Feedback loops in Vatican

Where does the Pope get his information?

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Introduction:

How is it that the Pope, locked away in the Vatican, knows that there was an earthquake in Haiti? From television? What if he doesn't have time? How does he help the victims? Does he log into his account and make a transfer? How does he know who to appoint as Bishop of Popokabaka if he has never been there? How does he get the people of Popokabaka to listen to his decisions? Does he send the Swiss Guard? How does the Pope know who is right in the conflict in the Middle East, who is telling the truth, and who is lying?

These questions are related to the two previous articles and boil down to how the Pope, or more broadly, the Church, makes decisions. We said that the Pope must steer the Church, i.e., make decisions. This post is about how the oldest institution in the world makes decisions

in the digital age. Where does he get his information, and how does he give orders, or, in cybernetic terms, what are the feedback loops in the management of the Vatican?

Examples of feedback:

What is the feedback mentioned in the introduction? Feedback has become a permanent part of the English language, especially in large corporations. "I'm waiting for your feedback!" and "I need to gather feedback on my report!" are phrases that can be heard very often, but what do they mean?

In this context, the word comes from cybernetics and is used to describe the basic mechanism of decision-making, which consists of several steps: impulse, input, action, result–output, information, decision, feedback, reiteration.

In the case of a report that I have to prepare for my boss, the impulse is the boss's first instruction, along with the input information; the action is writing the report; the result–output is the report, which forms the basis for the input information for the boss's evaluation; the decision is a comparison of the expected report with the completed one; and the boss's criticism is feedback, i.e., information about the result of my action, so that I can improve my action in the next round. In the case of the cybernetic pope, like any helmsman, the goal is to stay on course. The helmsman looks at the current and the wind, turns the rudder (action), receives feedback in the form of the ship's position, and corrects the rudder. The Pope therefore makes the simplest decisions, such as helping Haiti (impulse—earthquake, decision to help build schools, information about the effect of the aid, new decision), to more serious ones, such as the decision on how to respond to modernism, Marxism, or AI.

The Vatican is an interesting subject of analysis because, as an ancient institution, it faces modern challenges.

Historical background:

Traditional decision-making process

The traditional way of receiving feedback in the Church, as in any bureaucracy, was through a hierarchy: parish priests reported problems to the bishop, bishops to cardinals/the Roman Curia, and they to the pope, who made the decisions. On a day-to-day basis, these were standard bureaucratic standards and procedures, but sometimes, when the situation deviated from the norm (we fear nothing but precedent!), a council was convened to determine new procedures or to determine which ones were appropriate. In recent times, such councils have been the Council of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. Traditionally, it could be said that the

Vatican mills ground slowly. Decisions were made over a period of many years, decades, or even centuries.

Contemporary pressure

When information circulates faster, and there is more of it, this way of responding becomes insufficient. Issues such as the abuse crisis, problems with liberal theologians and ecology must be resolved more quickly. It is not so much difficult to find a solution, but often even to locate the problem. Bishops may not be able to keep up with the development of AI, let alone find a solution to the problems. Connections other than just hierarchy are needed. More networks need to be created with scientists, such as academic institutions, etc.

Contemporary conditions require, first of all, taking into account the speed at which information appears. For example, an article about a new bishop who is controversial appears on the internet. This was also the case in the past, but today, there may be pressure from people on social media and the internet that will be difficult to resist.

What loops do we have?

So, we have different loops. For example, bishops and bureaucracy loops, related to scientific conferences. We have formal ones, such as synods and consistories, and informal ones, such as social media.

We have loops in network or hierarchical systems. Loops in a hierarchy are clearly defined, communication is simple. In a network, you can get answers from many directions, but the amount of information can be overwhelming, selection can be 'by feel' and ultimately random.

Speed vs. depth of analysis

The advantage of traditional loops is depth. Decisions are not made hastily, but after consultation and reflection. Many decisions are not made at all, in the name of the principle of "you have to know how to wait," and most problems will resolve themselves. Here, we can compare two extreme approaches: no decisions at all, or attempting to solve every problem immediately. Often, there is no time for such a deep analysis, decisions must be made now. Where can information be obtained, then? Then, you have to seek information elsewhere, directly. The need to speed up decisions is influenced not only by the nature of the matter itself, such as a crisis, but also by pressure from the group. If all the media in the world said that something had to be changed and the Pope resisted it, it would be admirable. Lack of response will also be a decision. Either way, it is necessary to obtain information and make a quick decision.

All loops are similar in a way, whether it is bishops, scientists or politicians who provide information. At first, it is not so important what the information is, because what is important is that there is information, decisions, action. At this level of generality, it is more important that we can divide the flow of information into fast and slow, but, above all, depending on the reactions it provokes. Looking at the example of a ship's helmsman, we can say that there are two types of these loops. The helmsman turns to the right, the sailors shout, "Turn harder, and we will safely avoid the rocks." Then, the helmsman turns harder to the right, i.e., the feedback reinforces his previous decisions. If, on the other hand, the information he receives is "Mistake, we're about to crash," the helmsman knows he must countersteer in the other direction. In cybernetics, these two reactions are referred to as positive or negative.

One example of positive feedback is environmental protection. The world is talking loudly about environmental protection, the Pope issues an encyclical on environmental protection, more people are involved in environmental protection, their voice is better heard, and the Pope issues further documents on environmental protection. An example of a negative reaction is when a politician makes a controversial statement on a certain topic. This would cause widespread outrage, and then the government spokesperson would soften the tone of the statement by interpreting it in a less radical way, more in line with the sensibilities of the public.

Innovation vs. continuity

Let's try to translate this into the problem of steering a ship. We have sailors and a helmsman. If everyone can shout, "Turn left!", there will be so much noise that it might as well be no information at all. On the other hand, it would be good to have an emergency exit so that someone could run to the captain and shout "Iceberg ahead!"[1]. Similarly, with the course, you cannot steer a transatlantic liner like a one-man boat. A certain stability is needed. On the other hand, innovation is needed, the ability to quickly find a solution in a flood of information.

Each solution has its strengths and weaknesses. Flatter solutions allow for more interaction, but they can also be an attempt to circumvent doctrinal constraints by blurring responsibility and public referendums. The problem of speed of decision-making can be illustrated by the example of military decisions. What good is it if someone makes the right decision, but in the meantime, their army is destroyed?

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[1] When erecting the Obelisk in St. Peter's Square, there was a strictly defined way of communicating, and it was forbidden to speak under penalty of imprisonment. But, allegedly, despite this, one of the workers shouted: "Moisten the ropes, they're breaking!" And he saved the lives of the workers and the obelisk itself.

Summary

It can be summarised that feedback loops are an important element in the governance of the Church.

These feedback loops consist of receiving information about the effects of one's decisions and actions after the decision has been made, and, on this basis, further decisions and actions are taken. The problem arises with the amount of new information. Traditional methods of information processing are becoming insufficient, which creates pressure to seek new solutions.

More

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