

PAPAL STYLE

By Gabriel Moran

From the first days of his papacy Pope Francis caught the attention of the whole world with his moves to get rid of the pope's monarchical trappings. He has continued to do things with the seeming purpose of de-absolutizing the papacy. Papal style refers to the way that the pope has acted in his personal life. No one could have predicted how powerful would be the effect of that stylistic change. In small but consistent ways he has managed to change the attitude of millions of people toward the Catholic Church. He has done the things a pope should do and he has avoided doing things that would slip him back into the wildly inflated role that the pope was given at the First Vatican Council. The brilliant but short rein of Pope John XXIII had begun the process but it was effectively reversed by his three successors. Pope Francis has already had a longer papacy than Pope John but he seems acutely aware that his time is short and that he wishes to provide a shift in direction that will be very difficult for a successor to undo.

Of course, the king's change does not mean that all the king's men share in the mission. The pope's success depends not merely in divesting himself of the personal symbols of a monarch but of eliminating the Vatican bureaucracy's stranglehold on church affairs. Vatican officials do not much care for their loss of power. The Vatican is famous for its centuries of intrigues; the battles during the last three years are probably the stuff of some great mystery novels. At least, the world can be grateful that Pope Francis has not been assassinated. At an event in which the pope was greeting a group of pilgrims, one of them gave the pope some food. The pope's handlers were shocked that he ate it. "Didn't you realize that the food might have been poisoned," they asked the pope. "Oh, come on," the pope replied, "they were pilgrims, not cardinals." He was joking – right?

An example of how the Vatican bureaucracy can be quietly undone is the change in the process of what the Catholic Church calls "annulment." At the 2014 synod, a proposed change which did not draw much notice was the recommendation that annulment of marriage could be carried out by the local bishop. The annulment process has been one of the biggest scandals in the Catholic Church for decades, if not centuries. It was widely known that if you had enough money and influence you could get an annulment of a marriage. Legions of lawyers were employed to keep up the pretense that the Catholic Church does not recognize divorce. For the millions of ordinary Catholics who lacked the money and the patience to go through Rome's annulment process, a civil divorce was their only alternative. The official Catholic Church is slowly finding its way to admitting that some marriages never took hold, other marriages have died. Divorce has many different meanings but for some people it can be a positive step. For many years to come, the official Catholic Church will continue to talk about annulment but the result will be indistinguishable from what everyone else calls divorce.

Style, besides a way of acting, is a term that applies to how a person uses written language. I am less enthusiastic about this pope's style when it comes to his published documents. One tendency seems to be that the documents keep getting longer. That fact can indicate increasing precision in what is written; it can also be a sign of covering up problems that are unclear or questions that one is trying to avoid. The most recent document, *Amoris Laetitia*, is 57,000 words or 256 pages. That is one and a half times as long as *Laudato si* which was already too long. I don't think the pope

should do his teaching via Twitter but his one-liners have been more effective than his prolix style of writing.

The first major document that Pope Francis did, *Evangelii Gaudium*, had a relatively brief section that was a direct hit on the bad aspects of capitalism. His criticism was dismissed by rich U. S. Catholics (as well as the Cardinal of New York) who said that the pope did not understand the glorious workings of the capitalist system in the United States. The pope did not try to get into the intricacies of economic theory. He stood on the firm ground of condemning the unlimited greed of people who seem to think that they need a few billion dollars to be happy. There is no direct connection between the papal letter and economic protests that have arisen in the last couple of years in the United States, but the pope's clear call was important to anyone receptive to what he said.

The pope's encyclical on the environment, *Laudat si*, was a greatly anticipated document. In fact, people were lined up for and against the document long before it was published. That was not a good sign. The premise seemed to be that the papal encyclical would or would not be an endorsement of the science of climate change. The news media mainly responded to the actual publication by saying he had voted yes. But why take 37,000 words to vote yes? The encyclical's main point seemed to be the pope's attempt to link the environmental movement and the problem of world poverty. But I am afraid that point was largely obscured in the document's mix of environmental concerns, biblical exegesis, and theological doctrines. The document was an attempt to speak to a worldwide audience about an issue of universal concern. Hence, style was crucial. I think commentators were polite enough that they did not say that most of the document was a dud. As papal encyclicals go, it wasn't particularly bad style but papal documents, as Cardinal Schönborn joked, "do not belong to one of the most accessible literary genres."

In *Laudato si* there were a couple of important points that needed to be made about the environmental movement and its relation to the Catholic Church. The pope was unaware or chose to ignore that the environmental movement has from the beginning been set in opposition to what it calls "Judeo-Christian tradition." Instead of taking apart that concocted ideological term of the 1890s, the pope actually used it three times in the document. Instead of criticizing the charge of "anthropocentrism," the pope simply used the term with a twist that suggested he was unacquainted with how the term has been at the center of the attack on "Judeo-Christian tradition." The environmental claim that Christianity is the cause of our environmental problems is centered on a single text of the bible: "God gave man dominion over the earth" (Gen.1:28). The encyclical goes on for a dozen pages of biblical exegesis without confronting the problem simply and directly.

The document *Amoris Laetitia* is almost entirely about Catholic Church affairs. Even here, however, there is interest in some of these concerns because the Catholic Church has great direct and indirect influence on public policies. The recent synod was miles apart from previous synods that were scripted affairs without even the hint of surprise. With the pope's encouragement, the recent synod engaged in fairly open discussions that inevitably involved some infighting by opposing sides. The synod's theme was the family, a topic on which Catholic bishops would not

seem to be especially knowledgeable. And unlike Vatican II, the bishops at the synod were on their own without the “experts” who largely determined the direction of Vatican II.

The bishops of the synod as well as the pope continue to avoid the elephant sitting in the middle of the room, namely, the ban on “contraceptives.” Most members of the U.S. Catholic Church have decided, based on their experience and consciences, that the official position makes no sense. The only question is how to reconcile the official teaching with what has been decided by the people involved. The pope’s letter has this startling sentence: “Not all doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by intervention of the magisterium.” That last word is the obscurantism by which bishops refer to themselves. What the pope seems to endorse here is that the official doctrine of the Catholic Church has been changed by the people with no help from the bishops.

The pope recently pronounced that contraceptives might be used in the midst of a Zika epidemic because contraceptives “are not an absolute evil.” Some of the press hailed this statement as a step forward. Perhaps it is the best that this pope can do and it is in fact consistent with the way that church doctrine in the past has often changed. But in the glare of today’s news media the approach hardly seems up to the challenge which Catholic Church officials face of admitting that not only are contraceptives not an “absolute evil” but that they are a moral necessity, especially in the poverty stricken parts of the world which the pope is so concerned with. The pope’s encyclical on the environment was undermined by his statement that for eliminating poverty “some can only propose a reduction in the birth rate.” Perhaps there are people who simplistically think that distributing condoms is a cure for poverty but almost everyone deeply involved in the issue thinks that control of births is an indispensable element of any solutions to poverty. And they see the Catholic Church’s official policy to be a big obstacle.

The pope makes an admirable effort in this latest document to understand what is going on among women throughout the world. He says that “we must see in the women’s movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.” That is a giant step in papal rhetoric even if it is still unclear that the pope grasps what the women’s movement is calling for in equality of treatment for women. It is hardly surprising that a pope lacks experience, knowledge, and understanding of women. But where are the women advisers when it comes to publishing a document on the family. Surely, someone – even a man – should have recognized that the title of paragraph 9, “You and your wife,” would not go over well with the people who make up a majority of the Catholic Church.

It was a great surprise in 2014 when the synod brought up homosexuality as a topic to discuss at a meeting whose theme was the family. The final reports of the discussion were disappointing to people who had been encouraged by the first week of the 2014 meeting. Apparently, a small group of bishops were able to get out for public consumption a very positive statement about homosexuality, including adoption by gay and lesbian couples. The majority of bishops were horrified at those ideas and succeeded in keeping the final reports of the synod firmly under their control. But the discussion of homosexuality acknowledges its existence; that’s actually new. It may still take a long while but the official Catholic Church is inevitably on the way to the acceptance of homosexuality.

The key to this shift toward acceptance is two changes of language: First, the pope's use of the word "gay" (even though the synod reports still talk of "the homosexuals" as if gay people were an alien species). Second, more important was the admission of the term "homosexual orientation" in the synod reports and *Amoris Laetitia*. The press entirely missed the significance of this language. Vatican documents had previously cited the term "homosexual orientation" only to condemn it. The Vatican had insisted that homosexuality is an "objective disorder," and therefore homosexual behavior could only be understood as an (unnatural) perversion of the sexual faculty. In contrast, if people have a "homosexual orientation," then homosexual activity is a (natural) expression of the person's life. In the logic of the Catholic Church's sacramental principle, a person's inward life should be able to find external expression. Many bishops were probably unaware of the significance of "homosexual orientation" but there is no going back.

The synod report was unnecessarily harsh in condemning same sex marriage; and the pope simply repeated the synod's words: "There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family" There is not much point, however, in discussing the church's attitude to same-sex marriage. The prior question is gay and lesbian sex. The pope has some surprisingly positive things to say about sexuality and the value of the "erotic" but his imagination in this area may be limited. He opposes the teaching of "safe sex" because it is "as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against." An "eventual child" is not an enemy but surely not what most seventeen-year-olds can manage. If homosexual behavior were accepted then one might have an interesting discussion about same sex marriage. The pope says unions that are closed to the transmission of new life should not be recognized as marriage. I do not know where that leaves sixty-year old heterosexual couples or infertile couples of any age.

The issue of communion for divorced and remarried Catholics is of intense interest to millions of Catholics but not of much concern for the rest of the world. The issue has been left ambiguous by the synod and the pope. There seems to be a willingness on this point to be flexible depending on the situation of individuals. An emphasis on local situations, including a person's conscience, would seem to be a healthy direction. The only drawback is the possible arbitrariness of local priests deciding on who is worthy of communion. Bishops who are adamant in opposing any change have logic on their side. Admitting "adulterers" to communion is a stark change in doctrine not simply a matter of pastoral compassion. Most likely the plea of mercy to sinners will eventually lead to a change of doctrines.

The pope says at the beginning of the document that "no one can be condemned forever." The doctrine of hell has apparently been rescinded.