

The Gospel Rather than Caesar

The Fifth Decade of Catholic Reform

We commemorate the fifth century of the Reformation on October 31, 2017. Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on that date in 1517. The consequences of that challenge and its subsequent developments are yet not terminated. The Reformation proved to be a turning point in history, especially in Europe and the Americas.

A relatively more modest Reform began in our era in January of 1959 when newly-elected John XXIII, Bishop of Rome, summoned the Second Vatican Council. That Council validated for the Catholic Church many of Luther's reforms. The Council (1962-1965) and its aftermath changed the Catholic Church and world religious interaction in substantial ways.

The Catholic reform stumbled in the late 1960's, the latter years of Paul VI. It then attempted with John Paul II and Benedict XVI a reversal of the open-handed intent of Vatican II. For almost fifty years, there has been a retrenchment rather than a reformation.

In that fifty-year hiatus, Catholic Reform Organizations called for further changes and a more collegial spirit in the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council was so massive and consequential that reforms continued, on the official level, even though the key collegial spirit of Vatican II was tamed. During that period, unofficial and voluntary Catholic Reform Organizations protested what saw as a reluctance, even a refusal, on the highest levels of the Catholic Church, to honor the promise of Vatican II.

Catholic Reform Organizations came into being throughout the world but were especially strong and enduring in Europe and the Americas. We shall consider, in this essay, three of the most recent (2016) national and international Conferences of Catholic Reform in Chicago (October 17-20); Rome (November 4-6); and Albuquerque, New Mexico (November 9-11) And then we shall seek to analyze the difference Francis has made.

Catholic Reform Organizations in the United States had to contend during the retrenchment period not only with the Vatican's resistance to theological and pastoral openness but with the escalating number of rigid, right-wing bishops appointed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Many of the bishops were closed to even the most modest of changes. Indeed, in increasing numbers, they were belligerent and deficient in pastoral skills.

International Priest Associations and Catholic Reform Organizations

Chicago marked the third time this very new assembly was meeting. There was an initial conference in Bregenz, Austria in 2014. Austria has proved to be one of the most innovative and enduring countries in the world on collegial and reform initiatives. In 1996, under lay influence, Austria created the “We Are Church” Movement, one of the most extensive of all international Catholic Reform efforts. It was Austrian priest, Helmut Schuller, once serving as Vicar General for Vienna, Austria and still serving as priest, who issued a “Call to Disobedience” and spoke of the urgency for women and married men in priesthood, for Eucharistic inclusion extended to divorced and remarried Catholics, and for expansion of lay governance in the Church. In 2014, in Austria, Schuller convened “International Priest Associations and Catholic Reform Organizations”. Bregenz, Austria, is near Zurich, Switzerland. The group is unique in that it consists of married, non-canonical priests and canonical priests working together internationally. The second meeting of the group took place in Limerick, Ireland, in 2015. Chicago in 2016 was its third meeting. There are advantages and liabilities, as we shall see, in this mixture of diverse groups. In stating the liabilities, it is also necessary to affirm what this organization seeks to accomplish.

The advantages come from the fact that ordained priests, in or out of the system, have much in common and, quite often, function with bonds of solidarity and fraternity. Furthermore, suggestions for reform are more likely to be heard by bishops if they are presented by canonical priests still in official service.

The liability is chiefly centered in the caution priests in full service feel obliged to register, not because they do not see the wisdom of the proposal and, indeed, its necessity for the health and vitality of the Church. They move in the direction they do, quite often, because they fear their bishops will reject not only the proposal but also them. They worry, quite understandably, that their ministry and ability to serve may be curtailed or marginalized if they favor a reform not endorsed by the bishops of their country and the Vatican. It became clear in our meeting that this caution could even become crippling. It led to an unfortunate division by the end of the Chicago meeting.

There was a desire to conclude our meeting with a Eucharistic celebration, one of the foremost expressions of solidarity and fraternity among priests. Many of the canonical priests desired this as well. However, the celebration, with non-canonical priests playing a role more central than the Vatican might allow and, even more problematic, with women in close partnership during the celebration, would lead many bishops to criticize the judgment and wisdom of canonical priests in this gathering and to censure both their own priests and the proposals that came from the gathering and even to prohibit further participation in such a “radical” group.

It was a painful moment and no one had an acceptable formula that would overcome the secondary role imposed on women and on non-canonical but clearly ordained priests with those who are in full service. The groups, after days of collaboration and friendship, met an impasse. The canonical priests felt obliged to

absent themselves completely from such a celebration lest their respective bishops censure them.

The friendship, of course, continued but the absence took its toll. The absenting priests did not in all cases believe such a celebration would be wrong. They did all concur that such a celebration would undermine what they were trying to accomplish.

International gatherings of reform priests, none of whom has canonical standing, take for granted a freedom to act readily together. Now, it was as though the meeting had bishops in attendance despite the fact that they were physically absent. Future meetings of this group must struggle with this dilemma.

The second meeting of the international associations we are reviewing occurred in Limerick, Ireland, in 2015 and the third meeting, as noted, in Chicago.

Countries represented in Chicago were Argentina, Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States.

Further items on the agenda for Chicago were the status of the collaboration with other international reform groups, especially Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) and We Are Church International (WACI).

Americans were especially aware of how enriched we are when we meet across a multitude of international groups in equal and open standing. Europeans experience this phenomenon more readily because of their close proximity to so many diverse countries. We do all find remarkable how similar our concerns and limitations are.

All of us suffer from the lack of young people in our respective organizations. Younger candidates stress strongly a minimum of intrusion in people's lives as well as a spirituality rooted in the realities of human life rather than conformity to Church norms.

The conference was not trouble free. It takes its place, nonetheless, with other international conferences in developing strategies for an inclusive church in the light of the Gospel and the sign of our times.

We Are Church International: Rome

The meeting in Rome was convened by "We Are Church International" (the new name for what was called: "International Movement: We Are Church". It met from November 4-6, 2016

The agenda focused on collaborating more effectively with diverse reform groups. North America and Europe have developed strategies and personnel to do this more readily than other parts of the world.

We did reach out to Asia and sent a representative to the Youth Festival in Bangkok, Thailand. Distances are formidable for face-to-face dialogue and discussion.

Latin America has been effective with countries on that continent but connections, even in Spanish, have been intermittent. Latin America has been innovative with liberation theology and, of course, communicates easily in its own region.

Africa again presents challenges of distance, language, and priorities.

It is inescapable to realize that Brazil, Mexico and the Phillipines are the three largest Catholic countries in the world. Obviously, none is European; our connections with all three have been far more limited than we prefer. In all three, the central position of women's rights and ministries are dealt with more obliquely than in Europe and North America. Nonetheless, "Women's Ordination Worldwide" and "We Are Church International" desire closer association with Africa and Asia and search for creative and manageable ways to make this a reality.

There was one, parable-like moment, at the closing of the Rome meeting. It dramatized the difference between the Chicago meeting and "We Are Church International" without a word of comparison and contrast verbalized.

The closing liturgy of "We Are Church International" was, as a matter of fact, presided over by a canonical priest from Europe. Without hesitation he invited Martha Heizer, previous chair of "We Are Church International", and her husband to stand at his side and con-celebrate the Eucharist with him. Martha and her husband had been excommunicated by their local bishop in Austria with considerable media attention covering that unfortunate action. The couple was excommunicated because of their celebration of Eucharist in Austria at a private meeting of their local "We Are Church" gathering. The con-celebration meant a great deal to the two of them and, certainly, to us. This was done without hesitation or dialogue, without even a statement about the significance of the moment

There are, indeed, values in the dialogue conducted with "We Are Church International" and "International Priests Association and Catholic Reform Organizations" but the differences are problematic and freedom of action is diverse.

A considerable amount of time and energy at the meeting was devoted to two more or less public events. One of these took place at the singular and unique pyramid in Rome, the Cestius Pyramid. The focus of the event, led by Colm Holmes of Ireland, was a service built around Pope Francis' image of the need for the Church to create an inverted pyramid for its image of authority and relationship. The event attracted press attention and media coverage.

The second meeting was at the Vatican, in the Paul VI building for large public gatherings of the Pope with visitors to Rome. The Pope addressed an assembly of some three thousand people, including ourselves, on social justice. We attended in response to an invitation from Vatican Curia officials to Noi Siamo Chiesa (We Are Church – Italy).

The current chair of “We Are Church International” is Sigrid Grabmeier who succeeds Martha Heizer of Austria. Valerie Stroud of the UK manages the sometimes complex international internet connections between and among members. There are “We Are Church International” organizations with whom we would have little or no contact were it not for the internet and, indeed, Valerie Stroud.

The Rome meeting attracted 24 representatives from 13 countries in Europe and North America, including two from the United States.

The Chicago meeting of the “International Priests Associations and Catholic Reform Organizations” articulated three goals for its future work which “We Are Church International” affirmed and validated:

1. virtual equality throughout the structures of the church
2. manageable and inclusive ministry in parishes
3. human rights

Catholic Organizations for Reform (COR): Albuquerque, New Mexico

The third of these international meetings in close proximity to one another was an assembly of Catholic Organizations for Reform (COR), gathered in Albuquerque, New Mexico, from November 9-11, 2016. COR includes the major reform groups in the United States.

The COR meeting concentrated on ways to get their messages across within the context of American culture. Without COR, United States reform groups would find themselves isolated, not only from one another but also from their international partners. It would be a significant liability if we were unaware of what is working and not working as different strategies are attempted.

A considerable amount of time was given to the formation of committees, their personnel and their agenda. Areas for exploration and reports were outreach, media, website, education and liturgy. All these were realizations of the “Church for our Daughters” initiative.

Conclusion

Participation in these three meeting was gratifying not only in terms of the items discussed but, especially, in the experience they offer of contact with an

extraordinary group of people: intelligent and enduring, visionary and self-sacrificing.

I came from these meeting with a number of insights about Pope Francis, the future of the Catholic Church, and a sense of where the reform movements ought to be headed.

These meetings together with Francis' Apostolic Exhortations *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris Laetitia* show us a Pope very much committed to changing atmosphere rather than specifics. This approach necessitates many ambiguities which lead to, not indecisiveness but to pastoral attentiveness. It also underscores the Pope's preference for a collegial rather than a monarchical Church.

The Pope sees himself, in most cases, as a member of the team or family, a counselor, allowing the individual a strong force in determining the proper way forward. This option was left significantly underdeveloped over the last half century.

The atmosphere generated by Francis validates Vatican II after decades of resistance to many Conciliar priorities. This time period of resistance was initiated with Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*, on contraception, and continued in a non-collegial manner by the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Francis responds most readily, not to the brilliant ideas and insights of a remarkable thinker or a small group of well-placed individuals but to strong and sustained collegial solidarity. Thus, a large, substantive, and collaborative statement of lay Catholics or priests or pastoral bishops, especially when its approach is not rigid, registers with him strongly.

Resistance to autocratic papal decisions was easier for Catholic reform groups to mobilize. The new reality of ambiguity, the centrality of conscience and collaborative statements requires more sophistication and diversity.

Francis is resisted by many of the hierarchy appointed by very conservative and very dogmatic pontiffs. These bishops look for uniformity, clarity and obedience even in pastoral situations that are not served well by such preordained solutions. Such bishops see only chaos in Francis' approach.

Francis terrifies bishops of such a persuasion when he invites the Church at large to tell him where he is wrong. John Paul II, by way of one example, seemed not to know or take into account what bishops thought. He did not begin his decision-making in a collegial solidarity with them.

Many reformers underestimate how much Francis has changed the Church profoundly. They do not encounter lists of specifics where he has given a decisive judgment.

Most important in assessing Francis is to take into account how strongly Vatican II has been validated, even rescued, by him. Not only collegiality but conscience are now prior rather than marginal or secondary. The theme of mercy running through papal documents and words has been profoundly liberating and moving.

Francis is not looking to gather an army in the Church and lead it, as his predecessors might have preferred. He seeks instead to become a member of a healthy family.

Francis looks first for how human life is enriched by the Gospel rather than for unwavering submission to institutional mandates and obligatory alignment with an official biblical interpretation. He is clearly a son of the church but also, quite ardently, a brother to the people he serves. With Francis, the person he addresses must be considered strongly as the direction to be favored. A proper evaluation, for Francis, is not possible without a commitment to the life of the individual in question.

Anthony T. Padovano