Opinion
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Analysis

A statue of St. Francis of Assisi is seen outside St. Anthony Church in Butler, N.J., after a snowstorm. (CNS photo/Octavio Duran)

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October 11, 2018

Editor's Note: *This is Part Two of a two-part series. Read Part One here.*

"Lessons to be Learned from the Catholic Church," a study of management practices by the American Institute of Management in the 1940s and updated in 1960 made the following recommendations:

- Avoid nepotism
- Haste in some directions, delay in other
- Use of elderly men in staff capabilities
- Operating efficiency: As of now the atmosphere of the Vatican exudes efficiency. From the time clocks for all personnel to the extraordinarily long hours of the pope himself, one senses an immensity of details is handled quickly and handled well. Great decisions are often made quickly despite the protocol and secrecy. Literally everything is kept under lock and key. The pope (Pius XII) carries the key to his own desk.
- Effectiveness of leadership: the church's recent leadership (John XXIII) has been "extremely effective. The present pope has wisely selected bishops a step above the previous type.
- Fiscal policies: no other organization within our area of knowledge does so much with so little.

Ironically, the word "nepotism" comes from the action of those Cardinals in Rome who heaped benefits on their "nephews."

What the two American Institute of Management reports reflect is a feverish pace inside the Vatican. From my own time as a reporter spent inside the Vatican in 1984, in the Secretariat of State in particular, that appeared to be so.

This, of course, flies in the face of the not unfamiliar and quite justified complaints of dioceses and archdioceses worldwide that they were not receiving prompt — or even eventual — answers to their queries and problems.

Slightly facetiously in the *Forbes* article in 1985, this comparison was drawn: the Roman Curia — which functions both as the administrative center and the church's back office — had 1,800 employees. One bureaucrat for every 450,000 Catholics. Were the U.S. government administrative center and back office to adopt the same ratio at that time, there would have been 511 employees.

Looked at in reverse, the figures may well indicate that the Vatican, post-World War II, was and still is short-staffed, and — relying on the "free" labor of priests and women religious as it did — the staff is overworked. Understaffed and overworked. Neither of those is a recipe for efficiency.

Everything pointed to a Vatican in which the upper echelon was unconstrained except by the pope. The only hope of change inside is from the top down. Everyone else is too busy.

Working conditions inside the Apostolic Palace were cramped. There were no "personal" offices in the American sense, and meetings took place in small rooms. Most Western metropolitan archdioceses have more spacious quarters and many probably have, or had at the time, larger annual budgets.

The declining Vatican workforce mentioned in the 1985 *Forbes* report is now omnipresent in the Western church. So, back to the "what happened?" element, and what did not happen.

Franciscan poverty

After the earliest centuries, the full-blooded commitment to the poor that Jesus proclaimed did not continue. Poverty remained a major topic in church teaching, but in practice, a side issue. The great example of how far the church had strayed is St. Francis of Assisi, who also offered a solution.

According to biographer Adolf Holl, Francis *took the virtue of poverty away from the involuntary poor, and gave it to the wealthy*. He redefined poverty "i*n such a way that only Christians could really appreciate it and aspire to it*." (Italics mine.)

"That was a frightening message for much of the church hierarchy of the day," writes Holl in his book, *The Last Christian: A Biography of Francis of Assisi*, "and remains a frightening one for most Western Christians today."

Francis triggered "a violent ideological crisis in the Church" that "raged over his Testament and ideal of poverty, and its effects on a corrupt society," Holl said. A century after Francis' death, Dante hailed Francis as "the sun risen in Assisi." Three years before Dante's death, the first reformed Franciscans — those who had returned to Francis' lifestyle and preaching — were burned at the stake in Marseilles.

How did the institution handle Franciscan poverty? In a manner of speaking, it buried it. The example is in Assisi itself. Francis' humble little church, La Porziuncola, is wrapped inside a basilica filled with trappings Francis himself spurned.

Francis died as the Church-in-Rome was gearing up to become the premier financial power in Western Europe. By the 15th century — with plans for St. Peter's Basilica underway — the church, according to the authors of *Sacred Trust*: *The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm*, would control 40 percent of Western Europe's most valuable agricultural lands.

Franciscan friars wait for the arrival of Pope Francis outside La Porziuncola, the small stone chapel wrapped inside the Basilica of Santa Maria deli Angeli in Assisi, Italy, in this Oct. 4, 2013, file photo. The chapel was rebuilt by St. Francis. (CNS photo/Stefano Rellandini, Reuters)

Francis had understood what was happening. Jesus had not come to found a community that within 1,500 years could take its place on the Forbes Rich List. Jesus

had not intended the successors of Peter to be extolled as some of history's finest corporate managers by the American Institute of Management. Jesus had founded a community of and for the poor, yet most of its top leaders were wallowing with the wealthy or in personal wealth. Meanwhile, the Church-in-Rome's Vatican ended up as a stop on the Treasure Houses of the World Tour.

Profit centers

During the Middle Ages, the monasteries were manufactories. The profits from beer, wine and leatherware, created in the monks' ingeniously water-powered factories, were funneled to Rome. The church controlled the wool market, a veritable monopoly, and set minimum and maximum prices. The monasteries created wealth at a rate unknown again until the Industrial Revolution.

Money was pouring into Rome, and Rome learned to treat its outlying sources of wealth as corporate divisions. No matter how much money arrived, Rome always needed more — for it was time to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica and create the modern Vatican vista.

Income from indulgences (guarantees of favors from God) became a cheap source of quick wealth with little outlay. Marketing pitches that today's call centers couldn't match scared people into donating money for indulgences to make purgatory less painful and possibly to sidestep hell itself.

The dome of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican is seen from the Aventine Hill in Rome. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

In a classic case of market overreach, the indulgences debacle was key to disaster and led to the Church-in-Rome's losing the Catholic Church's dominion in Northern Europe. Rome had now lost most of its 400 southern Mediterranean dioceses to Islam, "lost" the Eastern Christian Church to Constantinople, and lost Northern Europe to Luther and Protestantism. Today's losses in the Northern and Southern hemisphere are too much in the news to need discussing here.

The Church-in-Rome became accustomed to spending vast amounts of money. To ease its erratic post-Reformation cash flow, it increasingly relied on borrowing, from the Fuggers, who were renowned international bankers and venture capitalists, and then, as the centuries advanced, from the Rothschilds.

Internally, financial reward came for favorite bishops and cardinals through papal preferments: lucrative assignments to lucrative archdioceses, to highly paid sinecures in the Papal Army and other papal service.

Through the centuries, what happened in the Church-in-Rome stayed in the Church-in-Rome. Just as the basilica wrapped around Francis' La Porziuncula, the Vatican wrapped its sheltering walls around its financial and sexual errants.

All this was possible because the Church-in-Rome was and is essentially an all-male cult: costumery, ritual vesting, a preoccupation with minutia, the aim of total control — plus misogyny and secrecy. For centuries the errant cliques prevailed, or lived on in the Vatican shadows. Overall, with sloppy or non-existent internal accounting and the acceptance of sexual predators, the Old Boys Club generally found ways of looking after each other, or looking after themselves, or looking the other way — except for those courageous and obviously generally ignored members who sought change and yet, given the system, could be disregarded or even rebuffed.

Prelates attend Pope Francis' celebration of the opening Mass of the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment at the Vatican Oct 3. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Making the transition in this article from money to sex returns the topic to pedophilia. That topic was hard to write about in 1985, and no less so now; it also was essential to cover in 1985, and no less so now.

One way back into the topic is through Leo X, the de' Medici pope at the time of Martin Luther's Wittenberg 95 theses. There is a debate among historians about Leo's character and conduct. Historian Michael Mullet contends Luther said Leo had vetoed a restriction on the number of boys that cardinals could keep for sexual purposes.

Raising the Mullet-Luther-Leo charge makes the point that pedophilia in the upper circles of the Rome-centered hierarchy was not unknown then or down the ages and was always an equally difficult and inflammatory topic.

Now add celibacy to the mix. The century before Francis of Assisi was born, Rome had imposed mandatory celibacy for priests (Second Lateran Council, 1139). Why celibacy? Money, as usual.

Martin Luther, a German monk, is depicted in this painting at a church in Helsingor, Denmark. (CNS photo/Crosiers)

Celibacy had previously been a gift the potential monk or cleric could offer to God. It had not been a requirement. The first pope, Peter, was a married man, and married priests and bishops existed for the first 1,100-plus years. With celibacy a requirement for ordination, the Church-in-Rome had imposed a limit on sexual activity that many (or, perhaps most?) men find extremely difficult in practice.

The issue was money because, under primogeniture, the sons of bishops and priests had a legal claim on the land and holdings of the priestly "living." Celibacy scotched that at a stroke — and contributed further to an existing problem of clerical sexual activity.

Outside of Rome, throughout the centuries, in seminaries — as in many religious and secular boys' schools and orphanages — the situation was rife for abuse and an attractive possible career situation to those attracted to that form of abuse as a sexual-psychological outlet.

I was a Catholic in a 16th century Anglican boys' school. It was a day school, not a starched-collar, black-jacketed boarding school. But even there one heard Anglican boys — regarding their own parish churches — occasionally utter cautions such as, "you don't go into the choir loft alone with the curate."

The issue, however, is not avoidance. It is abuse, the abuse of many thousands of boys and girls, young men and young women, by Catholic priests worldwide. The abuse robbed victims of their innocence, their trust and their self-worth, while inflicting them with confusion about their own sexual development.

As grotesque as that abuse is, the cover-up by the bishops is "a sin that cries out to Heaven for justice," though not on the list. It reveals the rot at the protect-the-church's-image center. The revelations have hurled a rock through the church's stained-glass-window opaqueness. That window that needs to be replaced with plain glass.

Outside of our Anglican school, Catholics had the Benedictines. We knew we were a minority religion (8 percent), that Catholicism had been proscribed until the previous century, and that we didn't have bishops until the mid-19th century (1850).

What we also learned was that in addition to Saint Benedict as a model, we had three 19th century English Catholic stalwarts:

- Cardinal John Henry Newman: "conscience first."
- Cardinal Henry Edward Manning: "the poor and dispossessed."
- And, to return to the point made at the start of Part One: historian and equerry to Queen Victoria, Lord Acton, who correctly declared: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Which gets to the heart of "What Happened to the Catholic Church?" High and low, from pastor to pope, across the centuries "power tended to corrupt, and absolute power corrupted absolutely."

It is as it was, a culture of power and corruption. Like a pox, there are large and small pustules of power and corruption. The malignant gene runs through almost two millennia. The way the system is set up makes it possible, makes it flourish. Corruption flourishes according to the degree of secrecy — and protection.

That's it. That's what happened to the Catholic Church.

Many voices can contribute to the how of banishing the secrecy in the Catholic Church. Most banishments would take but several strokes of the papal pen.

Mine, for starters:

Transparency at every level. Decision-making by the broadest available spectrum, lay and clerical.

Publish all church accounts everywhere, especially in Rome, and certainly in their entirety. Add in the requirement that cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests must submit an audited account of their own worth and holdings prior to retirement. Most of the money they handle is not theirs, though many treat it as such.

What else? Admit women to the highest offices. That would end the male cult, and create sufficient chaos for a couple of Councils to sort out.

Finally, male or female, permit priests to marry.

Will this, or anything, happen?

Postscript

I have a young friend who recently left to study for the priesthood. Seated next to him in a church pew the day of his leaving, I said to him in this time of uncertainty in Rome, plus the rise of Catholic fundamentalism in the United States, and elsewhere, "You, and those like you, may have to live as latter-day 5th and 6th century monks, glimmers of light in a new Dark Ages, surviving in the modern equivalent of the earlier islands and edges of the inlets, keeping the true flame alight and alive."

[Arthur Jones is a former editor and publisher of NCR.]