

## CHURCH CHAT

BY

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### URGENCY

The urgency is warranted. We need to do something about it very soon.

I hear and read a lot about the style of Francis, Bishop of Rome. His initial impact is overwhelmingly positive, hopeful and encouraging. But I also hear and read a lot about “wait and see” which implies skepticism about the long-term, substantive change he may inspire.

I want to make the case that we have already seen enough and waiting may undermine the renewal we need.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. The People of God do not sit in the stands and cheer our team as they march up and down the field, court, rink, or aisle of a Cathedral. We, the Church, are participants and, as Church, we act. We are players, not watchers.

There are at least four areas where Francis has already led by example. (That type of leadership, by the way, is refreshing: leading by living rather than leading by teaching. We haven't seen that in the Vatican since the early 1960s with John XXIII.)

1. **Simplicity. Humility.** It is clear that Francis lives simply and humbly. His lifestyle, even within the luxury of the Vatican, retains the character of his slum life in Buenos Aires. He refused the standard living quarters of previous Popes. His chosen way of life is authentic and belies his presumed position of honored authority. He has already shattered Vatican pretense, and exposed himself as a Franciscan Jesuit, which is a new, ecumenical, clerical species.

When translated into the People of God, his lifestyle leadership means no more extravagant, Medieval Church buildings promoting pomposity and power. Simplicity and humility rule our new day, even in our buildings. It means no more mansions for our clerics of whatever rank. It means the end to personal ambition and desires for special treatment.

2. **Preferential option for the poor.** Remember that phrase? It was formed by the Latin American Bishops in the 1980's and enshrined in John Paul II's encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (1991). Dust it off, folks, because Francis lived it for years, and there is no indication that he will change this focus as Bishop of Rome. We were just learning how to apply this gospel message when it abruptly got replaced with

abortion, contraception, gay issues, pedophile priests, and attacks on nuns and women in general. The lived commitment of Francis places this core gospel challenge right in the middle of our faces, our hearts and our pocketbooks.

3. Liturgical minimalism. Evidence of the downgrading of liturgical pomp and ritual scrupulosity dominated Vatican Holy Week. Shortened ceremonies, washing the feet of women prisoners, homilies that focused on central, scriptural themes (not theological treatises) all pointed to liturgical minimalism, where compassion outdoes ritual solemnity. If Francis did this during Holy Week, immediately after his election, he certainly will continue it.

His example can “loosen up” liturgies around the world. Can you imagine that impact? And the fear it may lessen among celebrants? One example: my guess is that had Francis been Pope two years ago, the Vatican could not have forced the hijacked new English translation onto our liturgies. And Fr. Bill Rowe would still be pastor of St. Mary's parish in Mt. Carmel, IL.

4. Doctrinal priorities. This category is not yet as clear as the previous three. He allowed the continuation of the investigation of the nuns in the USA, which is a serious issue, but, on this one, I am willing to “wait and see”. There are no final recommendations and there is no indication of what Francis will ultimately approve.

His emphasis on foundational Christian beliefs – there is a God, Jesus as a visible expression of God, the Church as a community trying to live the love of God – is the key message the world needs. Not supposed clarity on secondary doctrinal issues or sermons on sexual, moral matters. Foundational Catholic Christian beliefs and how they offer hope to a troubled world and individual pilgrims – that's the doctrinal message that will resonate.

We can't wait and see. Francis is leading by example, and a leader needs followers as well as local leaders to reinforce the example. So, what must we do now?

Some suggestions:

- Talk it up. How do we implement more simplicity, the preferential option for the poor and liturgical minimalism in our parishes and dioceses? Grassroots focus on these issues now has clear support from the Pope.
- Write letters to the editors of secular and catholic papers. Blog, Facebook, Twitter messages.

A new church is emerging. Francis has opened the gates, like John XXIII opened the windows. If we don't rush in now, the gates may close. Remember: John Paul I only lived 33 days!

So, participate now!