

Catholic Review Column: The Joy of the Gospel, Part 4 of 9

Last week, nearly 3,000 people gathered at Loyola University Maryland's Reitz Arena for a symposium we sponsored to celebrate the first anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. "The Francis Factor" featured Cardinal Seán O'Malley of Boston and four panelists who offered much insight into the life and ministry of Pope Francis. By all accounts, their efforts were well received.

One of the reasons Pope Francis generates so much enthusiasm is that he "walks the walk." As we have seen, the pope is urging us to revitalize and awaken our parishes and dioceses with the spirit of the Gospel. But he doesn't stop there. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), which we've been examining these past few weeks, the pope also speaks of doing the same for the papacy: "Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy" (EG, no. 32). What is the "conversion" to which he refers? It means that the way in which the papacy is exercised makes clear that it is wholly dedicated to spreading the Gospel and bringing greater unity in the church and among all of Christ's followers. It means holding fast to what is essential to the papacy while recognizing the new pastoral challenges which the church is facing in Rome and around the world.

This is no idle wish on the part of Pope Francis. On the contrary, he is already making important changes. He convened an international group of eight cardinals, including Cardinal O'Malley, to advise him in the work of reforming the Roman Curia so that it will exercise its responsibilities in ways that will truly foster the life and vitality of the church in countries throughout the world. He seeks to strike the right balance between the central authority of the church and that which is exercised more locally.

Already we are seeing results. You may have read that the Holy Father has established a new "secretariat for the economy" and named Cardinal George Pell of Australia to lead it. This new office is strengthened by the advice and participation of financial and managerial experts from various places. Its purpose is to oversee

Vatican finances in a sound and transparent manner. No doubt other changes are on the way.

There are many who carry out their work in Vatican offices with great dedication to the church's essential mission of spreading the Gospel. It is amazing how a small group of people can manage a Vatican department that has a worldwide reach, deals in multiple languages and cultures and addresses situations that vary widely from country to country. The prospect of significant change can be unsettling to any such group. Yet the prospect of orienting one's daily work more directly to the spread of the Gospel outweighs any uncertainty that rapid change may bring.

In seeking the right balance between the central authority of the church and a more local exercise of church authority, Pope Francis mentions the episcopal conferences. Our country's episcopal conference is the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Its current president is Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville and all active bishops in the United States are members. The conference enables the bishops of our country to consult and work with the laity, including experts, and with one another in addressing challenges and opportunities the church faces nationally. It also helps the Holy See understand the situation of the church in these United States. One of the overarching priorities of the USCCB is indeed evangelization, the need to dedicate ourselves to the Gospel and to marshal all our resources to spread it under the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It seems that the Holy Father is contemplating an even greater role for episcopal conferences. How such an expanded role could take shape remains to be seen.

Pope Francis is inviting us "to be bold and creative in the task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in (our) respective communities" (EG, no. 33). What is more, he is urging us to do this together, not as members of factions or as lone rangers. "The important thing," he says, "is not to walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment" (EG, no 33).