

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

WHAT'S A REFORMER TO DO?

The New Year looms. While “Happy New Year” is welcome, it would be better to be able to say “Happy Old Year” a year from now. To have a year begin, remain, and end happily depends on many factors, some which we control and many which we don't.

For the Catholic Church, 2016 could be critical. Will the reforms that Francis initiated take hold and expand? And, more personally, what's our role?

As a minimally effective but earnest Catholic Church reformer, I have a new and unexpected problem. For decades it was quite clear what my vision was but it was also evident that the real life context for that vision included a stubborn, rigidly conservative, self-serving hierarchy, a narrow focus on dogmatic teaching, and a stifling clericalism. And there was an obvious attempt to sterilize Vatican II. In that environment, I knew that my main message was to highlight the devastating consequences of that approach and to point towards the enlightened possibilities outlined in the Council. Frankly, it was easier to be prophetic.

But then along came Francis. He has changed the context. It's not that many issues are now resolved and many hopes realized. But Francis is clearly guiding the church in a direction that I am happy to follow. The Vatican is no longer the major obstacle to renewal that it was for decades. While I am still impatient with the rate of change, I can at least support many of the initiatives that Francis has launched. I haven't felt that positive about papal leadership for a very long time.

That happy change leaves me with a problem. What does a reformer do when the reform is now being led by the Pope? Follow his lead seems the most sensible approach. But how does that role work in this changed context?

I see three possibilities – but, of course, there could be more. Here are my current three:

1. Focus on local issues. How does your bishop measure up to the new standards that Francis champions? Things like: a simple life style, obvious personal commitment to the poor, service first rather than dogma first ministry, personal humility, a joyful spirit, decentralization, collaborative decision-making, etc. How does your pastor measure up to the same standards? How do you measure up? If you, your pastor, or your bishop still think and function like it was pre-Francis, then there are

opportunities to be prophetic, to be a reformer. In fact, we can now cite Francis when we push for reform on the local level.

2. Stick to one issue. Women's ordination comes immediately to mind. One day I think Francis is heading toward an acceptance of women's ordination because it seems so consistent with the other initiatives he has made. It seems he is headed toward a major reorganization of church governance with lots of decision making on a regional level. Maybe women's ordination will be part of that process. Then the next day I feel he's not going to do anything about women or celibacy. Any reformer, if he or she is so inclined, can focus on this issue and keep at it for some time.
3. Education. The prophetic role can morph into an education role. There are millions of Catholics who don't really know what Francis is doing, why he is doing it, and what difference does it make. Admiring Francis because he lives simply and identifies with the poor is one thing. Becoming knowledgeable about the nature of the Church, our history, and what is included in an authentic spiritual journey takes some study, reflection, dialogue, reading, prayer, and a spiritual guide or two. In our technological age, insightful articles and blogs are readily available. A modern day educator who sifts through all the resources and knows their relevance could easily educate lots of people by forwarding the best of the articles to interested readers. The basis for reform could then expand.

In any case, people like me, organizations like Call to Action, and news media like the National Catholic Reporter live in a new context, along with everyone else. The Francis factor makes a difference. His reform is bigger than my plan, but my plan certainly fits in with his reform.

It is exciting to be a part of the transformation that is happening right now. Our biggest sin would be to act like it isn't happening or that it is irrelevant.

Somewhere, in the middle of this discussion, there's room for a New Year's resolution. Got any suggestions?