

## Vatican Diary / Future curia, old project

The document is from 1931. Its author may have been a Dutch cardinal. The reforms that are awaited were already all there. And the criticisms were also the same as today, if not tougher

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VATICAN CITY, April 25, 2013 – A curia with "more representation and a more collegial government." A curia with "dialogue and bi-directional communications in a modern and efficient organization." A curia with a full "re-evaluation of the episcopal office". A curia with "above all: fewer Italians."

These would seem to be the lines of action of that reform of the curia which Pope Francis has set in motion - including through the constitution of a group of eight cardinal advisors - to apply the indications of the cardinals who elected him, formulated in the general congregations that preceded the conclave.

In reality, this program is not a response to the curial dysfunction that manifested itself in a dramatic way during the pontificate of Benedict XVI.

It is an older program. Much older. From thirty years before even Vatican Council II.

To understand better how the problems and criticisms of the Roman curia did not emerge with pope Joseph Ratzinger, it is enough to leaf through a recently published book, a miscellany in honor of the Jesuit historian Marcel Chappin for his 70th birthday, edited by the professors Paul van Geest, Dutch, and Roberto Regoli, Italian.

The work in question, in fact, published by the Vatican Secret Archive of which Chappin was vice-prefect in recent years, hosts a curious and interesting contribution from Hans de Valk that analyzes an anonymous document compiled in 1931 and entitled "De quibusdam rebus in ecclesiastico regimine emendandis": "Some matters that should be improved in the government of the Church."

It is a text of around twenty pages that scholars found in certain ecclesiastical archives (including the Vatican Secret Archive) in Latin and German versions, bearing the signature of "Paulus Bernardus a S. Catharina," a pseudonym believed to conceal - although the proofs are not definitive - the Dutch Willem Marinus van Rossum (1854-1932, in the photo), a Redemptorist, made a cardinal by Pius X in 1911 and prefect of "Propaganda Fide" with Benedict XV and Pius XI.

"Proposals for a reform of the curia, however" – de Valk writes in his essay – "are as old as the seven hills" of Rome. And in effect, before analyzing the document from 1931, he recalls how already at the beginning of the twentieth century there had blossomed programs for the reform of the curia. And he emphasizes how they came from both progressive and traditional circles.

The depiction of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that emerges from the document of 1931 is merciless. Here is how de Valk summarizes it:

"Most of the bishops, instead of being the strong characters presently needed, dynamic and active personalities, even if indeed pious and religious men are in effect at the same time mediocre, or even below mediocrity. Some are apathetic, timid, indolent or vain; others are conformists, bureaucrats or introverts; many are ignorant and clumsy administrators. [...]. Sometimes the whole episcopate of a country looks like a bunch of cripples".

De Valk reproduces in a footnote the original Latin, which is even more colorful:

"Aliquando autem totus episcopatus alicuius nationis ita est compositus, veluti si coecorum, claudorum et infirmorum omne genus esset refugium."

And he adds that "the problem is aggravated by the Holy See's tendency to appoint only obedient and complacent prelates."

Just as merciless is the depiction that the document makes of the college of cardinals. De Valk reports:

"As for the cardinals, the senate of the Church and the electors of the pope, here the situation is even worse, particularly in the case of those attached to the Roman curia. The sacred college contains too many non-entities who have reached their rank by never asking awkward questions. The merit of many eminences is not their excellent pastoral experience or learning, but that of having staffed a Vatican desk for a very long time. Without any real knowledge of the world or the life of the universal Church, they are nevertheless automatically promoted and placed in executive jobs far above their modest talents."

Particularly ferocious is the criticism of the excessive Italian composition of the curia. De Valk reports:

"Almost half of the cardinals and the great majority of the curial ones are Italians, as if the Holy Ghost had a distinct preference for the Italian nation ("veluti si solos Italos Spiritus Sanctus dignos invenerit ut eos tamquam S. Pontificis et proximos consultores et electores illustraret"). This only aggravates the matter, for even if Italians may have many talents, they are certainly not noted for their organizational skills. For the universal Church, this is at the same time both an insult and an injustice. The few excellent foreign prelates present in the curia are examples of what the alternative might look like."

The document of 1931 does not spare even the pontiffs, seeing that "since the nineteenth century the papal throne has been graced by a series of mediocre popes with the possible exception of Leo XIII."

But in the face of this picture, what are the proposals for reform delineated by "Paulus Bernardus," that is (perhaps) Cardinal van Rossum?

Here is how de Valk presents them, for the bishops:

"Radical changes are needed in the system of recruitment or election [of the bishops and cardinals]. The appointment of bishops should not be left exclusively to the Holy See, where generally the candidates are little known, while the information provided is often biased or unreliable."

And for the cardinals:

"To emphasize the universal character of the Church, the sacred college should be internationalized by spreading its membership more evenly, while the number of Italian cardinals needs to be reduced drastically. The international character of the Roman curia as a whole should be promoted. Next, the so-called 'loca cardinalitia' must be abolished. Only real princes of the Church, known for their outstanding qualities, should be raised to the

scarlet: that is, learned, pious and zealous men, who know the world, are experienced, well-informed and therefore able to act as real counsel to the pope."

As for the governance of the universal Church, the anonymous drafter of the document complains that "the pope, the secretary of state or his substitute decide everything, thus providing them with a workload humanly impossible to finish. Combined with the ever-growing amount of business and the exaggerated propensity for secrecy, this can only result in delaying even the most urgent affairs."

Among the remedies, the document of 1931 expresses the hope that "more space, therefore, should be given to the time-honoured system of the collegial government."

Moreover, the curial staff "should be increased by adding internationally selected experts, so that they can act and react quickly; new channels of communication will be opened up as well, to prevent that only one-sided and biased information reaches the Holy See. In this way, the state of affairs in the universal Church can be monitored more closely and it will be easier to communicate with the bishops, leading and admonishing them if necessary."

This is a matter of proposals for reform that now date back to more than eighty years ago. Vatican Council II made some of them its own.

For his part, de Valk writes that Paul VI in 1967 and John Paul II in 1988 with their restructurings of the Roman curia "have indeed carried out several of these reforms" called for in the document of 1931.

Many, but not all. Will it be Pope Francis who realizes those which are lacking?

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The book:

"Suavis laborum memoria. Church, Papacy, Roman Curia between History and Theology. Essays in honor of Marcel Chappin SJ on His 70° Birthday", edited by Paul van Geest - Roberto Regoli, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Città del Vaticano, 2013, pp, 618, euro 35.00.

Pages 183-205 of the book with the essay by Hans de Valk are entitled: "'Some matters that should be improved in the government of the Church.' A remarkable proposal for the reform of the Roman curia, 1931."

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English translation by Matthew Sherry, Ballwin, Missouri, U.S.A.

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For more news and commentary, see the blog that Sandro Magister maintains, available only in Italian:

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