lead and marched to the beat of his drum.

Some Background

For centuries the Catholic Church, mother of western civilisation, has laboured under what one writer (Spencer: 2014) has called 'cultural lag'. We can date it from the advent of Martin Luther, who brought into question central doctrines of the Faith and translated the Bible into vernacular German so that everyone could read it. He was condemned and anathematised.

Since the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, a timorous church relegated itself to being a mere side-bar to the scientific and intellectual discoveries, debates and insights which Western thinkers were protagonising. The church feared the Enlightenment. The Kantian ideal of a humanity come of age was repugnant to an institution priding itself on its divine authority. The French Revolution was the beginning of the end of the church's worldly power. The French democratic currents of the 1830s, the rise of the proletariat together with the publication in 1848 of *The Communist Manifesto*, and the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* provoked a papal response known as *The Syllabus of Errors* in 1864. Within a few years Pope Pius IX had himself declared infallible to teach christian doctrine in 1870. In that same year he lost the Papal States, thus opening the way for the formation of modern Italy, culturally Catholic and ferociously anti-clerical. The following year Darwin published his *On the Descent of Man*.

The lag did not abate. Nietzsche died in 1899, having written that God was dead and that we had killed him. In 1910 Pope Pius X inaugurated his policy of anti-modernism, by which the church pursued and prosecuted numerous theologians and biblical scholars who were trying to incorporate modern science and biblical criticism into their understanding of Revelation and Faith.

With the onset of World War I, Pope Benedict XV could do nothing to stop the inter-christian slaughter. Indeed Catholic bishops and priests encouraged the troops to fight, kill and die for God and country. Thus began the bloodiest century in all of history. That century has not yet ended.

Outside of the church there was no salvation; nor inside either. The dysfunctional relationship the church had with the surrounding environment was

matched by a corrosive disease, which ate away the interior culture of the institutional church. That was the cancer called clericalism.

Clericalism goes back to the early centuries of the church. It began under Constantine, when the priests of a legalised church inherited the roles and privileges of the old pagan priesthood. They became officials of the Roman Empire and were enabled to move worship from the house churches to the great pagan basilicas. The Emperor granted the priests immunity from the criminal justice system. Thus was born the priestly, clerical caste.

By the 11th century the church was a principal actor in religion and politics. The pope could wield the two-edged sword of political and spiritual power. He could crown the emperor or excommunicate him. The last big step towards the clericalisation of the church was taken in the 16th century at the Council of Trent. There the bishops tried to reform the church after the trauma of the Reformation. To improve the formation of future priests the church leaders decreed that students for the priesthood were to be gathered into seminaries for their priestly formation. One of their last acts was to declare the celibate life superior to all other forms of Christian living.

Pope Francis has come as a breath of fresh air and a new departure. In choosing the name of Francis the pope reaches a long way back into history, to the thirteenth century. Many say it was the century in which the church had reached the apogee of its power and the nadir of its gospel authenticity. It was the century of Aquinas, Albert the Great, Dominic and Francis. It was also the century of imperial, military and political papacies. The popes were major players in the politics of Italy and of Europe. The papacy was a plum fought over by Rome's influential families and Italy's powerful city states.

It was also the century in which it was felt that the church's clergy was living a lifestyle a long distance from the Jesus of the gospels. Some historians refer to the 'pornocracy', which sullied the church between 881 and 1003. By the thirteenth century there arose various movements of the poor.



Pope Francis addresses the Roman Curia. *Catholic Herald*

Some of them like the Cathari were condemned as heretical and genocidal crusades were organised against them. Others became religious orders which come down to today, e.g. Dominicans and Franciscans.

The Vision of Pope Francis

Pope Francis wants to do three things: he wants to preside in charity; he wants to place the people of God, especially the poor, in the centre; and he wants to shun all papal ostentation.

The fact that Francis comes from the periphery of the universal church may be a factor in leading the church towards a post-European future. A new paradigm of church could appear: a church that is a huge network of local churches rooted in different cultures. Some of those cultures, like China, India, Japan, the tribal cultures of Africa and the indigenous cultures of Latin America, are more ancient than Western Christian culture.

With Francis have come some new possibilities. He wants the church to be an open house, not a fortress under siege from post-modernity and secularity. Better a church prone to accidents than a church hermetically sealed where nothing can go wrong. He wants to be known as bishop of Rome, a title which can deflect tendencies towards exercising supreme power. His move away from the Vatican palace to a guesthouse reflects that. He is a pastor, not a monarch. His visits to Lampedusa and to striking workers indicate a desire perhaps to eschew triumphal visits marked by huge crowds, pomp and ceremony. He said last year: 'A christian who is not a revolutionary today is not a christian.' The guerrilla fighter Fr. Camilo Torres, Colombian, said before dying in combat in 1965, 'The duty of the christian is

to make the revolution.⁷

Francis wants a church for the life of the world, not for the life of the church. His papacy and pastorate wants to embrace the world, the poor and the Earth. And he wants a poor church for the poor.

Pope Francis has not yet celebrated a public Mass in Latin. That could be because the culture of European Christianity of which it is the vehicle is in its death throes, its twilight years. It has not sought to renew itself at the fountains of the new sciences, philosophies, politics etc. where modern culture was born. Pope Paul VI's rejection of lay input regarding married life, family and a couple's fertility, his ignoring of new scientific data point to the church's reticence vis à vis modern secular culture. The church does not have a language which can dialogue with that culture and its world. It has preferred to condemn and enclose itself within its delusions of having the absolute truth, using a language decrepit with age and sacral syntax, vehicle of a decayed, long dead culture. Renewal, if it happens, will come from beyond the frontiers of Western culture and Atlantic civilisation.

Accomplishments So Far

The Bergoglio papacy, just over two years in operation, presents itself as something different. He has invited to a 'revolution of tenderness', whose hallmarks are mercy and compassion. He is reluctant to judge. He wants to be an approachable pastor, breaking through the barriers which separated the popes from the masses of the faithful.

He proposes a different model of being bishop and priest. Bishops are chosen for their proven orthodoxy and ability to administer a diocesan structure. Priests are formed to celebrate Mass and administer the other sacraments. The model is heavily clerical with a firm insistence on the separate identities of priest and layperson. Francis wants pastors who are close to their people. He says they should be, 'gentle, patient and merciful; animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord and also by inward simplicity and austerity of life.'

There are two areas where the institutional church has caused scandal. One is the Institute of Religious Works (Vatican Bank). Since the end of the Second World War this entity has grown enormously with almost \$7 billion in assets. Sadly, much of this has been earned by laundering money belonging to the Mafia and criminal individuals. Pope Francis has acted with alacrity and has ordered a severe reformation of the bank and the removal of key personnel.

The other area is that of clerical paedophilia. Here the results are not so clear. There is a deep

concern on the part of the pope but he has not been able to impose a uniform policy on how to treat the paedophile and avoid covering up his crime. There is much to be done.

The Hard Road Ahead

There still remain important issues and concerns, which must be addressed if the pope is going to be an instrument of change. The first of these is the challenge of marriage, divorce and remarriage. Persons who divorce and remarry are automatically excommunicated. Thousands of Catholics have left violent marriages, or relationships marked by chronic addiction or infidelity. How can the church show the compassion of Christ to persons of goodwill who, despite having to break up a dysfunctional marriage, want to approach the altar once again in the wake of having been given a second chance to form a loving relationship?

A second challenge is found in the area of gender. LGBTQ persons constitute 10% of the human race, 10% of the Catholic Church. They are considered by the church as being of a disordered existence and must live as though they were heterosexual and/or celibate. The church's theological anthropology is skewed in favour of heterosexual persons. This blinds it to the full human identity of the LGBTQ, who consequently cannot be admitted to full communion. They may, for example, have civil rights to partnership but they cannot be accepted as sacramentally married.

The third challenge is ministry. The pope refuses to contemplate the possibility that women are called by God to minister at the altar. They are not 'like unto Christ'. Only male celibate clerics are called to eucharistic ministry. This is another instance of the church's skewed theological anthropology, not to mention its adherence to male patriarchy.

The fourth challenge is the eucharist. There is no possibility of inviting non-Catholics, or excommunicated, or practising LGBTQ persons to eucharistic hospitality. It is a sectarian meal, open only to the worthy.

Twin obstacles to engaging with those challenges are clericalism and celibacy. Celibacy is a call, generously responded to but possible of fidelity to only a few. Contemporary Catholics are witness to the problems and pathologies of men striving towards an imposed ideal.

The dark side of the insistence upon a male celibate clergy is homophobia. The church has chosen to ignore that the conversation about same-sex attraction has passed from biology and body parts to chemistry and hormones. This has permitted

a deeper understanding regarding homosexuality and homosexual identity. We no longer live in an exclusively heterosexual culture and society.

The three cultural ills of patriarchy, celibacy and homophobia are the principal components of clericalism. The Catholic clergy is an establishment of 414,000 celibate men, .00035 percent of the Catholic global population. It is being corroded by its own obsession with power, its obstinacy regarding its maleness and its inability to relate as colleague, friend and adult with lay women and men.

Pope Francis has written of the *Joy of the Gospel*. He desires a church which can inspire a civilisation of love, compassion and mercy, a civilisation whose greatest artefacts are structures which facilitate the growth to full humanity of every human being. A culture related to that civilisation arises from a community which gathers to cultivate gospel values, to render cult to the God whose spirit animates those values: to live in harmony on the basis of justice, solidarity and charity.

Something new is happening. Francis will not live long enough to see the work completed. Serious cultural change takes generations. He himself has his own blind spots, e.g. women in ministry. He is always a man (sic) of the church. Still, he is starting a process which will hopefully lead to a church which will sing a new song.

Frank Regan is the long-serving, recently retired Editor of *Renew*, the magazine of Catholics for a Changing Church.

NEW SOF TITLE

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Dominic Kirkham

From Monk to Modernity by Dominic Kirkham will be published by SOF and launched on July 24th 2015 at the SOF Annual Conference. Copies (despatched on publication) can be pre-ordered for £10 postfree from :
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