Could Pope Francis be any clearer about his vision for the church?

Robert Mickens | Feb. 16, 2015 A Roman Observer

Consistory 2015

It would have been fascinating to be a fly on the wall on Sunday in any number of Rome's restaurants or private dining rooms where clerics gathered for their midday pranzo. Without a doubt, first course for most of them was the extraordinary homily Pope Francis gave just a couple of hours earlier at Mass in St. Peter's Basilica with his newly fortified College of Cardinals. Depending on the wall, the conversion would have been either stomach-churning or quite inviting.

Those clerics who are troubled by or pretend not to understand what Francis is "up to" -- no matter what color their dress or which rung of the ecclesiastical ladder they stand on -- were certainly not raising their glasses to toast what he had to say.

But those priests, bishops and cardinals who have been inspired by this pope from "the end of the earth" or who are at least willing to be challenged by him -- no matter how small or great their numbers -- were no doubt feasting on his words.

The Jesuit pope on Sunday showed once again that elevation to the episcopacy, even to the venerable See of Peter, has not emasculated the prophetic nature so constitutive of his priestly ministry and identity as a professed religious.

He reminded the men that some Catholics still and unashamedly call "princes of the church" that Jesus was more interested in embracing lepers and every kind of outcast than observing the ritual purity and prudent deliberations of the doctors of the law.

"I desire mercy and not sacrifice," he said in one of the numerous lines in which he evoked the Lord of the Scriptures. "What matters for Jesus is, above all, reaching out to save those far off, healing the wounds of the sick and restoring everyone to God's family!" the pope said. "And this is scandalous to some people!"

Francis knows firsthand that a number of men who wear miters on their heads are among those most scandalized by the way "Jesus revolutionizes and upsets that fearful, narrow and prejudiced mentality" characteristic of certain religious leaders. He has seen it by the near fanatical and hostile way some of them and their theological experts have tried to annihilate proposals -- which the pope has encouraged -- that seek to reconcile all variety of Catholic "outcasts" with their church, most especially those currently excluded from its sacramental life.

"I urge you to serve the church in such a way that Christians -- edified by our witness -- will not be tempted to turn to Jesus without turning to the outcast, to become a closed caste with nothing authentically ecclesial about," he said.

Francis was explicitly addressing the 20 new cardinals (15 of them electors) that he created over the weekend. He told them to serve and see Jesus in all those on the margins, "even in those who have lost their faith, or have turned away from the faith, or say they are atheists."

He urged them to imitate his namesake, St, Francis of Assisi, by embracing the leper and accepting all the different types of outcasts. "Truly, dear brothers, the gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, is discovered and is revealed!" he said.

Sunday's homily was arguably one of the most important messages Pope Francis has issued during his nearly two years in the Petrine office. And it must be seen an essential addition to a small collection of interviews, documents and speeches during this period in which he has clearly placed the program of his pontificate before the People of God and, indeed, all people of good will.
He began with the surprising and blockbuster interview in August 2013 with La Civiltà Cattolica, which was translated and published shortly thereafter by numerous other Jesuit publications. Then the following November, he issued his apostolic exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium ("Joy of the Gospel"), an astonishingly fresh blueprint for church reform and renewal inspired by the far-sighted, yet unrealized, vision of the Second Vatican Council.

In this select compendium, one must also include Francis' opening address at October's extraordinary session of the Synod of Bishops for the way it liberated church leaders from a decadeslong moratorium on debating or questioning topics that had long been labeled "streng verboten" by authorities in Rome.

And finally, one cannot forget the 78-year-old pope's message to the top officials of the Roman Curia just before Christmas, when he warned the cardinals and bishops of 15 spiritual ailments to which they were especially susceptible. In every one of these talks and texts, Francis provoked -- and continues to provoke -- clear and diverse reactions.

But those who say they disagree with the prophetic words of the first religious order pope in nearly 170 years (the last was the Benedictine monk Gregory XVI) are more honest than those who say they do not understand him. By now, Francis has made it clear what he believes -- that the Holy Spirit is pushing the church to be more inclusive, compassionate and outward-looking; that the Lord Jesus is calling it to be less inward-focused, legalistic and obsessed with the nonessential externals; and that "finding the right words" for our beliefs, our teachings, our disciplines -- is one of the great tasks the church's pastors and its people must discover in order to bring this into being.

The next gathering of the synod in October will offer a glimpse of how many of the bishops are ready to ratify the pope's vision. But in the meantime, expect him to offer at least a few more talks and papers like his homily on Sunday to spell out that vision even more clearly.

[Robert Mickens is editor-in-chief of Global Pulse. Since 1986, he has lived in Rome, where he studied theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University before working 11 years at Vatican Radio and then another decade as correspondent for The Tablet of London.]