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# The FURROW

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## The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis: *A Note from Organisational Theory*

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As the first non-European to ascend the Throne of St Peter for many centuries Pope Francis was not imbued with the closed culture of the Vatican operating significant change within the Church.

On embarking on this change process within the Catholic Church, Pope Francis has looked to the idea of employing the Inverted Triangle, a change tool which is widely used with varying degrees of success in all sectors of a modern economy. Fr. Gerry O'Hanlon SJ<sup>1</sup> describes in the clearest terms possible the struggle the Holy Father is having in getting the Vatican and thus the Church to come into the 21st Century in terms of Goals, Vision, Message, and the delivery of God's Message within a modern setting. O'Hanlon comments on the Inverted Triangle and it is the intention of the writers that this note will explain the uses of this and other tools of organisational theory as they might be applied to the power structures within the Church, and to share our experience of the essential elements in the process – and strategies to be employed for any possibility of success and change to occur.

Before inverting the triangle, it has to be considered in its natural state where the Chief Executive or other titled senior manager sits at the apex. Below this sit all the other employees of various degrees of seniority, with titles such as Deputy Manager, Assistant Manager, and so on, down to the bottom line where you find the poor Front Line Workers. Yet they are the ones who face the customers or users of the service so could be seen as having the most important job in the company - and having the greatest impact on its image. They are paid the least, get orders from the levels above them, and in general are told what to do and avoid thinking. Examples of this include the Armed Forces, the Civil Service, Local Authorities, large private sector organisations, and

1 O'Hanlon, G., *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis. A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland?* Messenger Publications, Dublin, 2018.

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of course the National Health Service. This applies to the UK only, surely.

This method of running an organisation was absolutely fine for the world in the early twentieth century. Everybody knew their place and did as they were told. However, from the 1970s this has been changing and a move to a more questioning and challenging attitude is more appropriate.

The answer to this changing environment was conceived to be inverting the triangle so that the apex was at the bottom with the triangle spread out from it. Here the chief saw his role as server to the layer above him, the deputy chief(s), so as to enable them to perform their function better. They in turn sought to serve their subordinates and so on up to the front line where the workers now have the whole organisation working to enable them to perform the task of serving the customer/user to their entire satisfaction. Thus, the organisation became outward looking and fit to compete in modern times. The intention was to make the organisation more customer friendly by making it a better and more outward looking place to work.

While the Inverted Triangle is wonderful in theory more is needed. In the sphere of the Church all that would happen is that the Holy Father would be at the bottom of the triangle trying to assist the Cardinals to assist the Archbishops to assist the Bishops to assist the Monsignors, and other ranking clerics to assist the Parish Clergy in helping the Faithful receive the message of the Good News. A brilliant idea but without additional changes it is unlikely to happen. On its own, inverting the triangle will not work to create the collegiate Church desired by the Holy Father and by many in the pews. That, together with additional changes may be necessary, but will not be easy.

There are two changes necessary to complete the movement away from the Ultra Montane structure that is the Church today if it is to become the synodal Church many dream of seeing. These are:

- first*, de-layering the triangle, and
- second*, changing the culture within the entire Church.

### DELAYERING

In the private sector *delayering* has involved the removal of layers such as Deputy Manager, Assistant Manager, and many more. Every level that exists in the chain of command can provide an opportunity to make a mistake in the message to achieve the object of the enterprise. In commercial enterprises the primary concern is profit; for the church it will be an understanding of the message

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of the Gospel. Complex, multi-layered organisations can become preoccupied with their system and lose clarity in achieving their purpose. Mistakes can be either accidental or deliberate. Delaying can, however, have its problems if not done with sufficient thought. For example, in Scotland, Lothian and Borders Police removed the rank of Deputy Chief Constable only to reinstate it after a few months. They came to understand that the Deputy Chief Constable played a crucial role in coordinating actions across a large force. It is too easy to assume that because you have reduced layers it will be right and appropriate. In this case it was neither.

One of the best examples of the use of delayering was at General Electric (the 21st-largest firm in the United States) under Jack Welch. He removed some 10,000 managers and increased the return to shareholders by 5000% during his twenty or so years in charge. Delayering for him was a strategic choice to be pursued relentlessly with careful planning, and as such it worked.

The less complicated the interconnections within the organisation the better the chances are of avoiding mistakes. This is illustrated by the addition of the concept of '*silo management*' within the triangle where there are numerous separate departments, each with their own chain of command. It is this command system which supports and maintains the triangle, whether or not the triangle is inverted. Inversion does not remove the silo management process. Apart from being visible, it is a state of mind. In this system, commands come down and are obeyed. Within the Church this system reflects the way in which previous Popes have made decisions which are then carried out by the Church; it is a top-down approach.

### CULTURE CHANGE

In order to create the collegiate Church the Pope wishes to see, difficult changes have to be made. The old system which supports the traditional approach has to alter. This is likely to encounter fierce resistance. In addition, culture change of the required magnitude takes *time*; perhaps more time than will be allowed to the present Pope. He is already in his eighties. The way to ensure the change process continues beyond his term is to appoint reform-minded prelates to positions of importance within the Curia in sufficient numbers to maintain change of direction. As noted below he is doing this and will continue to do so.

### RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

It is naïve to think that the bureaucrats of the Vatican would suddenly and easily surrender power. Resistance will come from many quarters, not least from those who have prospered under the

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previous system and who have no intention of giving up on their hard-won privileges. There will be many within the higher ranks of the Church, and also the lower levels, who like the present silo system and will do their utmost to keep their silos in place.

There are many different approaches to trying to deal with this resistance. None of them is certain of success but if not attempted and won then there is unlikely to be much change. The following ideas, based on organisational behaviour theory, might be suggested:

- ▶ address the attitude towards change of the people about to be involved in the process of change,
- ▶ realise and affirm the singular role of the senior managers in their commitment to the process, and
- ▶ avoid the mistakes of Vatican II (see below).

## ATTITUDES TO CHANGE

People have a variety of attitudes towards change. In any collection of involved or concerned people, 10% will be all for the change, 10% will oppose it at any level and 80% will sit on the fence to see which side is gaining the upper hand before deciding which side to join. The task of the *change leader*, in this case the Holy Father, is to ensure that the Side of the Angels, that is the reformers, is seen to be winning. Sadly, the thoughts contained in Querida Amazonia<sup>2</sup> may not be the outcome wanted by those who support reform in the Church. Christopher Lamb's recent book, *The Outsider*<sup>3</sup>, illustrates clearly the extent of that resistance and the damage it is doing to the Church. In addition, the forces of resistance are becoming more desperate over time. The College of Cardinals, however, is now composed of a majority appointed by Pope Francis, and thus the reformation might succeed despite the resistance. The resisters know this and are increasing their attempts to stop the process. As to how far they will go, the recent writings of Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano<sup>4</sup> suggest they will go a very long (and dangerous) way.

- 2 Libreria Editrice Vaticana (2020) Querida Amazonia of the Holy Father Francis to the people of God and to all persons of good will. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html) (Last accessed 2 December 2020)
- 3 Lamb, C., *The Outsider - Pope Francis and his battle to reform the Church*. Orbis Books, New York, 2020.
- 4 'Archbishop Vigano is aligning with Trump to stay in the spotlight. Pay him no attention'. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/06/12/archbishop-vigano-aligning-trump-stay-spotlight-pay-him-no-attention> (Last accessed 2 December 2020)

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### THE ROLE OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Key people at the top must side with the change process and the desired outcome if it is to be successful. This is true of all organisations at all times. This is the hardest task facing any chief executive who seeks change. The Pope will need a Curia which is on his wavelength, and he is not certain to get that. He has started the process of making them his supporters by sending signals that the world has changed, and that any resistance will be opposed.

*One* clear signal which has supported change is the appointment of reform-minded clergy to positions of influence with the Vatican. That signal will have resounded around the world and the message should be clearly understood. A *second* powerful signal is the replacement of Cardinals within the Vatican who have not bought into the Pope's ideas. They have been found jobs in their home countries. These two moves, straight out of the Organisational Theory textbook, are getting the ball rolling.

### AVOIDING THE MISTAKES OF VATICAN II

According to O'Malley<sup>5</sup>, in the opening phase of the Vatican II there were a multitude of notes and consultative papers that emerged over a very short time, and thus blunted the edge of the change process. This also allowed opponents of change all the material they needed to slow down or subvert the process. Further, the structure of the Council was impossible to comprehend. "The organisational chart of Vatican II was so complex as to defy a depiction", commented O'Malley. In modern parlance perhaps the message to the reformers of today would be '*Keep it Simple*' as was the mantra of Bill Clinton: if it is simple, then it is understandable. O'Malley compares the attitudes of the minority of the Council, who were against reform and who were Vatican-based in the main, with the many who laboured at the periphery of the Church and who supported reform. The '*centre knows best*', and those outside of it are of little import, was the attitude of those against reform. This is also common in many large organisations. Just ask a General Practitioner within the NHS how they are regarded by hospital-based consultants.

In addition to these direct attempts to further the revolution, below are possible options from Organisational Theory which offer interesting possibilities:

- ▶ Top-management people become positive *role-models* as suggested above, by the appointment of reform-minded clergy.

5 O'Malley, J. W., *What Happened at Vatican II?* Belknap/Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2008.

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- ▶ The organisation must select, promote, and support employees who espouse the new values, which will mean the promotion of the supporters of change. Perhaps the recent appointment of Ruth Kelly and five other females to the new Council to oversee Vatican finances could be counted as an effort in this direction by the Pope.
- ▶ There should be a shakeup of current *subcultures* through, for example transfers and terminations, as suggested above.
- ▶ There should be peer group consensus via staff participation or via a collegiate system.

## CHANGING THE ORGANISATION CULTURE

In addition to the points above, Pope Francis will have to reset the culture of the Church. By ‘*culture*’ we mean how the underlying beliefs, values and principles are expressed and are incorporated in the ways in which people interact within the organisation.

*First*, it must be recognised that changing the culture of any organisation is not easy. Managers of a commercial organisation can attempt to modify the *visible* aspects of culture, such as language, stories, and rites. These can be applied by the Pope to the Church, but it will take drastic action to reframe the *underlying* values and assumptions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Organisational Behaviour suggests ways in which change can be achieved, or at least attempted, by the Church. These could include:

- ▶ Change the *people* in the organisation - a more varied entry to the priesthood - perhaps married priests or an expanded Diaconate.
- ▶ Change *people’s position* in the organisation - using the models of orders like the Dominicans where no appointment to a managerial post is other than temporary and that the holder will return to the ranks after a specific stated period of time.
- ▶ Change *beliefs, attitudes and values* - develop open discussion of attitudes to various subgroups such as gay people, the role of women within the church, and others.
- ▶ Change *people’s behaviour* - a less clerical approach to the people in the parishes.
- ▶ Change *systems and structures*.
- ▶ Change the corporate *image* - a more caring and open church.

All of these could be implemented by Pope Francis over time - and indeed the Church would benefit from some or all of these.

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*Secondly*, an institution can become a “*learning organisation*”<sup>6</sup>. A learning organisation is one that has developed the continuous capacity to adapt and change. The characteristics of a learning organisation include:

- ▶ There is a changed vision that everyone agrees on.
- ▶ People discard their old ways of thinking and the standard routines they use for solving problems or doing their jobs.
- ▶ Members think of all organisation processes, activities, functions and interactions within the environment, as part of a system of interrelationships.
- ▶ People openly communicate with each other (across vertical and horizontal boundaries) without fear of criticism or punishment.
- ▶ People sublimate their personal self-interest and fragmented departmental interests to work together to achieve the organisation’s shared vision.

It may be difficult for the Church to use the methods of a learning organisation. Applying some of these techniques will not give an instant change in culture; that takes years. But it can be done and should be attempted by Pope Francis.

### CONCLUSION

The process of changing the Church in order to create a vibrant, growing and relevant body is not easy. That it is *essential* is shown by examining the attendances at Mass among Catholics. In many countries fewer than 10% of Catholics attend Mass regularly. In the private sector the silo system of management with layers of bureaucracy has reduced profits and led to the collapse of many organisations. How much more important is it that the decline in active Catholics is heeded before the Church is reduced to a mere sect? The inverted triangle is a *start* but it has to be accompanied by massive changes in culture.

6 Senge, P. M, *The Fifth Discipline*, New York: Doubleday, 1990.