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Pope Francis: Radical and Conservative

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RICHARD W. MOODEY, MAY 16 2013

In his actions upon the international stage, the conservatism of Pope Francis will probably overshadow his radicalism. Nevertheless, he has shown his radical side by naming himself after St. Francis of Assisi. He will not just remember the poor, but will also attempt to follow St. Francis in his personal devotion to “Lady Poverty.” This is a radical orientation for a man who lives in the midst of the treasures of the Vatican, and in a world dominated by the quest for wealth. But Pope Francis will be conservative in the model of the church he habitually uses. Because of his position, he will tend to think of the church as an organization or institution, rather than as “mystical communion,” “sacrament,” “herald,” “servant,” or “community of disciples.”[1] Moreover, his past history leads me to believe that he will continue to be conservative on issues of gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and marriage.[2]

The radical side of Pope Francis is likely to take the form of an increased emphasis upon distributive justice, as has been articulated in a series of papal encyclicals beginning in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, on the “Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor.”[3] Although the teachings of this document have been restated and elaborated in a series of social encyclicals issued by later popes, they have often been rejected by conservative Catholics. After Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* appeared in 1961,[4] the expression—incorrectly attributed to William F. Buckley—“*Mater si, magistra no*” (“Mother yes, teacher no”) became popular in conservative Catholic circles. Since the doctrines on social justice have never been promulgated as infallible papal pronouncements, conservative Catholics freely defend social and economic policies that contradict the teachings of the social encyclicals. Thus, it is unlikely that the genuine desire of the new pope to alleviate poverty throughout the world will change the beliefs, values, policies, or actions of wealthy and powerful people, whether or not they are Catholic.

As the head of the Holy See, Pope Francis is the *de jure* ruler of both Vatican City and the worldwide Roman Catholic Church. But the degree to which he is the *de facto* ruler of these collectivities is severely limited. He is assisted by the Roman Curia, which includes the Secretariat of State, Pontifical Councils, Pontifical Commissions, various tribunals, and nine Curial Congregations, each headed by a Cardinal. The relations between the Pope and the heads and members of these subordinate organizations are important elements in the Roman Catholic tradition. These relations are specified in terms of reciprocal rights, duties, and expectations that exercise powerful constraints upon what the occupants of these offices say and do. A pope can put new people into these positions, but the traditional definitions of the rights and duties of the offices are not thereby changed. Therefore, the *de facto* control by the pope of the Holy See and Vatican City is constrained by the network of role relationships within which he must act on a daily basis.

The *de facto* governance of the whole Catholic Church by the Holy See is much more limited. In terms of the literal chain of command, there is one pope who is the immediate superior of over five thousand bishops. This is an impossible span of control. Members of the Roman Curia assist him, but in organizational terms, they are staff rather than line. Bishops are the immediate superiors of about four hundred and twelve thousand priests spread throughout the world. If they were evenly divided among all the bishops, which they are not, each bishop would be in charge of about eighty priests, a considerably smaller span of control than that of the pope over the bishops, but still much greater than is usually present in complex organizations. The priests minister to over a billion Catholics, about one priest for every two-thousand four hundred Catholics.[5] The question of span of control, however, does not really arise here, because priests, for the most part, do not even attempt to control the Catholics to whom they minister.

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The Holy See, the Roman Curia, and Vatican City are all organized in ways that are similar to the model of a “machine bureaucracy.”[6] They are organizational structures with workable spans of control. The organizational structure of the entire Catholic Church, however, is far too flat for it to be seen as a bureaucracy. This structural difference is an important part of the reason why it makes sense to speak, as John Apczynski does, of two churches, “the church of rules and doctrines and the church of practice and devotion.”[7] The church of rules and doctrines corresponds to what people mean by “the Church” when they think, speak, and write about the church using the institutional model. The church of practice and devotion corresponds to what people mean by “the Church” when they think about church, using one of the other models (“mystical communion,” “sacrament,” “herald,” “servant,” or “community of disciples”). As a result, the ability of the Holy See to insure that the members of the Roman Curia and the residents of Vatican City speak and act in ways that are consistent with official rules and doctrines is great, but the Holy See has very little ability to insure that over a billion Catholics conform in their words and deeds to the official rules and doctrines promulgated back in Rome.

The lack of control by the Holy See of the words and deeds of the huge number of Roman Catholics in the world is independent of whether or not the non-conforming Catholics are conservative or liberal. While conservatives are much more likely to reject the church’s teaching on distributive justice, liberals are much more likely to reject the church’s teaching on the position of women, the use of contraceptives, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and remarriage after divorce; and both are equally likely to dismiss the church’s teaching on the conditions for a “just war.”

It would be a mistake, therefore, for students of IR to think of Pope Francis as the representative, in Eric Voegelin’s sense,[8] of the whole Roman Catholic Church. The head of a collectivity can be its representative only to the extent that the collectivity is politically organized to act collectively. The Holy See itself, and Vatican City are politically organized, and Pope Francis is the representative of these two overlapping collectivities. He speaks and acts in their name; the members habitually obey his directives; and the members cannot effectively repudiate what he says. But the Catholic Church as a whole is not politically organized for collective action, so the pope does not speak and act in the name of over one billion Catholics. Consequently, there is a very real sense in which the Catholic Church, as a whole, cannot be governed.

This is an undesirable state of affairs for the members of the church of doctrines and rules, less so for the members of the church of devotion and practice. Those who think of the church as a mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant, or community of disciples value obedience to pope and bishops less than those who think of the church as an institution or complex organization.

Some of those who are devoted to the hierarchical church have said that they would like to see a “smaller and purer church,” a phrase that has, probably mistakenly, been attributed to Pope Benedict XVI.[9] But ultimately, if the Roman Catholic Church does become significantly smaller, it will because of voluntary withdrawals, rather than because of the ability of popes and bishops to excommunicate those who dissent or disobey.

Pope Francis will not be able to reduce the diversity within the Roman Catholic Church, a diversity that includes the widespread tendency for lay Catholics, the priests who minister to them, and members of religious orders to think of the church of doctrines and rules as something far removed from, and largely irrelevant to, their daily lives. This inability is not the result of any personal weaknesses on the part of the new pope, or even the result of his conservative views on a number of issues with which Catholics may disagree. More than anything else, it is the necessary consequence of the size and internal structure of the church.

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^[1] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974, 1986, 2000, 2002).

^[2] Jamie Mason, "Pope Francis, women and 'chauvinism with skirts,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, 24 April 2013; available from <http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/pope-francis-women-and-chauvinism-skirts>.

^[3] A copy of *Rerum Novarum* is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html.

^[4] A copy of *Mater et Magistra* is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html.

^[5] Carol Glatz, "Vatican says number of Catholics, priests, bishops worldwide increased," *Catholic News Service*, 12 March 2012; available from <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1200999.htm>.

^[6] Henry Mintzberg, *Mintzberg on Management* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp.131-135.

^[7] John V. Apczynski, "The Impact of Benedict XVI's Resignation on Papal Politics," *e-International Relations*, 23 April 2013; available from <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/23/the-impact-of-benedict-xvis-resignation-on-papal-politics/>.

^[8] *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

^[9] Joseph A. Komonchak, "A smaller but purer Church?," *Commonweal*, 21 October 2010; available from <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/?p=10517>.

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