

Goodbye, King Pope. The Progressivists' Plan at the Conclave

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The influential lobby of Fr. Dossetti's followers re-launches the Church reform proposed unsuccessfully at the 1978 conclaves. And it instructs the next pope in what to do during his first hundred days

ROMA – Nothing gives any indication of an imminent conclave. But many are thinking about it, both at the top levels of the Church and in influential Catholic circles. A book published recently in Italy has made public, for the first time, a program for the reform of Church governance delivered in August of 1978 to the cardinals taking part in the two conclaves of that year: a program that, according to the intentions of its authors, should be equally valid for the next conclave.

The book, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo, is entitled "L'officina bolognese [The Bologna Workshop], 1953-2003." And it describes the forty years' operation of the "Documentation Center – Institute for Religious Sciences" founded in Bologna by Giuseppe Dossetti.

Dossetti – a first-rate politician in his youth who then became a monk and a priest, deceased in 1996 – is the man who has most inspired Italian Catholic culture during the second half of the twentieth century. But that's not all. Dossetti made a very strong impression on the development of the Second Vatican Council, at the level of the worldwide Church. Afterward, he generated a highly peculiar interpretation of that council which met with universal success.

In his biography, included in the volume "The Bologna Workshop," the extraordinary contribution Dossetti made to Vatican II is described thus:

"Dossetti was summoned to the council by the cardinal [archbishop of Bologna, Giacomo] Lercaro as a private consultant in November of 1962. Dossetti placed at the service of the council his historical intuition, united to a singular theological and canonical education and to an experience of assemblies all the more valuable as it was unusual in that environment. In the summer of 1963, he formulated proposals for modifying conciliar regulations, which were accepted by Paul VI. The most important of these was the constitution of the [four cardinal] moderators [Agagianian, Döpfner, Lercaro, and Suenens] as the pope's fiduciary body for the direction of the council. From the beginning of its functioning (at the end of September 1963) he acted as secretary of the college. During the second half of October he proposed and formulated the guideline questions to be posed to the council on some fundamental ecclesiological themes, such as the sacramental nature of the episcopacy, collegiality, and the diaconate. In 1963, he collaborated in the drawing up of the formula for the pope's approval of conciliar decisions."

Dossetti was proud of his ability to guide Vatican II. In a book-length interview published in 2003 after his death, he explicitly claimed "to have reversed the fortunes of the council itself at the decisive moment," thanks to his mastery of assembly procedures, determining the victory of the innovators and the defeat of the traditionalists.

In the series of documents written or inspired by Dossetti and made public for the first time in the book "The Bologna Workshop," one long memo stands out, dated August 1978, "sent to the participants of the imminent conclave" of that year, the one that resulted in the election of John Paul I, followed shortly thereafter by another conclave in which John Paul II was nominated.

The memo, written by "some of the members of the Institute," is entitled: "For the renewal of the pope's service to the Church at the end of the twentieth century."

The document is extensive, with seven chapters. Reproduced in its entirety below is the sixth of these, in which the new pope is asked to act upon the mechanisms of Church governance during the first "hundred days" of his pontificate, passing from monarchical to more collegial management.

But these are not the only reforms proposed. Others, developed in other chapters, call for greater closeness to the poor, on the part of a Church itself rendered more poor.

Still others ask the new pope to "free himself from the fear" of communism and the sexual revolution. Both of these are indicated in the memo as "two classic stumbling blocks for Christians, to the extent to which they are seen as possible alternatives to the Gospel. This is the reason for the decline into attitudes of deception or merciless condemnation."

"Communism," the memo continues, "as an ideology that acts as a crossroads for the desires of divided and lacerated man, asks that the Church first of all pose to itself the problem of its own fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel, to its own radical poverty. Faced with an apparent 'enemy,' the Church cannot take refuge in detached condemnation or in the search for a human ally (from the West, for example, against the barbarisms coming from the East). These attitudes are not, unfortunately, in short supply."

As for the sexual revolution, "this recalls on the one hand the fragility of the cultural schemes in which desire has been held prisoner. But it recalls above all the necessity of rediscovering and re-proposing, with humility and secure trustfulness, the sense of the love of God. [...] In this context, perhaps now more than ever, the Gospel must be proclaimed in its distinctiveness from the prevailing ethos."

In its introduction, the memo assesses the Church of the period after Paul VI as "ever more inadequate to the demands of the life of man."

But the judgment of its authors on the Church after John Paul II is not dissimilar. Of the program set out in the memo, pope Karol Wojtyla has not realized a single point.

A confirmation of this critical judgment on the pontificate of John Paul II can be found in another book published recently in Italy: "Mother Church, Church Stepmother," written by Church historian Alberto Melloni, who has also been for years one of the pillars of the Dossettian "workshop" of Bologna, together with Alberigo and the prior of the monastery of Bose, Enzo Bianchi.

One of the central theses of Melloni's book is that "on the agenda of the Church of tomorrow, there is still much that remains from that of 1978," and that the reform projects assigned by Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini to a future Vatican Council III, which he called for in a famous speech in 1999, "could have been pronounced with the same conviction in the 'de eligendo pontifice' oration of the conclaves of 1978."

The reforms Cardinal Martini called for concern married priests, women's ordination, lay participation in the ministry, sexual morality, communion for remarried divorced persons, the sacrament of penance, and ecumenism. But at the root of all this was a proposal for more collegial Church governance.

It is the same proposal made in the sixth chapter (with subtitles added) of the memo delivered by the "Bologna workshop" to the cardinals of the 1978 conclave, republished now in the hope that, in the next conclave, it will not be ignored as it was then:

For the Renewal of the Pope's Service to the Church. The First "Hundred Days"

(From: "The Bologna Workshop," pp. 209-213)

The initial acts of a new pontificate carry a decisive importance for all successive developments, because they constitute a public indication of the orientation of the pope and the Church, and above all because during the first weeks the newly elected pope's internal energies are intact and his prestige is not yet deadened by routine. It is thus fundamental that the guiding principles emerge clearly and vigorously during the first "hundred days," indicating courageously the dominant physiognomy of the new period of Petrine service underway.

BISHOP OF ROME WITH NO MORE VICARS

As bishop of Rome, it will be decisive that the newly elected pope show that he feels himself to be such (independently of his country of origin), assuming personally the duties and functions pertaining to the life of the pilgrim Church of God in Rome. It is impossible to honor the doctrinal declarations of Vatican II and of Paul VI on the fact that the pope is above all the bishop of Rome without being in point of fact (not, that is, only symbolically and on occasion) the bishop of this Church: a Church, moreover, that has an ancient and unsatisfied need for direct episcopal paternity. It will thus be necessary to express with unequivocal acts that the pope has the awareness of faith that he is so not by the power of his title, but by really being concretely the bishop who celebrates the Eucharist in Rome, turning aside from "vicarial" formulas, which have by now the connotation of shirking responsibility and of a lack of commitment.

COLLEGIAL GOVERNANCE

As the patriarch of the Western Church and head of the Roman Catholic Church, some of these first acts cannot help but pertain to the nerve center of the bodies dedicated to communion, solidarity, and the unity of the Churches. This especially brings up the problem of the creation of a true and proper body which, together with the bishop of Rome, would preside over the common aspects of Church life (in analogy with the medieval consistory and with the permanent Eastern synod). One can think, that is, of a collegial body that, under the personal and effective presidency of the pope, would consider on at least a biweekly basis the problems facing the Church as a whole, and would make the related decisions.

The formation of such a body could be, initially, nothing more than "ad experimentum," on the condition that it be composed exclusively of members of the episcopal college chosen freely by the pope. Some of these could later be designated by the synod of bishops and still others jointly chosen, with a special majority, by the pope and the synod. This body, essentially required to fulfill a service of orientation, guidance, and operative decisions, would need to be stable (but renewed periodically) and of a restricted, and thus efficient, composition: perhaps no more than twelve members. It might be opportune that this body be completed each time by presidents or delegates from particular episcopal conferences for specific topics. The competence of this body would need to be that of the head of the episcopal college; extending, that is, to all the "causae maiores" the individual members would bring. Decisions would need to be made unanimously, or, in case of necessity, by majority, provided that this always include the pope's vote. It would need to be clear that this is not an instrument for coordinating the congregations of the Roman curia, but rather a new body situated at the highest leadership level of the Catholic Church, expressing and putting into effect the shared responsibility of the universal episcopal college with its head, the bishop of Rome. This would imply making the collegial manner of exercising supreme responsibility in the Church the ordinary one, and making the personal way an exception.

THE DELIBERATIVE SYNOD

It would likewise be necessary to recognize the true and proper legislative capacity of the synod of bishops, always under the presidency and direction of the pope. Consequently, the synod could meet at least annually and perhaps twice yearly (in analogy with the Roman synods, which for centuries were celebrated during the Easter season and during Advent) and might possibly include greater representation from the people of God.

THE CURIA SUBORDINATED

It is easy to see that the Roman curia – possibly scaled down, and in some cases with its offices merged – would need to carry out a subordinate function of preparation and, respectively, of the execution of the decisions of the synod of bishops and of the collegial governance body.

VALUING THE LOCAL CHURCHES

Furthermore, directly connected to these general institutional aspects must be the pope's attitude and practice of promoting with respect and fraternal delicacy the responsibility and charisms of the individual

local Churches, in the firm and explicit conviction that each of these consumes in the Eucharist the entire mystery of Christ the Lord and that, at the same time, all of them need to live, to strengthen their faith, and to purify themselves in the universal communion presided over and nourished by the successor of Peter on the Roman cathedra. In this perspective, the criterion of subsidiarity is still waiting to be made operative in the acknowledgment of areas in which the Christian distinctiveness of the Churches, and especially of the third world Churches, can make valuable contributions towards a greater fidelity of the entire Church to its Lord and to the Gospel.

LOCALLY ELECTED BISHOPS

In this regard, one unmistakable sign might involve Rome's early acceptance and promotion of different and experimental ways of selecting bishops, in order to prepare a progressive, effective re-appropriation of this responsibility by the interested ecclesial communities, making sure that this take place not through conflict and rupture, but in a healthy equilibrium between spontaneity and ecclesial communion.

NUNCIATURES ABOLISHED

A different sign, but of similar significance, might consist in the entrusting of functions presently delegated to nuncios to the presidents of the national episcopal conferences, gradually accenting the displacement of this service from relations between the Holy See and the governments to relations of communion between the Churches of a particular area and the center of that communion itself. This would overcome one of the most disturbing remnants of the conception of the Church as a power among powers, and of the papacy as a "monarchy."

NEW ECUMENICAL GESTURES

If we widen the horizon further to include all the Churches and ecclesial Christian communities of the East as of the West, it is evident that the time is ripe – owing above all to the work of John XXIII and Paul VI, of Vatican II and many other ecclesial initiatives – that the effectively ecumenical dimension of the Petrine service begin to acquire consistency again. We can imagine at least two initial movements in this direction.

The first of these would be the sending of a message announcing the election of the new bishop of Rome to the great patriarchs of the apostolic tradition (Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem), to the other major sees – beginning with Moscow – and to those dedicated to the communion of the Churches and communities of the great Christian traditions (Nestorians, Monophysites, Protestants, Anglicans). This message, without assuming completely the model of the ancient letters of communion, must transcend completely the bureaucratic and diplomatic levels and constitute a humble and deliberate act both offering and asking for communion in faith and charity. This would represent an advance in the "theology of the sister Churches" repeatedly outlined by Paul VI, and a re-launching of the quest for unity powerfully fostered by Vatican II.

This could be closely followed by a second initiative consisting of a solemn and public declaration of the pope's availability, in conjunction with his collegial body, to participate in a proto-conciliar Christian assembly intended to gather together all the Christian Churches in respect for their present evangelical awareness, with the prospect of attaining ever fuller levels of unity, destined to be sanctioned ultimately in a true and proper "ecumenical" council.

GOODBYE, KING POPE

This is not the place to emphasize both the value and the limits of predominantly institutional initiatives such as those now hypothesized. It is enough to add that even these acts or their equivalent, and even perhaps more adequate ones, might be almost completely ineffective in renewing the service of the papacy in the Church if they are not accompanied and enlivened by an attitude of service profound enough to cut through the thick, sticky slather of a papal tradition in which the centuries have fixed their garish incrustations.

The conviction of needing to decide alone, of not being able to renounce the monarchical symbols of power and authority, the resignation to hiding personal virtue beneath the pontifical mantle (the residence, clothing, titles, mystery, etc.) constitute only the most showy aspects of this morass. It would therefore be highly desirable that the future bishop of Rome be strengthened and encouraged to show himself for what he really is, and not under the wrappings of his possibly far removed predecessors. For this generation, the proof of the perennial endurance of the papacy consists above all in witnessing its capacity for renewal and truthfulness, and not in its immutability, as in other times. To the extent to which all this is true, it will be necessary to pay great attention to the ordinary practice of the service of the papacy, in order that its routine not contradict the effort of renewal, but instead express it with fitting docility. This could be made easier if the new pope wished to accomplish quickly, according to his genuine personal charism, some emblematic signs actually capable of effecting what they signify, instead of just high-sounding ideological rhetoric.

Just as important would be the conviction that in the pope the public virtues are at least as indispensable as the private ones. This means that the pope's salvation is not played out simply in terms of his interior fidelity to the Gospel, but even more in terms of his capacity to be pope according to the ways of the Gospel, in such a manner that in the pope, and beyond the pope, every man may and must recognize the only Lord of the Church and of history, which he saves in love.