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Comment: *Praedicate Evangelium*

On March 19 of this year Pope Francis promulgated the text of an Apostolic Constitution called *Praedicate Evangelium* ('Preach the Gospel'). Its provisions come into effect in June 2022 on the Solemnity of Pentecost. The Constitution amounts to a reform of the Roman Curia of the Holy See (a collection of administrative departments assisting the Pope in the government of the Catholic Church). Such reforms have taken place in the past. Most recently, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II turned their attention to the Curia in two Apostolic Constitutions: *Regimini Ecclesiae Universae* (1967) and *Pastor Bonus* (1988). But *Praedicate Evangelium* breaks new ground and deserves to be noticed even by Catholics with no special taste for Roman Curial matters. It also needs to be noticed by non-Catholics who think that the Roman Catholic Church is unable to act as a responsible and rational organization in the 21st century.

Collegial work leading to *Praedicate Evangelium* started soon after the election of Pope Francis in 2013. The Constitution displays a special regard to the teachings of Vatican II and has, as its context, several problems about which Catholics should be concerned. One of these is the number of people who have left the Church in recent years. Another is the worldwide drop in vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Yet another is the much reported child abuse scandal and the reaction to it by reflective people everywhere. *Praedicate Evangelium* seeks to address these challenges, and others, so as to improve the effectiveness and credibility of the Church as a whole.

Right at the start of the Constitution the emphasis is on faithfully putting into practice the evangelical mission of the Church considered as reflecting the life and teachings of Christ. The document then goes on to observe that obedience to this mission requires that all Christians ('the People of God') should listen to each other and learn from each other. That such a reference to listening and learning is not merely platitudinous is clear from the fact that *Predicate Evangelium* continues by stating in detail how the proper pursuit of the Church's mission must now be practiced by the Curia.

For example, the Constitution explicitly recognizes that lay people (including women) should be involved in the governing of the Church. It does so by stating that popes, bishops, and ordained ministers are not the only preachers of the Gospel and that any member of the faithful may preside over a body within the Curia, which seems to imply that lay people can chair most Vatican offices. The idea that any Catholic

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can function as a Christian teacher is not new, since in 2021 Pope Francis established a lay ministry of 'Catechist' in his 2021 Apostolic Letter *Antiquum Ministerium*. But *Praedicate Evangelium*'s approach to lay people (including women) in the Curia has no precedent and is therefore 'big news'.

A related change to the recent curial *status quo* noted in *Praedicate Evangelium* is a revised way of listing what used to be called Vatican congregations and councils. These are now all referred to as 'dicasteries' (the term is not a recent invention), which are to be understood as juridically equal. Thus, for example, the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples have become the Dicastery for Evangelization. Again, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is now the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and includes what was previously the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. This new listing in terms of dicasteries might not be thought to be of major significance. But it is worth noting that *Praedicate Evangelicum* talks about the work of the Dicastery for Evangelization before it turns to that of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which seems to indicate that the new Constitution has in mind a *theological* ranking of dicasteries if not a *legal* one. The idea seems to be that the Church should be worrying more about how it is functioning well as faithful to Vatican II rather than being obsessed about ways in which academic theologians might be (rightly or wrongly) criticized or censored for what they have written.

Much of *Praedicate Evangelium* draws on previous comparable constitutions and reflects changes already implemented by Pope Francis. But much of it is innovative, and its tone indicates that Pope Francis is serious about implementing Vatican II in a way that Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI seemed to many to shy away from. It makes clear that the goals of Vatican II should be those of the Curia. And it seriously challenges a long prevailing view according to which governance in the Church comes only with the grace of ordination. In this sense, the Constitution can be read as an attempt to debunk clericalism, if 'clericalism' is taken to assume that it is only priests, bishops, and cardinals who are truly qualified to govern the Church and the people who make it up. It is also worth noting that *Praedicate Evangelium* manifestly favours synodality (if 'synodality' is understood as the attempt to decentralize when it comes to the way the Church functions and to foster collaboration between bishops and lay people).

Are all of the Constitution's legislations wise and likely to advance the cause of preaching the Gospel to good effect? *Praedicate Evangelicum* has yet to be put into practice, but worries about it have already been raised.

Take, for example, the decision to place the former Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors within the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. Marie Collins, a founder member of the Pontifical

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Commission for the Protection of Minors, has recently described this change as likely to erode the significance of that body. By contrast, Cardinal O'Malley of Boston has praised the change as 'for the first time' making safeguarding and the protection of minors a fundamental part of the church's central government. Only time will tell which of these thinkers has correctly diagnosed the future significance of the change now in question.

Again on the 'worry' front, it has been suggested that the inclusiveness of the laity when it comes to the Curia is not practical for financial reasons. The Church has long relied on clerics when it comes to curial positions, and one should remember that clerics are 'cheap labor' who are not demanding a competitive salary. So, it has been asked whether the Vatican can afford to pay the kind of lay people that *Praedicate Evangelium* would ideally like to see in the Curia. This question (and it is not a silly one) has been raised by Fr. Thomas Reese in the American *National Catholic Reporter*. I might add that Fr Reese also says: 'Having laypeople in top jobs will not magically change the church for the better. Laypeople bring their own values and baggage to their jobs. As parishioners know, lay ministers can be just as clerical and authoritarian as priests'. Room for thought there, indeed.

Still, *Praedicate Evangelium* is certainly striving to apply Vatican II to the situation in which the Church now finds itself. And it is notable for its openness to lay people. Some self-professed Catholics now seem to be suspicious of Vatican II and will doubtless regard the new Curial reform as mistaken because of its attempts to adhere to the aspirations of that Council. Such people are also likely to reject *Praedicate Evangelium*'s view of the laity and its place in the Church. But there is certainly a case to be made on the other side when it comes to lay people in the Church. This case was famously made by Cardinal (now Saint) John Henry Newman in his 1895 essay 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine'. That text was controversial following its publication. Some people thought that it was saying that any layperson is as competent to decide on doctrinal matters as are the most distinguished and orthodox theologians of the Church. But such was not Newman's line. His point was that the health of the Church depends on the faithful and their pastors to be working together, which is exactly what *Praedicate Evangelium* seems to be saying.

Brian Davies OP
bd01725@gmail.com

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