

## Renew My Church in Chicago: The Need to Foster Freedom to be Critical

by Thomas M. Howard

The archdiocese of Chicago is in the midst of restructuring. Parish life for millions of Catholics in Chicago is changing. During the next few years, some parishes may remain intact, but the vast majority will consolidate and reopen with new names and identities. Some parishes, unfortunately, will close for good.

While many in Chicago lament change, others understand this as an opportunity to become a pilgrim church and a pilgrim people. Affluence and access to power often insulate certain Catholic dioceses from opportunities to journey with faith. This article explores some implications of what a pilgrim church and a pilgrim people can offer affluent dioceses as they are challenged to reconfigure.

In 2014, newly installed Archbishop Blase Cupich inherited an archdiocese full of challenges: priest shortages, dwindling church attendance, shifting demographics, the sexual abuse crisis, cultural changes, a decaying infrastructure, and lack of finances. Almost immediately, Cupich began pitching a vision for a major overhaul of the archdiocese. After being elevated to cardinal, strategic plans for change were shared internally with key clergy and pastoral center directors.

First, the entire pastoral staff was reorganized. Employees either retired, found other jobs, or chose to interview for new positions. Second, drawing on the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, Cardinal Cupich internally branded his plan with the title *Renew My Church (RMC)*. Theology and Catholic tradition now both undergirded Cupich's plans for change.

Third, a public relations campaign went into action, branding *RMC* for the general public. People from all over the United States were made aware of Chicago's plan for change. Finally, groupings of parishes from each deanery were designated by each auxiliary bishop. Facilitators were provided, and specific dates to meet were set. The tasks for each grouping were to evaluate different scenarios and provide the cardinal with critical local context.

### Personal Context

I recently participated in *RMC*'s most crucial phase. About fifty people from more than a dozen different cultural backgrounds were charged with the unenviable task of recommending which eight parishes should stay open,

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which should become worship sites, and which should close. Financial, pastoral, and demographic archdiocesan benchmarks for each scenario were established and distributed.

In the end, our grouping put its support behind a very lengthy, extremely complicated document which was formally presented to Cardinal Cupich. As our group's editor-in-chief of this discernment document, I became quite intimate with the *RMC* process.

At first, I believed that this interest would diminish and fade away once the discernment document was out of our local hands and into the hands of the archdiocese. To my surprise, even after the local input phase had ended, I still had a strong desire to probe deeper.

As editor, my freedom to be critical was limited because I was charged with the task of making sure our document was coherent and brief. Now, however, I was free to be critical, so I quickly chose to put on the lens of practical theology. Once *RMC* was under this critical lens, the following question surfaced: How could the freedom to be critical be fostered in a more authentic way during the next wave of groupings?

### **Fostering the Freedom to be Critical**

Our grouping was not asked to solve any problems or fix the archdiocese. Rather, we were called to evaluate different scenarios and provide the cardinal with critical context. While I believe we accomplished the former, I regret to say that we failed miserably with the latter. The cardinal received a document replete with technical arguments but devoid of any deeper understanding of how to make disciples, inspire witness, or build community.

The purpose of the commentary below is not to uproot and expose why individuals avoided critical engagement with *RMC* or, for that matter, what tactics they employed in steering the dialogue from the *RMC* three imperatives (make disciples, inspire witness, and build community). My aim, rather, is to leverage a tool from the social sciences called social location, applying it to my experience of *RMC*. I hope to offer practical suggestions on how to foster a culture of freedom so that future groupings can be more critical when providing their context with Cardinal Cupich in their discernment documents.

### **St. Francis and Renewal**

Over nine hundred years ago, the idea of church renewal inspired St. Francis of Assisi to become a radical follower of Christ. "Renew my church" was a clear message which young Francis heard from Jesus while praying in the dilapidated San Damiano Church on the outskirts of Assisi, Italy. Could Jesus's message be the same for us today?

For the rest of his life, young Francis never stopped thinking about the word renewal. Over time he began distinguishing it from more transactional terms like repurpose or redevelop. Francis knew that Christ's church was much more than a building. While buildings can be repurposed and redeveloped, church members are called to renewal. Francis undergirded his apostolic ministry with this new way of thinking - that Christ can renew without bricks, mortar, or a physical address.

Thanks to Francis's renewal efforts, new life slowly took root, reconnecting the Church with its core identity. Even today, the spirit of St. Francis continues blessing parishes with rich opportunities to reframe their identities in compelling ways through the practical lens of social justice.

## Prophetic Call

St. Francis was neither a cleric nor a privileged member of society when Jesus called him to renew his church. After making the choice to renew, he became an embarrassment to his family; socially, he became an outcast, living on the margins of society; culturally, he was disdained because he chose to beg for his food.

These sociocultural and historical facts should serve as a vivid reminder to everyone of the prophetic call to institutional change. All God's people, lay people and the ordained, by the virtue of their baptism, are called to be prophetic. Therefore, *RMC* is by its very nature a prophetic call for change.

Those with the most access to power in Chicago's church are the clergy. If care is not taken, *RMC* can be mistakenly perceived by lay people as the establishment's agenda. Institutional change with a weak prophetic character will ultimately fail. *RMC* must be owned by both the clergy and the laity.

## Social Location

Race, class, gender, and social class were not considered when truth claims were shared during our *RMC* discussions. As a result, preconceived notions, underlying presuppositions, and personal biases went unchecked.

For example, parish priests, due to their theological and pastoral background, were the ones asked to define ambiguous terms like building community or inspiring witness. As a result, discussions failed to go deep. The opportunity to share and explore compelling new ways to build community (such as the "field hospital" metaphor of Pope Francis) or inspire witness could have been developed if considerations of social location had been considered.

The faith witness of St. Francis reminds all Catholics, by the virtue of their baptism, that they are called to be prophetic. While every parish may, in theory, believe all three imperatives are essential, how each parish gives flesh to each imperative occurs in unique ways. Missionary discipleship may look very different in Chinatown, for instance, than it does in Bridgeport; faith witness in Canaryville may transpire in radically different ways than it does in Bucktown; community life is celebrated culturally in a much different fashion in Little Village than it is in the West Loop. Socioeconomic class, cultural perceptions, and access to wealth and power all help determine one's experience of community, witness, and discipleship.

No human being, not a cardinal, bishop, priest, president, or lay person, can claim "neutrality." If parish members had a chance to unearth their underlying motivations and perceptions, uprooting and exposing them, group discussions could greatly improve.

## Ways to Improve *RMC*

What follows are practical ways to foster the freedom to be critical with *RMC*:

- Encourage facilitators to utilize thinking routines developed by Harvard University's Project Zero, especially while engaging the *RMC* imperatives.<sup>1</sup> These thinking routines help make an individual's thinking visible. Presuppositions and biases are checked internally with these routines.
- *RMC* facilitators should collectively debrief and continually meet, refashioning their methodology at each and every juncture.

<sup>1</sup> Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/>

- Have qualified lay people give public witness of *RMC*. Currently *RMC* leans too heavily on clergy for accomplishing this task.
- Publish *RMC* testimonies from passionate lay people. Highlight how faith lives are being transformed through *RMC*.
- Be more intentional about bridging the gap between personal narratives and the narrative of St. Francis.
- Continue investing funds for promoting *RMC* for the general public.

**From Hearers to Doers of the Word**

Over nine hundred years ago, St. Francis of Assisi made a fundamental choice to become more critical with method. Not content with simply hearing the Word of God, he famously stripped himself naked, choosing to do God’s Word (Jas 1:22-23). This radical methodological shift created the necessary space for authentic cooperation with the Holy Spirit. A fruit born from this authentic pastoral method was church renewal.

*RMC* in Chicago is a well-thought-out, publicly branded, strategic, theologically undergirded, and professionally supported process. However, with dozens of new groupings about to begin their most crucial phase, *RMC* leadership would be wise to uproot, expose, and identify specific threats that could be curtailing its ongoing implementation.

The lived experience of this author suggests that clericalism currently threatens *RMC*. Clericalism was able to establish roots in *RMC* not because of domineering priests but rather because of lackadaisical baptized Catholics. Complacent with their baptismal calls, many Catholic parishioners in Chicago have abdicated their call to be prophetic to clergy.

Just as St. Francis was courageous and creative, *RMC* leaders too are called to model these behaviors. Every grouping deserves and needs an on-going, research-based, contextualized methodology. With a sincere, deliberate commitment to these small steps, the freedom to be critical can be effectively fostered in *RMC*.