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VATICAN REFORM

Francis, the Incremental Pope

Michael W. Higgins

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There aren't many things Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Pope Francis have in common, but they do both face a demanding 2014 for the same reason: They must deliver on pledges publicly made.

Mr. Harper must find a way of either reforming or eliminating our national chamber of sober second thought, the Senate, and Francis must find a way of reforming the Roman Catholic Church's central governance body, the Curia.

So far, Francis is winning the race despite his age (77) and missing lung. His stamina is remarkable, equalled only by his tenacity. To date, he has initiated many changes in the Vatican Bank and the myriad other byzantine bodies that oversee the Holy See's finances. He has ushered in changes in the powerful Secretariat of State (replacing the ineffective and unilingual Tarcisio Bertone with accomplished polyglot Pietro Parolin). And he has stared down his numerous operatives, papal hangers-on and retainers by insisting on pastoral priorities over diplomatic niceties, spontaneity over courtly behaviour and credible leadership over centralizing management.

He has his enemies within and without. Sir Ivor Roberts, president of Trinity College, Oxford, and a past British ambassador to Italy, has cautioned the Pope to be attentive to his security people because he is in the Mafia's crosshairs as a consequence of his financial reforms. It is unlikely Francis will pay much heed; it is not his nature to privilege personal safety over accessibility. He is, after all, the Fisherman.

But the most important undertaking, at least in terms of institutional management, is his shuffling of personnel in the Congregation for Bishops. It is this senior dicastery or cabinet structure that determines who among the world's priests will become bishops and who among the world's bishops will be promoted to archbishops.

Like Mr. Harper, Francis understands that when seeking to implement reform and renewal, much or all depends on your personnel's capacity to implement the directives, define the style and commit to the agenda.

To that end, the Pope has removed the image-obsessed Cardinal Raymond Burke, an American canonist with a taste for ecclesiastical frippery, arcane clerical conventions and theological nostrums rooted in the 19th century, with the urbane, pastorally connected and moderate Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington.

But he has retained Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec as the prefect or head of the Congregation itself. For all the criticism (particularly by traditionalists) that Francis moves far too quickly in making change, he actually moves with carefully calculated moderation. Cardinal Ouellet is no radical. He is a reflective and intelligent conservative, and his removal would be interpreted as a statement against the emeritus Pope Benedict XVI. That would hinder rather than help, and Francis is more irenic than warlike in his reform strategy.

The biggest obstacle the Pope faces in his resolve to decentralize the church's governance apparatus is the simple fact that his immediate two predecessors spent decades centralizing that very structure, appointing bishops they could rely on to shore up Rome's hegemonic control and marginalizing dissenting bishops.

With thousands of bishops to see to, this is a generational reform effort, but the signs are auspicious. Francis could perhaps accelerate things by offering obscurantist Lords Spiritual to those bicameral democracies that have a place for unelected partisans.

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