

PATHS TO NEW FRONTIERS

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Chris Lowney, author of *Pope Francis: Why He leads the Way He Leads* (Loyola Press), recently wrote¹, following a series of interviews given by Pope Francis: "I believe Pope Francis is trying to ignite massive culture change within the Catholic Church." He highlighted the attraction to, and influence of the missionary ideals of Jesuits on Pope Francis, a Jesuit himself, and drew attention to how early Jesuits sought out the frontiers of the world then known to Europeans.



Lowney went on to say that Pope Francis is inviting us to understand "frontier" in a much more expansive way than those early Jesuits. "Catholicism's 21st-Century frontiers are less about geography and more about those who don't see much value in organized religion or who have been overlooked or excluded." Lowney quoted Pope Francis as saying "let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit, or are indifferent."

Towards the end of his article, Lowney returned to the claim that Pope Francis is trying to ignite a massive change in culture in the Church. He drew attention to phrases Francis used in his recent interviews commenting on the Church: "live on the border and be audacious", "be searching, creative and generous", "find new roads", "dialogue with all ... even with opponents". In referring to phrases and vocabulary used by Pope Francis rather than directions and prescriptions, we can hear an echo of the arguments John O'Malley SJ used some years ago for making the case that Vatican II really wanted the Church to move forward.² Lowney concluded that Francis is asking all of us to help lead the culture change that he, Francis, is proposing.

¹ Lowney, Chris, "Francis challenges us to take dusty paths to new frontiers", *National Catholic Reporter*, September 27, 2013, accessed on October 20, 2013 at <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-challenges-us-take-dusty-paths-new-frontiers>

² O'Malley SJ, John, [Vatican II: Did anything happen ?](#), *Theological Studies*, Vol 67, 2006, pp 3-33

So, again we are being confronted with a call to change the culture of the Church.³ This time it is in regard to seeking out new frontiers of how and where the Church should exist and carry out its pastoral ministry - even to dialoguing with opponents. Surely this has implications for us here in Australia as we try to be Church in a society which is at the same time secular, multi-cultural and multi-religious. If we accept Chris Lowney's conclusion that changing the culture of the Church is not only a matter for leaders, but for all of us, then there are implications too for all the members of the Vincentian Family.

A frontier too far ?

Francis does not spell out completely what and where these new frontiers are, but his way of acting and speaking indicates they are specifically the poor and marginalised, and some of the internal operations of the Church. So it would seem that for us in the Vincentian Family, we need to be looking not only at the way we reach out to people on the edge, but also the way we function and think within our own organisations.

As an example of thinking differently, we could take note of Maureen Fiedler, a Loretto Sister in the US, who wrote earlier this year in an article titled "Traditional vows redefined for the 21st Century"⁴ on different ways in which the vows in women's religious congregations can be looked at in order to be relevant in the present time. In regard to the vow of obedience she says:



The vow of obedience was instituted in a world where royalty ruled. It was an age when bishops, abbots and abbesses were generally more educated than their underlings and were assumed to know more about the needs of the larger world. Thus, subjects were supposed to obey them, especially when it came to ministry. It was, in many ways, a military model.

³ See Williams CM, T., "The Culture of the Catholic Church", The Vincentians (Australian Provincial Website), accessed on October 15, 2013 at: <http://vincentians.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/The-Culture-of-the-Catholic-Church.pdf>

⁴ Fiedler, Maureen, "Traditional vows redefined for the 21st century", *National Catholic Reporter*, accessed June 15, 2013, at: <http://ncronline.org/news/sisters-stories/poverty-chastity-obedience-traditional-vows-redefined-21st-century>

Before Vatican II, this model was most visible in ministry and in living assignments given to sisters, often on an annual basis. But Vatican II ushered in major changes. Sisters began to choose their own ministries and living arrangements.

Most women's religious communities today rarely operate in a military style: Superiors don't give orders to "underlings." Members are encouraged to consult with the leadership, a spiritual director, or partners in a discernment process to make important decisions, such as a change in ministry. But members are rarely, if ever, ordered to do or not do something. In Loretto, members are assumed to be adults in making decisions.

Thus, the historic military-style interpretations of this vow do not fit the 21st century.

Some may not agree with all that Maureen Fiedler writes. Some may even argue that "tampering with" the traditional vows is indeed a frontier too far ! But she does give an example of how thinking and attitudes may need to alter.

In the history of the Church, there have been many who have felt compelled to tamper with current ideas and tackle new frontiers. Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul are certainly people who broke away from the common perceptions of the time in order to go to those new frontiers. They did not wait for Church leaders and civil leaders to take responsibility for attending to needs. So rather than throwing all responsibility on our own Vincentian Family leaders, we have to ask ourselves what each of us is doing to move forward as Pope Francis asks. Dare we even think about the culture changes needed ? Or is this a frontier too far ?



FOR REFLECTION

1. Do we sometimes find it more comfortable leaving it to Leadership to take the initiative in searching for new frontiers of ministry - within and outside the Vincentian Family - rather than reaching forward ourselves ?
2. Are Church Leaders sometimes fearful of allowing those under their care to take the initiative in searching out new frontiers ?

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