

## **Pope Francis and the changes in the global governance of the Catholic Church**

### **O Papa Francisco e as mudanças na governança global da Igreja Católica**

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#### **Abstract**

The article analyzes a few aspects of pope Francis' governing style and the overall context for the issue of a synodal reform of the Catholic Church in the global world: the meaning of "Ecclesia semper reformanda" in a globalized Church; from episcopal collegiality to ecclesial synodality and the "synodal process 2021-2023"; the relationship between pope Francis and the Roman Curia; the troubles with the globalization of the Church; the meaning of governance of the global Church in the age of the sexual abuse crisis. The article frames pope Francis' most important decisions and choices for the governance of the Catholic Church in the most undisputable feature of the pontificate: the re-positioning out of a strictly European and North American theological and geopolitical axis, in order to embrace the global vocation of Catholicism. This implies some epoch-making shifts for what concerns the role of the Vatican, its relationship with the local churches and the bishops' conferences, and the idea of church reform.

**Keywords:** Ecclesiology. Papacy. Governance. Abuse crisis. Decentralization. Synodality.

#### **Resumo**

O artigo analisa alguns aspectos do estilo de governo do papa Francisco e do contexto geral do tema de uma reforma sinodal da Igreja Católica no mundo global. Nesse sentido aborda as questões do significado de Ecclesia semper reformanda em uma Igreja globalizada; da colegialidade episcopal à sinodalidade eclesial e ao processo sinodal 2021-2023; da relação entre o Papa Francisco e a Cúria Romana; dos problemas com a globalização da Igreja; e do significado da governança da Igreja global na era da crise dos abusos sexuais. O artigo enquadra as decisões e escolhas mais importantes do papa Francisco no governo da Igreja Católica na característica mais indiscutível do pontificado: o reposicionamento de um eixo teológico e geopolítico estritamente europeu e norte-americano a fim de abraçar a vocação global do catolicismo. Isso implica em algumas mudanças que marcaram época no que diz respeito ao papel do Vaticano, sua relação com as igrejas locais e as conferências episcopais, assim como a ideia de reforma da igreja.

**Palavras-chave:** Eclesiologia. Papado. Governança. Crise de abuso. Descentralização. Sinodalidade.

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## Introduction

Pope Francis' pontificate can be understood only in the context of a centuries-long process of transformation of the Roman Catholic Church in an inculturated and decentralized global Catholic Church. This essay tries to analyze one specific aspect of the pontificate and its turn to the global: the changes in the governance of the Church, with particular attention to Francis' concept of Church reform, synodality, the crisis of globalization, and the handling of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. This essay tries to propose some hypotheses on the main trends and dynamics in a pontificate still far from over.

### 1. “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*” in a globalized Church

If it had not been clear already, the pandemic has made clear that ours is the age of the crisis of trust in institutions and a crisis of governance of institutions at all levels – local, national, international, and global. The Catholic Church is a multi-secular organization, one of the oldest institutions in the world with an uninterrupted tradition of centralized administration over vast territories and numerous and diverse peoples over the centuries. But the Catholic Church too is going through a crisis in its stability and governance: the election of Francis was in part also the attempt to stabilize the papacy after the crisis in the governance of the Vatican during the papacy of Benedict XVI.

Italian historian Andrea Riccardi summed up the contribution of Francis to the current crisis of governance:

Bergoglio has a deep sense of institutions [...] he does not come from a reality foreign to Church government, he is not a hermit or an intellectual, but he was provincial of the Jesuits, auxiliary and coadjutor bishop, and archbishop of a big archdiocese. He has familiarity with the government of the Catholic Church, but he knows that the Church is not made by its leaders and institutions. (RICCARDI, 2013, p. 168).

Francis' pontificate has definitely not abandoned the charismatic legitimacy of the modern papacy, but he seems to be a rebalancing after two pontificates of charismatic popes (each one in his own way) largely uninterested

in the day-to-day governing the global Church. Pope Francis is a legislator and a disruptor at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

The conclave of 2013 gave to the Church a pope that proved to be a surprise also for the issue of Church governance. The cardinals that elected Francis on March 13, 2013 expected institutional stabilization more than the theological and spiritual path of renewal opened by his pontificate. This was not only the expectation of many cardinals, but also of many Catholics around the world. Francis was elected in a conclave shaped by the hope for a restoration of the institutional stability of the Catholic Church, and of the central government of the Church in Vatican especially, in an unprecedented situation: the coexistence of the pope who was newly elected by the conclave of 2013, and the pope who had just resigned, pope Benedict XVI, who co-habited the Vatican with his successor for years after his resignation.

One of the assumptions of Francis' election in March 2013 was the succession to the theologian pope Ratzinger-Benedict XVI with the pope of institutional stabilization, Bergoglio-Francis. It is not clear if and how the succession from Benedict to Francis corresponded to this expectation. During the pontificate of Francis, it became more and more clear that the “Catholic question” centers around the sustainability of the Church in the face of a growing crisis regarding the authority and credibility of the ecclesiastical institution. But it also became clear that the role of the Church and its governability took a growing role in light and in the context of a crisis of systems in the crisis of globalization: the crisis of the Church/churches is just another aspect of the crisis of politics and of the nation state and of the world order in the Western world.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of Francis' pontificate, the political developments in many countries in the world – beginning with the USA and the European Union – made many look at the Vatican and the Catholic Church as an island of relative institutional stability in a world in a state of chaos. But was only until the new wave of the sex abuse crisis hit the Catholic Church – and in a direct way, the papacy – beginning in 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> About pope Francis and globalization, see FAGGIOLI, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> About this see FAGGIOLI, 2015, 41-60.

In this sense the perennial question of the *ecclesia semper reformanda* – of a Church that needs to be governed at the same time constantly needs to reform itself – changes features in the global context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is a different urgency from the Catholic Church of Paul VI or John Paul II: the face of the Catholic Church takes different shapes in light of different historical-political situations, both nationally and globally. But the *ecclesia semper reformanda* is being replaced by another paradigm: *ecclesia semper penitens*. The Church is being forced by external pressure to be a Church that is constantly repenting for financial and sexual scandals that seem to epitomize its inability to change: this reframes the concept and the possibilities of reform as well as of governance.

Francis' pontificate had to face a double challenge: governing a Church in a world in geopolitical turmoil dealing with the disruption of globalization (SPADARO, 2018), and governing a Church internally more complex, divided, diverse, post-confessional and trans-confessional than before, where scandals have become a weapon to be used in Church politics.

The pontificate of Francis has not provided a definite answer to the question of the possibility to reform and to govern the institutions of the Catholic Church: certainly Francis has rediscovered the language of collegiality, synodality, a new relationship between “universal” and “local” Church, a re-reading of the papacy formulated by Vatican I in a long-term history of ecclesiology (LEGRAND, 2014). The reversal of expectations between the conclave of 2013 and the pontificate of Francis has changed the position of the pontificate on many issues compared to the predecessor. One of these is the role of Rome in the government of the global Church, which compared to his predecessors John Paul II and Benedict XVI has taken up a new role: less judge and arbiter, more *pontifex* – bridge-builder within the Church and the world.

The issue of Church reform has remained on the agenda of pope Francis: Church reform as reform of the way of being Church, synodal reform, reform of the universal Church and of the particular Churches, ecumenical reform, reform for a more inculturated Church.<sup>3</sup> Francis himself has governed through

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<sup>3</sup> For a wide range of issues representative of the debate on reform in the Catholic Church, see SPADARO; GALLI (2017).

legislation more than the average Catholic perceive: he has legislated more than Benedict XVI in various areas (reform of marriage tribunals, financial activities of the Holy See, liturgical norms, resignation of bishops), in various ways (*motu proprio*, apostolic constitutions, *rescripta ex audientia*), and also creating new institutions of government (council of cardinals, new Curia dicasteries, commissions with special tasks such as the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors).<sup>4</sup>

## **2. From episcopal collegiality to ecclesial synodality and the “synodal process 2021-2023”**

The pontificate of Francis began in a Church with two opposite forces counterbalancing: the theological and ecclesiological impulse towards decentralization and de-institutionalization, and the institutional response of the pontificate of Benedict XVI (and of the late part of the pontificate of John Paul II) for a re-institutionalization of the ecclesial dynamics with a strong role played by the Vatican (THEOBALD, 2009).

On the one side, the demands for a more collegial and synodal Church were coming from the defenders of Vatican II as an event and as a source for Church reform, while on the other side the agenda of a neo-ultramontanist Catholicism was one aspect of the reaction against Vatican II both as a historical memory and as a corpus of documents perceived as a “rupture” in the tradition of the Church.

Francis’ approach to the issue of the governance of the Church has to do with his hermeneutics of the Second Vatican Council. His distance from abstract and idealized hermeneutics of Vatican II shapes his ecclesiology, and in particular his view of collegiality and synodality. Francis is a creative interpreter of Vatican II who sees in the council a dynamic force acting in a globally changing Church. His global ecclesiology is clear in his choice of the image of the Church as a “people” over the other image of the Body of Christ (FORESTIER, 2015).

Francis’ ecclesiology of synodality is rooted in his dynamic use of the *sensus fidei*:

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<sup>4</sup> About this, see BIER, 2017.

If the *sensus fidei* is a given, we can have access to it or, better, it manifests itself only in a process, process of dialogue in an institutional dimension. Here it is necessary to take some distance from a non-dynamic comprehension of the *consensus fidelium* understood only as unanimity within a given expression of the faith. (CHIRON, 2016, p. 204).

The dynamic comprehension of the *consensus fidelium* in Francis has consequences for his view of the intra-ecclesial dynamics and the issue of governing the Church. Francis' vision of the problem of Church governance is aware of the theological rifts and ecclesial fault lines of the post-Vatican II. It was telling his mentioning of the *affective* and *effective* dimensions of the collegiality in his April 1, 2014 letter to Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Bishops' Synod – a symptom of Francis' honesty in assessing the experiences of the past assemblies of the Bishops' Synod more as affective than effective for most of the members of the world episcopate:

Almost 50 years have passed since the Synod of Bishops was established, and I too having deeply examined the signs of the times and with the awareness that in the exercise of my Petrine Ministry it is necessary more than ever to further revitalize the close relationship between all the Pastors of the Church, I wish to value this precious heritage of the Council. (FRANCIS, 2014a).

Less original was Francis' mention of the need to learn from the synodal model of the Orthodox Churches in *Evangelii Gaudium* 246, in the section about ecumenism – not on Church and decentralization: “in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality”.

But Francis' vision of Church governance is to a large extent transversal and “bipartisan” compared to the theological rifts and ecclesial fault lines of the post-Vatican II period. Francis is more interested in spiritual renewal of the Church than in the reform of ecclesiastical structures; in continuity with his predecessors, he is also keeping at bay those movements pushing an agenda of internal structural reform. For Francis, the rediscovery of a more participative ecclesiological model is not based on a liberal and individualistic idea of a right of the baptized to be consulted and part of the decision-making process, but part of a missionary ecclesiology, as it is clear in the opening paragraphs of *Evangelii Gaudium* (par. 3). It is in this context that the global governance of the Church of

Francis proceeds towards a less Rome-centered Catholicism, “a sound ‘decentralization’.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 16).

Reform of Church governance is always meant by Francis as a result of “pastoral conversion” for the missionary effort of the Church going forth (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 27). In the same framework of missionary outreach is the self-criticism by the papacy through Francis about the failure to realize concretely the wish of Vatican II to make of the bishops’ conference the subject of collegiality in the Church (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 32).<sup>5</sup> Collegiality and synodality are related to a new appreciation of the charismatic dimension of the Church (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 130) and on the reliance of the infallibility “in credendo” of the people of God (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 119).

The issue of collegiality and synodality is no less important in the encyclical on our common home, *Laudato Si’*, where the problem of power is central. In the encyclical the issue of collegiality and synodality is not addressed directly, but it is very present, even though indirectly. From a methodological point of view, the choice of developing papal teaching quoting abundantly from national and continental bishops’ conferences is a step away from the previous style of papal teaching, and a step towards a “hermeneutical circle” of reception between papal magisterium and local magisterium. In the argument made by *Laudato Si’* against inequality and exploitation of resources there is a critique of the “technocratic paradigm” which is also a critique of a functionalism in ecclesiology in the form of the reduction of ecclesial dynamics to a corporate-like process that in Catholic culture can take the form of authoritarianism or of facile assimilation of collegiality and synodality to the democratic process.

This ecclesiological response of Francis to the crisis of globalization and to the new Catholic globalization is also a shift in the missionary responsibility from the *institutional* church – bishops and clergy as presiders of local geographical communities – to a responsibility of the *charismatic* and *pneumatological* structure of the Church in evangelization (THEOBALD, 2016). But in a way different from the relying of John Paul II on charismatic movements and leaders,

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<sup>5</sup> About this, see SCHICKENDANTZ, 2017, p. 376-399.

which was part of the pontificate's effort to maintain the ecclesiastical and clerical status quo.

An even more pronounced emphasis on collegiality and synodality is in the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. The exhortation not only quotes from ten bishops' conferences (Spain, Korea, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Australia, CELAM, Italy, and Kenya); it also uses the two final relation of the Synods (2014 and 2015) in a way that reflects the synodal discussions more than in any other post-synodal document (more than fifty quotations from the two *relatio*) – not without advancing its argument accepting paragraphs of the final *relatio* of 2015 that were approved with a high number of no votes (n. 71 with 41 no votes, n. 84 with 72 no votes, n. 85 with 80 no votes, and n. 86 with 64 no votes). From the very beginning of *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis explains his vision of the role of papal magisterium:

I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs" (*Amoris Laetitia*, par. 3).

Theological inculturation for Francis is part of the need for a more synodal Church. The images of the Church used in the Synod – “like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm” and the field hospital (*Amoris Laetitia*, par. 291) – are in the context of emergency situations, but these situations are not used to justify authoritarian, hero-like ecclesial leadership. On the contrary, the prophetic voice is relocated in the body of the Church. It is not just the specific nature of the exhortation – a document born from a synod is built in order to receive reception from a church in synodality – but it is something that extends to the whole ecclesiology of Francis.

This became clear in the speech delivered during the 2015 Synod, for the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Bishops' Synod by Paul VI in 1965. This speech is the most important speech of a pope on synodality in the post-



Vatican II Church and can be called the *magna charta* of synodality in the post-conciliar papal magisterium. Even more important of Francis' articulation of the dimensions of synodality in the various levels in the Catholic Church (in the local and particular churches; in Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions, Particular Councils and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops; the level of the universal Church) is Francis' insertion of the synodal dimension of the Church in the context of the global world:

The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. (FRANCIS, 2015a).

Synodality goes to the roots of the tradition: “The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life. The Synod process begins by listening to the people of God, which “shares also in Christ's prophetic office”, according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: ‘*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*’.”<sup>6</sup>

But at the same time there is a new missionary and ecumenical urgency: “The commitment to build a synodal Church — a mission to which we are all called, each with the role entrusted him by the Lord — has significant ecumenical implications.” (FRANCIS, 2015b). The last paragraph is Francis' manifesto for synodality in the global Catholic Church:

Our gaze also extends to humanity as a whole. A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. *Is 11:12*) in a world which — while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration — often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which “journeys together” with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations”. (FRANCIS, 2015b).

This acknowledgment of the reversal of positions between the *urbs* and the *orbis* in Catholicism has been clear from the very beginning of Francis' pontificate, with the strong emphasis on the *poor* and on *mercy*, and with

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<sup>6</sup> About this, see the famous article of CONGAR, 1958, p. 210-259.

synodality as the Church's way to respond to "small but powerful groups". Francis is trying to revitalize in the Church a synodality that is not merely one that strives to make the church non-monarchical and more collegial. It is also a synodality that ensures that "small but powerful groups" are prohibited from running the church. It is an antidote to those who think reforming the Church requires a well-funded group with abundant travel funds, connections with the powerful and effective communication skills – a phenomenon that has become important in the global and interconnected Church of today.

This phenomenon is complicated because it is not found on only one end of the ideological spectrum. Though it is much more visible on the conservative side, where big money is more easily available than for liberal-progressive causes, both sides of the aisle have become part, even though in different ways, of this mechanism. Catholic think tanks and advocacy groups on the liberal end of the spectrum work for issues like gender equality, sexual ethics, lay decision-making, and social and economic justice. Those on at the conservative end, which generally have more financial support, focus on issues like economic freedom, natural family planning and an anti-LGBT agenda. The conservative groups, especially, do little to take up the cause of those who lack money and power – that is, the poor.

Francis' vision of synodality is primarily a call to the Church, included to theologians who could become tempted to think about their mission as isolated from the Church as a people, as he pointed out in the message to the theology congress taking place in Argentina in September 2015: "The believing People in whom he [she, the theologian] was born has a theological meaning that he cannot ignore. He [she] knows he [she] is 'plugged' into an ecclesial awareness and immerses himself [herself] in those waters". (FRANCIS, 2015b). Francis' distance from academic theology is integral part of his vision of the synodality of the Church: clericalism is not just among the clergy. Historically in the Western world, the privileges of academics and of Catholic clergy have a lot in common and they imitated one another.

The global dimension of the Catholic Church constitutes the reason for a real synodality and at the same time also a challenge. The conditions of the

Catholic Church today are significantly different from the times when the reviviscence of collegiality and synodality became visible, that is, at the time of the Second Vatican Council. Globalization of Catholicism means also a Church more tribal and polarized globally and locally, in a world that is more interconnected but at the same time also more divided than at the time of Vatican II. The troubles of globalization are also Catholic troubles, with important consequences on the ecclesiology of synodality – the issue of *how* to be synodal.

In this sense, the contribution of Francis to the development of synodality must be seen in the theological periodization of the debate on collegiality (at Vatican II) and on synodality (the post-Vatican II Church), but also in the context of a larger social and cultural history of Catholicism. Francis' double challenge – a Church recovering the promise of collegiality made by Vatican II and the need for synodality expressed by the post-Vatican II Church – cannot be assessed in theological and institutional terms only, and it is part of a long-term trajectory this pontificate is counting on.

The “synodal process” launched in May 2021, which will culminate in October 2023 in Rome with the XVI ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops, is the most important project of church governance since Vatican II and could become the most important ecclesial event in global Catholicism since Vatican II. But it will also be a test for the reception (or non-reception) of pope Francis' pontificate by the global Catholic Church and the episcopate in particular. The celebration of events and processes between October 2021 and October 2023 in different phases– local, national/continental, and central – will say a lot about the state of synodality in Catholicism today.

### **3. Pope Francis and the Roman Curia**

One important aspect – both symbolically and practically – of the issue of the governance of the global Church is the central government of the Catholic Church, also known as the Roman Curia.

For its entire history since the early second millennium more criticized than actually understood, the mysteriousness of the Roman Curia is due, in part,

to the fact that we know only bits and pieces of its complex and very long history. It is also due to its weak theological foundations, which has forced Church leaders, theologians and ecclesiologists to employ complex arguments in order to explain and justify its existence.

But the Roman Curia is not a monstrosity in the history of Christianity. It is not a deviation from the Church's concept of governing and leading the community of the faithful during its history in the West. Significantly, all the popes of the last century – from Pius X to Benedict XVI – confronted the problem of governance and Curia reform. And the way each of them addressed the issue of the Curia was indicative of other key aspects of their pontificates (FAGGIOLI, 2015b). We now have a similar situation with pope Francis. Important aspects of his pontificate can be better understood by looking at what he is doing (and *not* doing) with regard to the Roman Curia.

Since the beginning of the pontificate, Francis has worked at a new apostolic constitution for a reformed Roman Curia to replace the one John Paul II issued in 1988, *Pastor Bonus*. It was the major reform of the Curia in more than thirty years, and a long effort in the making, dating back to the first meetings of the council of cardinals between 2013 and 2014. In a long and important article by the Italian bishop who served as secretary of the pope's council of nine cardinal advisors (C9), which was published in the Bologna-based Catholic magazine *Il Regno* in 2018, Semeraro (2018) traced the steps Francis has taken so far to reform some aspects of the Curia (for example, his creation of the Third Section of the Secretariat of State in November 2017). The reform decided to not create the new position of a *moderator Curiae*, a sort of chief administrator of all the offices because, according to Semeraro, "the analogy between the Roman Curia and the diocesan curia is not appropriate". Moreover, Semeraro outlined several key principles that guide Francis' reform of the Curia. They include the principle of *gradualism* of discernment and experimentations (flexibility); the principle of *tradition* as fidelity to history (no drastic changes); the principle of *innovation* (for example, the new dicastery for communication, created between 2015 and 2017); the principle of *simplification* (merging of dicasteries, but also decentralization). In his article the C9 secretary showed that Francis' view of the

Church, the papacy and the Roman Curia are tightly connected. The Curia exists not only to transmit messages to the rest of the Church but also to receive messages from a synodal Church. It exists for a Catholic Church not in retreat but *in the world* according to the pastoral constitution of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*.

The repeated delay of the new apostolic constitution for Francis' reform of the Curia was not a symptom of a fiasco of the C9 or of the pontificate. Rather, it was fully consistent with this pope's approach to the Roman Curia, which has proved to be different from his predecessors' since the first days his pontificate. "It is attractive to think of the Roman Curia as a small-scale model of the Church, in other words, as a 'body' that strives seriously every day to be more alive, more healthy, more harmonious and more united in itself and with Christ," Francis told Curia officials in his pre-Christmas gathering with them in 2014 (FRANCIS, 2014b).

This passage was noteworthy because a key problem of the Curia has always been the questionable nature of its theological legitimacy, besides its historic institutional and political functions. But in this address Francis tried to describe the Roman Curia as a "small-scale model of the Church," clearly setting aside the fact that it is fundamentally lacking a basis in ecclesiology and disregarding the differences between, for example, the very diverse sociology of the global Church today and the almost-totally clerical sociology of the Curia.

Francis has always offered his diagnosis of the problems of the Roman Curia – especially in the dreaded Christmas addresses to the Vatican officials – with language that defines a spiritual experience rather than one that describes functional mismanagement. His non-functionalist approach to the Curia is clearly consistent with his criticism of the "technocratic paradigm" in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

In this respect, Francis' handling of the reform of the Roman Curia must be seen in the context of his understanding of the issue of the governance of the global Catholic Church. On the one hand Francis has certainly pushed towards some decentralization of the Church, although without investing his pontificate in an institutional decentralization. Most of Francis' efforts have been aimed at

stopping and inverting the tendency, evident in the post-Vatican II of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, to recentralize the Church on Rome. Francis made decisions made about the authority for liturgical translations (FRANCIS, 2017a) and for the declarations of marriage annulments<sup>7</sup>, which are more restorative than revolutionary from an ecclesiological standpoint.

On the other hand, for Francis, decentralization is not just administrative but also magisterial, as *Amoris Laetitia* par. 3 illustrates well, and also extended to the geography of the papal trips. Since the beginning of the pontificate Francis made clear his disappointment for the centralizing course of Roman Catholicism in the post-Vatican II period, when in *Evangelii Gaudium* he wrote that “It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization’.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 16) and that “Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 32).

Francis’ shows a will to decentralize the Church, but not disjointed from a fairly classic understanding of the necessity of a central level. Francis does not have in mind a return to the first millennium or to another age as a way of restructuring radically the structures of the Church. Rome continues to play a role for Francis’ papacy, also because of the continued visibility of his predecessor, Benedict XVI as “emeritus”. Compared to Benedict, Francis has talked more about the Curia and in a different way. Francis used for the Roman Curia the metaphor of the antenna: Rome as a receiving and transmitting antenna:

To return to the image of the body, it is fitting to note that these “*institutional senses*”, to which we can in some way compare the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, must operate in a way befitting their nature and purpose: in the name and with the authority of the Supreme Pontiff, and always for the good and the service of the Churches. Within the Church, they are called to be like faithful, sensitive antennae: *sending and receiving*. (FRANCIS, 2017c).

Overall, Francis’ effort has been more about a *re-sintonization* with the peripheries by the antennae of the central government of the Roman Curia than

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<sup>7</sup> The two *motu proprio Mitis iudex Dominus Iesus* and *Mitis et misericors Iesus* (both August 15, 2015) on the cases regarding the nullity of marriage.

at a radical decentralization. It seems that for Francis the new global dimension of the Church in the world still needs this kind of antenna as a center of communion and communication. The major reforms of the Roman Curia proper before the publication of the apostolic constitution has been limited to the merging (which took place between 2014 and 2016) of seven dicasteries in two new dicasteries on the laity and on integral human development. On the other hand, other reforms decided by Francis have sidelined or bypassed the Curia without ever making the argument for the redundancy of it. The decision to create the Council of eight cardinals, announced on April 13, 2013 and that started to meet in October 2013, has been a historical change in the relationship between the pope and the Curia, but without taking away power from Rome and the papacy: in some sense, it has made the central government of the Church more centered on the pope and less on the bureaucracy. The inclusion of the cardinal Secretary of State (thus making of the C8 the C9) in July 2014 was evidence of the fact that the council of cardinals is a governing body emanating from papal power – and whose future after the end of Francis’ pontificate is far from clear.

Under Francis, papal Rome has not lost its “traditional” place: the assemblies of the Bishops’ Synod continue to take place in Rome; the new attention of Francis to the activity of the Vatican diplomacy is based on the fact that it is a *papal* diplomacy; Francis’ decision to give the pope more power on the resignation of bishops (per papal *Rescritto* published on November 5, 2014) is an indication that the Church’s government is still centered in Rome and in Rome; the location in the Vatican of the new judicial body within the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to handle appeals by priests who have been disciplined for sexually abusing children (decision announced November 11, 2014) is a symptom that on critical issues, Rome is still seen as the natural place for the decision-making process involving the whole Church. This is part not only of keeping with the tradition, but also of Francis’ pedagogy of reform: the pontificate of Francis has shown the paradox that the decentralization of the global governance of the Catholic Church needs heavy Vatican inputs.

During Francis, Rome was the irradiation point of a spiritual reform of the Church that requires a spiritual reform of the Curia, but also a different

relationship with the magisterial dimension of the Vatican. Compared to his immediate predecessor, Francis is inverting the trend of the relationship between the Roman Curia and the Church, from a dogmatic understanding of the government of the Church to a kerygmatic one.

#### **4. Catholic Globalization and Its Discontents**

An analysis of Francis' handling of Church governance requires particular nuance, given Francis' ecclesiology of reform, which is aimed more at a conversion of the mentality of bureaucrats more than institutional reform of the bureaucratic structures. Francis is animated by the idea of Church reform articulated by Yves Congar before Vatican II especially in his most important book, *True and False Reform* (CONGAR, 2010): the primacy of charity and of pastorality; the preservation of communion; patience and respect of the delays; renewal through return to the principle of tradition. This makes the ecclesial politics of Francis' pontificate more complicated, because Congar's idea of Church reform can be frustrating for those who have lost the patience Congar was invoking fifty years ago. The expectations of many Catholic experts and theologians expect a visible institutional reform of the Curia which is often expressing a technocratic mentality that is not Francis'.

During the first eight years of pontificate, Francis did not emphasize the need of a bureaucratic overhaul of the central government of the Catholic Church, and there is a difference between him and the predecessors that are theologically closer to him: John XXIII called the council on January 25, 1959, less than three months after his election, in an act that was in itself one way of addressing the issue of the Roman Curia and its role in the global Church; Paul VI reformed the Curia four years after his election, with the apostolic constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae Universae* of August 15, 1967. Francis' approach to the issue of the Roman Curia has been shaped by looking at it not from the center – as it was typical of his predecessors – but from the peripheries and from the global Church: there is a difference in the perceived emergencies and in the solutions.

The issue of the reform of the Roman Curia and of Church governance was quite high in the list of the expectations at the beginning of Francis' pontificate,



in a global Church where the mentality of the single-issue reform agenda has become more influential than in the past. One of the major changes we have seen in the last several years– not just in politics, but also in the Church – is the growing influence of advocacy groups, lobbies and think tanks. Among the liberal-progressive Catholics “disappointed” by pope Francis there are those who reproach Francis for not having kept the promises of “modernization” of the Church’s bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>8</sup>

In some sense, the way Francis has approached the issue of the institutional reform is representative of the whole pontificate: too revolutionary for the standard bearer of the status quo, and too traditional for “revolutionaries” and their agenda for Francis’ papacy. This is not a centrist position that is ideologically confusing for the entrenched fronts of ideological Catholicism. In part it is the impossibility of framing Francis in the “liberal vs. conservative” scheme, especially for the institutional issue of Catholicism. But it is also part of the evolution of the papal ministry. Governing the Church from Rome can be seen as a formidable task for an evangelizer against centuries of stratified institutional baggage, but it can be seen also as the cautionary tale against the worldly fetish of the Pope-superstar, a solitary hero, and a miracle worker. The messianic expectations from the bishop of Rome are tested by the Roman Curia: the resilience of the Vatican bureaucracy can be interpreted simplistically as the fight for the preservation of the power of Rome. But this reluctance of the central government in the Vatican to be reformed or to reform itself can also serve the healthy purpose to bring back to reality the expectations about leadership in the Catholic Church.

The real question for the future of the global Catholic Church is not the reform or reformability of the Roman Curia, but the ability of the rest of the Church to support the development of a global Church that cannot and will not rely on Rome as it was in the past, in a more Europe-centered Catholic Church. In other words, the real question is about the “Francis effect” on the local Churches, and especially the national and continental bishops’ conferences, and

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<sup>8</sup> This kind of expectations, for example, in Marco Marzano, *La Chiesa immobile. Francesco e la rivoluzione mancata*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2018.

from them on the seminaries for the formation of priests and the schools of theology and ministry. The vision of Francis' for a globalization of the college of cardinals has been a success: Bergoglio's rupture with the historical criterion of traditional cardinal sees (thus making space for new cardinals from the "global south" and younger Churches all over the world, especially from Africa and Asia) has made possible a departure from the previous models of representation of the Church through the composition of the electoral college of the bishop of Rome.<sup>9</sup> The same can be said about the appointments of bishops, that under Francis have been chosen from priests with a visibly pastoral profile and not from clerics from administrative or academic background.

The question on the reform of the life of the local Churches remains an open question. The pontificate of Francis and the reactions to its evangelical appeal, to the Gospel *sine glossa* – without too many cultural mediation - has shown that the real challenge is, more than the reform of the institution, in the words of the Italian theologian Giuseppe Ruggieri, "the re-appropriation of the Church as an experience of brotherhood and sisterhood." (RUGGIERI, 2017, p. 170). The discontents of Catholic globalization are more about a more fractured sense of the Church than about the inability to reform the structures. The keys to this synodal sense of the Church – *liturgy*, *poverty*, and *mercy* – have been the most difficult for Francis to transmit to the neo-conservative and neo-traditionalist *revanche* within Catholicism that is now, two generations after Vatican II, integral part of the Catholic landscape in the West dealing with the globalization of the Church.

Those who try to understand the issue of the reform of the governance of the global Church found in Francis' pontificate an important moment to understand the development of the problem. If Benedict XVI's decision to resign was also due to a failure in his ability to control the central government of the Church, Francis' pontificate has shown that the crisis went deeper than one particular pope. Francis' is the pope of a newly globalized Church in the sense that the globalization of the Church means the transition from the functionalist dream of Vatican II (SALE, 2017) – the council worked with the idea of the

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<sup>9</sup> See especially the consistories for the creation of new cardinals of 22 February 2014, 14 February 2015, and 19 November 2016.

existence of an institutional fix to the problems of Catholicism – to the reality of governing an institution that had become much less relying on laws and regulations and much more on the charismatic element.

Francis' pontificate was also about the relationship between the expectations from a pope to be a reformer of the institution on one side, and on the other side the fact that the Roman papacy has become a charismatic role. Whatever the institutionalization of the papacy tried to control in the “charismatization” of the papal role since the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870 (the declarations on papal primacy and papal infallibility), the papacy embodies now a charismatic power more than it used to be, and more charismatic than institutional.

Paradoxically, one of the discontents of this Catholic globalization comes from the awareness of the growing evidence of the limits of papal power in the church of today. The “internationalization” of the Roman Curia dreamed by Vatican II and launched by Paul VI has been made real by pope Francis by restructuring symbolically the relationship between the pope and the global Church by creating more distance between the pope on one side and on the other side the Curia, its Roman and Italian historical-political environment. The papacy of Francis has been more focused on the chaotic and multi-cultural and multi-religious city of Rome than on the holy city, papal Rome; more focused on Italian Catholics and Christians than on the Italian bishops' conference or Italian politics.

This is a consequence of what one could call, paraphrasing Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous report *Tristes Tropiques* (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1955), the sad part of the Catholic globalization. It is a globalization more affected by ethno-nationalism and tribalism not only in the social and political sphere, but also in the Church. One example is the case of the Peter Okpaleke, appointed bishop of the southern Nigerian diocese of Ahiara by Benedict XVI in 2012 but was never able to take possession of the diocese because of the widespread nature of the protests. It is one of the cases that show the new and visible difficulty of papal power to win over fragmented ecclesial identities. Bishop Okpaleke had to resign in February 2018, despite Francis' strong message to his local Church in a letter

of June 2017 to accept him as a bishop. (FRANCIS, 2017b). The pope backed down in dispute with Nigerian priests that had complained that Okpaleke was not from Mbaise, the region surrounding their diocese, and Francis accepted the bishop's resignation.

The discontents of Catholic globalization are not surfacing only from those part of the Catholic globe that have acquired new visibility in the age of the interconnected Church. It is now part of the life of Catholicism in larger areas of the world. The phenomenon of the new Catholic traditionalism must be understood also as a reaction against multicultural globalization and also against Catholic globalization. This fragmentation has been amplified by the virtualization of Catholicism – that is, the creation of religious identities in cyberspace – and by the legacy of the institutional sclerosis of the Church under the guidance of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, marked by the inability not only to live synodally, but also to believe in the very idea of a Church that can debate synodally.

In an age of rising nationalism as well as polarization within the Catholic Church itself, the global governance of the Church problem depends much more on the peripheries than on the center: the true transition to a synodal Church depends on how much the Church around the world is willing to accept and support this new kind of Church governance. Catholicism today still flirts with the dangerous tendency to rely on one man only - the pope. Francis' pontificate certainly offered an interesting example of leadership in a new age of fascination for "strongmen".

## **5. Governance of the Global Church and the Sexual Abuse Crisis**

One of the areas where Francis has tried to resist the temptation and the pressure to act as a "strongman" and to the call for a "law-and-order" papacy is in his handling of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. Indeed, the handling of this global scandal has been one of the areas where Francis' spiritual government of the Catholic Church through discernment has been met with impatience.

It is during pope Francis that the crisis of the abuses committed by Catholic clergy has become a global Catholic crisis *also* in the perception of the Vatican. The unprecedented meeting of all presidents of the bishops' conferences in the Vatican of February 21-24, 2019 has been a key moment to understand the paradoxical tension between the need to de-centralize the Catholic Church and at the same time to call the Church to a decentralizing reform from the center.

The phenomenon of the crisis and the response to the crisis has shown the particularities of the Catholic Church as a global Church, but also as an international organization where religious-spiritual level and political-diplomatic level are never completely separated. The abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has put to a test the logics of the structure of the Church much more than any organization investigated for the same pattern of criminal behavior, and much more than other Churches and religious groups. But it also put to a test the ecclesiological model of governance of the post-Vatican II Church.

The abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is a multi-layered crisis: a problem of corruption (crimes and cover-up), a problem of credibility of official teaching on sexual morality, and a problem of huge diversity in the Catholic Church dealing with all that has to do with gender and sexuality (FAGGIOLI, 2018). But the abuse crisis has also revealed the unsustainability of an ecclesiological model that in the second post-Vatican II period (between John Paul II and Benedict XVI) frustrated the theological role of the local and national level. In this sense, Francis' action on the sex abuse crisis has been a mix of necessary central impulses (from the creation of the Pontifical Commission for the Abuse of Minors in 2014 to the decision to call the meeting of all presidents of bishops' conference and major superiors of religious orders in February 2019) and of a new opening of spaces for collegiality and synodality. This is a mix that reflects not only the ecclesiology of pope Francis, but also the need of a complex mix between universal-central level and local level in Roman Catholicism.

There is no question that pope Francis' ecclesiological rebalancing from has tried to revert the centralization of the previous pontificates, and tried to do this with a generation of bishops who were previously appointed and promoted

on the basis of different ecclesiological priorities. But it is an open question – for the handling of the sex abuse crisis but more generally for the governance of the Catholic Church more generally – what kind of balance this will be. It is for sure that the abuse crisis has a major impact in reconsidering a wide range of ecclesiological issues: the relationship between Church and State, between clergy and laity, between local Churches and Rome. For what concerns the institutional Church's handling of the abuse crisis, the strategy to fight clerical sexual abuse begins with Benedict XVI. But the discourse on collegiality and synodality as ecclesiological conversions necessary to fight against clericalism as a root cause of the sexual abuse in the Church begins with pope Francis.

The year 2018-2019 had indeed inaugurated also a new phase in the history of the Catholic abuse crisis: not only for the defrocking of former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the convictions of cardinal George Pell by an Australian tribunal for crimes of sexual abuse against minors and of cardinal Philippe Barbarin by a French tribunal for failing to report an abusive priest together mark a new chapter in the relations between church and state (both Pell and Barbarin were subsequently acquitted between January and April 2020). It became also a new kind of test for the governance of the papacy itself. The spring of 2019 made clear the unprecedented complexity of the crisis and the role of the papacy in it. From the entourage of Benedict XVI, on April 10, 2019, emerged an essay, signed by the “pope emeritus”, interpreting the genesis of the sexual abuse crisis, in a way that constitutes a counter-narrative that directly fed opposition to Pope Francis.

The abuse crisis has become a test for the Catholic Church in globalization also because it strikes at the heart of a deep contradiction and coexistence within Catholic theology of these last sixty years: on the one side the realization that the Catholic Church has never been as centralized as it is, and it needs decentralization; on the other side the consciousness that in Church history major processes of reform always need a certain amount of centralization.

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