

Innovations Will Continue Until Morale Improves: On Francis's New Constitution for the Roman Curia

On March 19, 2022, Pope Francis [released the text](#) of the long-awaited reform of the Roman Curia in an Apostolic Constitution entitled *Praedicate Evangelium* (Preach the Gospel: hereafter, *PE*). I say “long-awaited” because this reform was apparently one of the main reasons the cardinals elected Bergoglio back in 2013, when he talked tough about the need for reform in the Vatican. It has thus been in the works for nine years, with a council of cardinals (some of whom ended in disgrace), and with a consultation of the world episcopacy. (No one knows precisely how wide or serious this consultation was; if the [survey on the traditional Mass](#) is any indication, the Vatican seems to practice “synodality” in inverse proportion to how much it talks about it.)

The fact that, after nine years of thrashing around, the Constitution was released suddenly, in Italian only, and in the midst of a highly distracting situation in Eastern Europe, does not exactly inspire confidence in its “above-boardness.” We have seen similar tactics used in this pontificate for augmenting chaos and disarming opposition, as when *Traditionis Custodes* was released last July 16 effective immediately, or when the responses to the supposed *dubia* were released a week before Christmas by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (usually abbreviated CDW).

In spite of nearly a decade of work on it, the document betrayed telltale signs of haste and clumsiness. For example, it still referred to “the extraordinary form” [*sic*] of the Roman rite when discussing the competencies of the former CDW (soon to be called the Dicastery for Divine Worship: we will need to get used to writing DDW), even though Francis’s *motu proprio* of July 16 had obliterated the nomenclature of *Summorum Pontificum*. It was about time that he did so, and that he stated the truth that there is only one form of the Roman rite. This one form, of course, is the traditional Latin liturgy. Unfortunately, Francis picked the wrong member of the pair by selecting the modern rite of Paul VI, which has only the loosest of connections to the Roman rite.

Key Features of Francis’ Curial Reform

There are several key features to the curial reform that we should pay attention to and ask about.

The reduction of all the branches of the Roman Curia to *equal* “dicasteries” with no ranking among themselves except that they are all inferior to the Secretary of State and Evangelization is strangely post-modern. Post-modern philosophy is skeptical of hierarchy, dependency or subordination, truth claims, and dogma. It tends to privilege pluralism, relativism, freedom, equality, and social action, in spite of the fact that all of these eventually clash with one another when applied with any seriousness.

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In reality, there *is* a hierarchy among these various Vatican offices, as is plain for anyone who thinks theologically: the Gospel itself is revealed truth that must be first understood, and rightly understood, before it can be proclaimed. The new arrangement suggests a vision in which action and politics hold primacy over contemplation and doctrine; in which nothing is apolitical, everything politicized. As one commentator pointed out: If most of the dicasteries are now to be considered equal, and yet they must all serve the Secretariat of State, there will be even more jockeying for power and influence, as each tries to get the best seat at the Secretariat's table. As Phil Lawler mildly [puts](#) it:

"The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, on the other hand, will have a somewhat diminished role. While the existing Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has had the final say on all doctrinal statements, the dicastery will now be charged with collaborating with other Vatican offices and with local churches on questions of doctrine."

This jockeying will take place especially concerning papal documents, for the reason that Loup Besmond de Senneville of *La Croix* [explains](#):

"The Secretariat of State is defined as the 'papal secretariat,' underlining this office's role in helping the Roman Pontiff carry out his mission. Francis also wants the Secretariat to focus particularly on the preparation of the major texts of the magisterium."

The Secretariat — think: the people in charge of the deal with Beijing that sold out the Chinese Church, either because of high-level blackmail or financial dependency — will prepare the "major texts of the magisterium." What could possibly go wrong, in a world where enormous wealth and power is concentrated in the hands of the globalists of the New World Order?

Severing Curial Leadership from Clerical Status

More particularly, *PE* takes the audacious step of [severing curial leadership from clerical status](#). The progressives are popping corks around the globe at the prospect of laywomen taking charge of entire Vatican dicasteries (as they have already done at many mainstream parishes). Just think of it: Sr. Hildegard Waffgenmund from the highest ranks of the German Church might be put in charge of the CDW (I mean DDW), making sanctuaries a safe place

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for women of all ages, races, orientations, and religions! A lay theologian like Massimo Faggioli might even be tapped to lead the Congregation — I mean Dicastery — for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Lawler also [points out](#) an example of the slapdash nature of the document, which sadly has come to characterize so many messy reforms of this pontificate:

“The document says that lay people may take roles in Church governance, but the Code of Canon Law reserves the authority of governance to the ordained clergy, saying that lay people ‘can *cooperate* in the exercise of that same power.’ Of course the Pope, as the supreme legislator of the Church, can amend canon law to resolve that apparent contradiction. But no such amendment has yet been suggested.”

More seriously, the severance of curial leadership from clerical status suggests that the curia is being reconceived as a gigantic secretariat for the pope, instead of being seen as sharing in the hierarchical function of governing and teaching (*sub et cum Petro*). That is, although the curia has never been seen to have authority *over against* the pope, it has had in the past a certain “weight” to it that is appropriate to a body competent to issue instructions, clarifications, laws, rulings, and so forth. As Fr. Hunwicke has well explained, the curia of the Vatican is a natural outgrowth of the curia of the pope as the Bishop of Rome: every bishop is surrounded by his clergy who assist him in the tasks of ruling, teaching, and governing. [According to Cardinal Gerhard Müller](#), however, the changes put in motion by *PE* transform the Roman Curia “from an ecclesial entity of the Holy Roman Church into a worldly administrative apparatus.”

The idea that lay people can take charge of the dicasteries seems to make them more like think-tanks or study groups, while concentrating power solely in the pope — a continuation of a now more than 150-year-old trajectory by which the diversified and complementary authorities spread throughout the Church by divine design, partly in order to give the Church due protection from the rare occurrence of wayward popes, have been weakened to such an extent that their power is treated as if it emanates from the pope and operates solely by his sufferance. I have written about this elsewhere in connection with the scandalous removal of Bishop Daniel Fernández Torres (see [“Is the Pope the Vicar of Christ or CEO of Vatican, Inc?”](#)).

Notably, Fr. Pius Pietrzyk, professor of canon law at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., holds that the view, stated by *PE*'s defender Fr. Gianfranco Ghirlanda,

that the pope can endow a layman with the power to head a dicastery of the Roman Curia “destroys the link between episcopal consecration and the sacred offices of the bishop, to teach, sanctify and govern, and makes the pope ‘the source of all authority,’” as Edward Pentin [reports](#). Ironically, a pope who wishes to be remembered as the one who completed the unfinished business of Vatican II has, [according to Fr. Gerald Murray](#), approved provisions that contradict the teaching of that Council as given in *Christus Dominus*, the decree on the pastoral office of bishops. Nor should we be surprised, since [even The Pillar recognized](#) that the CDW's *Responses to the “Dubia”* violate Vatican II's presentation of the rights and responsibilities of bishops.

Moreover, having lay people on committees that are drafting and voting on policies that will apply to clergy and religious should strike us as problematic, not because we are clericalists who think that laymen can have nothing helpful to say about clergy and religious, but because it is a principle of good order (not to mention common sense) that the higher ranks should not be ruled by the lower ranks, even if they ought to take fully into account their professional expertise and insights. This almost cavalier separation of governance from ordained ministry is another step in the progressive separation of the offices of ruling, teaching, and sanctifying.

In fact, the separation of the power of governance from the power of ordination — an idea strongly espoused by the German Synodal Way — has received a potent theological critique from the former vicar of the diocese of Chur in Switzerland, Fr. Martin Grichting, who [maintains](#) that this separation is not some brilliant new idea but a resurrection of an old error that the Church has had to fight energetically in European history. Once again, this priest points to the irony that this German proposal, now embraced by *PE*, directly contradicts the teaching of Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*. One might think that the men in charge are trying to signal that it's time to leave the Council behind — a proposition with which traditionalists would agree, but for quite different reasons.

As with [Spiritus Domini](#) in the domain of worship, there is in *PE* a systematic conflation of the value and dignity of the laity with exercising positions of authority in the Church's government. This politicization and democratization of Church office could occur only in a time period when the truly supernatural mystery of Holy Orders — a direct participation in the priestly, kingly, and prophetic offices of Christ — has been obscured owing to the corruption of Catholic liturgy by the acids of naturalism and secularism.

Is the Pope's Primary Task to Evangelize?

On another point, it seems odd, too, that *PE* makes the pope *ex officio* head of the Dicastery for Evangelization, which, with the Secretariat of State, rules the roost. Is the pope's

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primary task to evangelize? It seems like his traditional function was (to repeat it once again) to rule, teach, and sanctify the members of the Church, creating a favorable environment, so to speak, for the evangelizing efforts of subsidiary members, namely, those we call *missionaries* as well as ordinary laymen in everyday life as they rub shoulders with unbelievers, separated brethren, and the fallen-away. Think of this parallel: a secular ruler's job is not to run the factories or sell the products; rather, he presides over a just society that can provide for its own needs out of its own resources.

The pope may well evangelize incidentally just by being a good model of an ecclesiastical leader, living a life of virtue and celebrating the divine mysteries with befitting splendor and majesty; but he is not a street preacher to the six populated continents. The orienting theme of *PE* looks like an attempt to reduce to institutional form the globetrotting John Paul II-style papacy. However much good his travels may have accomplished, John Paul II was known to have neglected urgent problems in Rome, above all, the appointment of truly good bishops — and this, in spite of the fact that the great authority on canonization, Prospero Lambertini (the future Benedict XIV), took great pains to say that the number one job of a pope, and the number one criterion for papal sanctity, is the appointment of good bishops (see the appendix to [Are Canonizations Infallible? Revisiting a Disputed Question](#)).

Loup Besmond de Senneville [rhapsodizes](#) as follows:

“The 250 articles clearly show that the goal of the Curia is not to be an administrative apparatus, but to contribute to active evangelization.... Another sign that evangelization is considered a fundamental axis of the Roman Curia's work is that this new dicastery [for Evangelization] appears at the top of the organizational chart, taking the place that was previously occupied by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The change is a way of signifying that all the Church's work, including development and defense of doctrine, is at the services of evangelization.”

It is very difficult, as mentioned earlier, to understand how evangelization could ever take precedence — even administratively — over doctrine, and thus, how the dicastery overseeing the latter could be subordinate to that tasked with the former. Is this a realization of the much-vaunted [fourth principle of Pope Francis](#): “Reality is more important than ideas”? That is a page taken straight out of Marxism, in which praxis is superior to theory, or, in Catholic terms, action to contemplation. Can we not see a sort of conflation of governance and evangelization, as if the only activity of the Church is mission? But this is false: she has tasks *ad intra* as well as supreme actions *versus Deum*. The Church's first task

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is divine worship; her second task is to educate and nourish the members of “the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10); her third task is to bring others into the Mystical Body. If the priority is inverted, disaster will ensue.

A huge irony of our situation can be missed by no one. It seems, alas, that the more evangelization is talked about, the less evangelizing actually takes place; and the more Catholics are evangelizing, the less time or inclination they will have to talk about it. Preaching the Gospel is real work that takes a person out of himself into opportunity, danger, and heroism, as the Word of God crashes against the internal and external fortifications constructed by “the prince of this world” (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11) and his infernal craftsmen; talking about preaching the Gospel is largely busy work that takes a person out of his office and into a meeting room. After Vatican II there have been endless meetings, initiatives, pastoral plans, and synods, printed on the paper of countless forests, yet all along the mainstream Church continues to decline in every measurable way.

Let's be honest about it: all this grandstanding about evangelizing is a typhoon of hot air. If the pope and his men were seriously interested in evangelizing, they would welcome with open arms everything that helps modern people rediscover and live the Catholic Faith with zeal. The area where this is happening most obviously today, at least in Europe and America, is Traditional Latin Mass communities, which, if they are simply allowed to exist, soon flourish with young adults, large families, converts, and reverts, not to mention vocations to priestly and religious life.

One would think, surely, that a form of Latin-rite worship and Catholic life that proved effective in nourishing the faithful for over 1,600 years would receive a place of honor in the New Evangelization, to which, paradoxically, it has proved so well suited.[\[1\]](#) Yet the pope and his curia mercilessly attack this thriving part of the faithful, while encouraging Amazonian inculturation, LGBTQ outreach, and every other fashionable and controversial progressive program, to the confusion and division of believers. This indicates that, in point of fact, it is not the unchanging Catholic Faith and the Christ Who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8) that the Vatican wishes to preach, but a Modernist substitute for both: a Faith that has “evolved” to leave behind the Church's heritage, and a Christ Who is no longer the sole Savior of mankind, the one Way to the Father (cf. John 14:6), apart from Whom there is no salvation (cf. Acts 4:2).

It must never be forgotten that the primary justification given for the massive liturgical reform was that it would be “evangelical”: Catholic worship would finally reach out to Modern Man and meet him just where he was, and thousands, even millions, would come rushing into the embrace of a Church who had formerly alienated them with her cryptic and cobwebbed ceremonies, held in dark churches with a dead language. Not only did this

utopia of active participation never materialize, the opposite transpired. The congregational song of renewal is burdened with a constant refrain of church closures, parish mergers, payoffs, and settlements.[\[2\]](#)

Pardon me, then, while I refuse to believe a single word about “evangelization” that comes forth from the mouths of wolves and serpents who misappropriate their titles and our funds, and leave a charred wasteland wherever they implement their vision.

What the Church Really Needs

Maybe, just maybe, a radically different approach is called for... How about imitating the priorities of the great missionaries of the past: celebrate glorious traditional liturgies; preach sound doctrine “in season, out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2); support Christian marriages and families; show forth the beauty of holiness? This is the short version of the *Praedicate Evangelium* that the Church needs in the Western world.

It is quite true that *PE* is, in some respects, not as radical a document as had been predicted or feared. Many of the nuttier ideas tossed about several years ago seem to have met the fate of many committee brainstormers as the document got passed round and round. Nevertheless, it is radical enough in certain respects, as my comments have shown. De Senneville notes, for example:

“The new constitution profoundly changes the very concept of the Curia’s role and purpose.... National and regional episcopal conferences appear in *Praedicate evangelium* as full partners of the Roman See, and not just as structures over which Rome has hierarchical authority. The text also specifies that ‘documents of major importance’ must henceforth be ‘prepared with the advice of the episcopal conferences.’”

This sounds like an absolute bureaucratic nightmare: synodality on steroids. Anyone who knows anything about committee documents knows how bland, weak, blunted, and turgid they tend to become, the larger the committee is and the longer it labors to reach consensus. This is not how the best Roman documents were composed. Think of the social encyclicals of Leo XIII: he found orthodox Catholic ghostwriters he could trust who shared his vision; he let them produce a draft; and he, with impeccable Latinity, revised it. That’s all.

It also seems telling that there have been four major curial reforms since Pope Sixtus V

structured the Roman Curia in 1588. Note the dates: St. Pius X (1908), Paul VI (1967), John Paul II (1988), Francis (2022). Is there any significance to the fact that the Church was able to “get on” with Sixtus’s scheme for 320 years, while three reforms were felt to be needed in the space of only 55 years? To me, that rather sums up the Vatican II problem: a liquefied/liquefying Church, uncertain of itself, uncertain of its direction, uncertain of the hierarchy of reality that should be reflected in its structures of governance. It will be necessary at some point for well-equipped political philosophers and dogmatic theologians — such as those of the *Josias* integralist school — to ponder the implications of the new “political structure” of the Roman Curia.

Authentic Reform Hinges on Good Leaders

Let us recall an important principle from Leo XIII’s encyclical [*Au Milieu des Sollicitudes*](#):

“In so much does legislation differ from political power and its form, that under a system of government most excellent in form legislation could be detestable; while quite the opposite under a regime most imperfect in form, might be found excellent legislation... Legislation is the work of men invested with power, and who, in fact, govern the nation; therefore it follows that, practically, the quality of the laws depends more upon the quality of these men than upon the power. The laws will be good or bad accordingly as the minds of the legislators are imbued with good or bad principles, and as they allow themselves to be guided by political prudence or by passion.” (nn. 21-22)

Although the *ralliement* of Pope Leo XIII — that is, his effort to convince French Catholics to participate in the Masonic republican government of the time — was a predictable failure, he nevertheless helps us to remember that it is not ultimately a structure or a constitution that rules, but actual human beings invested with power, exercising their offices. A poorly-structured government could still be ruled by men of prudence and sanctity who would use their positions to do good, just as the most admirably structured government could be administered by corrupt criminals and perverse ideologues. At the end of the day, what will matter far more than Francis’s new arrangement of deck chairs is who exactly will be sitting in them and what decisions they will reach.

Regardless, therefore, of the arguably bad or good aspects of the new curial structure, the decisive question is who will succeed Francis, who will that pope put into positions of authority, and what policies will they form and follow. We must hope and pray more than ever that the next pope, the future heads of dicasteries, and the work they are destined to

do will, in whatever system they work in, truly give glory to God and build up the Mystical Body of Christ on earth.

[1] See my book [*Noble Beauty, Transcendent Holiness: Why the Modern Age Needs the Mass of Ages*](#) (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017), ch. 1: "Why the New Evangelization Needs the Old Mass."

[2] It is also misleading, at best, to cite Third World countries as examples of "success" after the Council. The Church that was planted by pre-Vatican II missionaries continues to grow in those countries as their populations grow, but there is every reason to believe the harvest would have been still greater had the practice of the Faith remained traditional. See my article "[Did the Reformed Liturgical Rites Cause a Boom in Missionary Lands?](#)", *New Liturgical Movement*, July 6, 2020.