Defining forms of public space: a frame for understanding ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to construct a frame for the sake of understanding why the Vatican’s economic reform is so often called into question in the public space. For present purposes, the public space must be distinguished according to the differing forms in which it manifests itself: democratic movements, social initiatives and the mechanisms of the free market economy. With respect to the latter form, the Vatican economic reform is observed and judged by the Church’s different publics, for instance, her faithful, her international financial regulators and governmental organizations. The frame here established allows an analysis of some of Pope Francis’ most important decisions regarding ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’. These decisions have neither been simply the fruit of the Holy Father’s desire to change the Roman Curia’s administration, nor have they been solely dependent on pressure from international regulation offices. The Vatican accepted external requirements in order to preserve its institutional mission, which is primarily a spiritual mission in service to its faithful all around the world. Pope Francis’ leadership is not only rooted in his authenticity, being himself extremely attractive to the media, but also in his credibility, being a pastor with the capacity to change the institution from within. These two characteristics, falling within the categories of transparency and reform, are greatly appreciated in the public space.

1. Introduction
The Holy See is a sovereign entity, understood in the same way as any state, that has the Vatican city-state as the territorial support of its inherent independence and sovereignty (Holy See 1929, 1–4). The Pope and the bodies of the central government of the Catholic Church reporting to him are the basic elements of the Holy See (Code of Canon Law c. 361), which has offices in Rome but sometimes outside of the Vatican city-state (John II 1988, 1; Holy See 1929, 13–15). Currently, most of the structures of the Roman Curia managing major financial investments are being reformed to bring about better budgetary and asset management procedures. The reform is of some of
the Roman Curia offices, rather than of the Vatican city-state as a whole, and it is not economic, but administrative. However, since the media and other agents of the public space have defined it as ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’, we will keep the term for the sake of clarity.

It is not always clear how this economic reform should be understood. For some, the reform seems to be understood as the solution for economic scandals and corruption that they believe plague the Vatican regularly. This group of individuals is typically comprised of enthused faithful making economic reform the key point of a more global reform, desired by Pope Francis, hoping it will terminate in ‘a conversion of the Papacy’ (Francis 2013a, 32). For others, an economic reform that could bring exigencies which are alien to a religious institution merits a skeptical approach. These skeptics, for instance, are surprised when the Church institutes management processes, such as the new Secretariat for the Economy, with the power of full vigilance and control over the Holy See and her related entities (Francis 2014a, 5).

The question that here needs to be asked is whether the reform is an urgent need requiring, above all, the Roman Curia’s administrative restructuring? Or, whether the reform needs to be focused in other fields of the ecclesial institution other than its economic institutions? To find an answer, I will endeavor to consider the players involved in the ‘process of discernment, purification and reform,’ which the Pope desires for the whole Church (Francis 2013a, 30). This study, in any case, will not evaluate whether the economic reform should be done, or if it should be done as it has been so far. This is because the economic reform in place is indeed implying several exigencies for those working inside the Vatican, and actually the reform is finalizing plans to put new budgetary procedures in place, at least from the point of view of Church legislation, needing only effective implementation in the near future (Zalbidea 2015, 365).

The economic reform is the result of important governmental decisions made by the Pope, in collaboration with high-ranking Holy See officials and pastors, who all seek to carry forth the spiritual mission of the Catholic Church. The Cardinals who elected Pope Francis in 2013 asked for ‘Vatican economic reform’, revealing that they sensed a change was needed. Economic reform became one of the Pope’s most significant concerns, thus making it irrelevant to question the need of it at this point in his Pontificate. The present scope is to stress the role of those responsible for Church communications, but rather than judge whether these reforms were opportune for reshaping the institution’s public image, the task is to explain why they are actually in place.

With all this in mind, I will attempt to provide scholars and Church communicators with a frame to better understand ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’, which is still in process (Miñambres 2015a, 150). For clarity’s sake, ‘frame’ is here being used in the sense of ‘schema’, that is, ‘to interpret the meaning and reality of a situation’ (Goffman 1974, 182).

To attain the aforesaid goal, I will thus: (1) Put emphasis on past grounds and perceptions that have shaped the Church’s image in the public sphere, (2) identify some recent decisions Holy See’s leaders have made regarding the Roman Curia’s finances, particularly, as a communicative dimension of the Catholic Church, in the economic field and (3) bolster the content on ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’ for Church communicators to utilize in the public arena. In the first section, I will set up the social
context in which the economic reform has been taking place, that is, the very same one any other public institution in the European milieu is found. In the second section, I will analyze social expectations and the Vatican’s corresponding responses through media statements and the communication channel of the Secretariat for the Economy (Bulletin 1). Considering most would agree that it’s harder to explain why an institution is not doing what public opinion supposes it should be doing, rather than just explaining certain changes that are underway, this second section is noteworthy.

In order to explain the actions that should be taken, an understanding is required of some of the social expectations that, in this case, the Church as an international public institution is asked to respect. Generally speaking, what the Catholic faithful expect from their shepherds is a life of piety, clear teaching and commitment toward those most in need. A consistent part of public opinion is however asking for a kind of financial transparency and accountability, not always required for other international charities or governments. Considering the ongoing dissimilarity between these aforementioned external expectations regarding economics and the Holy See’s own self-understanding in the last regard, I will address some of the Roman Curia authorities’ public considerations, with the institution’s different publics, to evaluate the impact of the economic reform in the public arena.

As a matter of fact, the Secretariat for the Economy is preparing ‘sound and consistent Financial Management practices and reporting,’ simultaneously providing its different stakeholders with ‘a clear framework of accountability for all those entrusted with the resources of the Church’ (Pell 2014). New financial policies and practices are thus implemented in order to boost the Church’s spiritual mission, that is, by providing more financial resources (Francis 2014b). Yet, at the same time, this business-like language utilized in Roman Curia’s public statements to define the religious institution has produced discontent, for there are those who would prefer to publicly address and speak of the Church in purely theological terms, such as, the ‘people of God’ or ‘body of Christ’ (Lumen Gentium, 8–9). Theological definitions, however, do not shape the Church’s public image as they are very rarely considered by media and other public agents. There might even be other ways to define the Church in the public space and, in order to find them, one should begin by considering legal regulations pertaining to the economic reform.

Since the publication of the new Code of Canon Law (1982), legislators have been stressing that, as an autonomous institution, the Holy See does not act upon civil observances to develop her spiritual mission. This statement does not translate into ignoring them either, as in some cases local Church’s administrators are asked and required to follow civil laws (Schouppe 2007, 27). Regardless of civil law prescriptions, the media however note the importance of international Catholic charitable foundations acting outside the Vatican managing major financial investments. These latter institutions are not part of the Roman Curia, and operate according to local civil laws, so they do not seem to fall into the administrative reform, although there is no way to know this in the public sphere as the list of entities that will be affected is not yet available, which seems to hide the juridical space of application of the law.

Moreover, Canon lawyers observe that the Secretariat for the Economy has received functions that have had a juridical transformation in the last months, moving from ‘oversight’ for some of the structures of the Roman Curia (Francis 2014a, 5), to their
‘control and surveillance’ including the management of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (Francis 2014c, 618), but respecting the original rules about staff hiring and transfers in the Holy See (Francis 2015a). These juridical shifts have been translated by the media as a process of rethinking within the Holy See (Windfield, 2015). On the contrary, the scope of the new Secretariat for the Economy is to administer the Roman Curia’s assets with greater transparency (providing guidelines and budgeting processes), and not to manage them (taking care of daily operations), a model which corresponds more to a diocesan governmental structure than that of a Nation (Miñambres 2015b, 82). These canonical points, however, just as the theological ones, are neither present in the public arena, nor do their proponents seem fully accepted as actors in the public square (Reese, 2014). We thus need to make a greater effort to translate the canonical and theological contents into the public space. With that end in mind, I will try next to define the key concepts necessary to benefit from this discourse.

2. Defining concepts: building a frame for understanding the economic reform

2.1. The public space

In order to understand the complex dynamic of the public space, one must consider several mindsets in relation to one another (Habermas 1991, 141–159; Benhabib 1992, 73–97). This is because the public space is self-consciously founded by the common action of those acting within it (Taylor 2007, 271). Public space is manifest in several forms, involving for instance a public sphere ‘in which people conceive of themselves as participating directly in a nation-wide (sometimes even international) discussion’ (Taylor 2007, 87). Another instance of public space is civil society, where every single individual appears to have the right of giving and receiving public information (Mendoza 2014, 7). With this mentality, social networks are viewed as the natural expression of personal behavior, rather than just working instruments (Treem et al. 2005, 418).

The public space also seems to be constituted by our political process of democracy, namely, as a space where all can partake in an election. In the case of the modern citizenship state, the Church has been called upon to adopt forms of democracy. Some of these, however, have been defined by the Church’s authorities as incompatible with the nature of her institution, such as ordination of women or not allowing the non-ordained faithful to celebrate the Mass (John II 1984, 546). Issues, on the other hand, that are not against the sacramental nature of the Church, like the government of its temporal goods, have been shaped according to what is commonly understood as openness and transparency. The group of Counselor-Cardinals established to support Pope Francis in the government of the Universal Church is a point example of this effort (Cozzolino 2014, 234).

Finally, public space is also considered as a global market economy where not only economic goods but also human ones are traded and supplied. Moreover, it’s a space where ‘all economic agents are seen as entering into contractual relationships with others on an equal footing’ (Taylor 2014, 87). Some politicians, social leaders and economics’ scholars, however, seem to consider that economic growth erodes the
traditional ways of life, making the Church an ally in their anti-free market economy positions, with the result of extracting her out of the public space (Gutierrez 1970, Novak 1986). When appearing in the form of the mechanisms of market economy, the public space pays no heed to anti-economic values and, thus, the voice of their supporters remain illegitimate. It is for this reason that it is important to stress that the Church neither promotes a specific economic system, nor is against any specific economic growth (John II 1991, 42). This is evident both through the Church’s teachings and charitable institutions that make a considerably good impact in developing societies (Roy and Tagle 2014, 18).

The ‘Vatican’s economic reform’ in its proper context, for the sake of this analysis, fits in the third above mentioned form of public space: the market economy system. The idea that everyone has the right to trade any good in the public space is rooted in the Enlightenment (Woods 2005, 223). As a philosophical movement, its advocates judged several religious and political institutions as socially oppressive, expelling them from public space and enlarging the field for personal freedom, fraternity and equality. Enterprises and businesses, on the contrary, remained in the midst of social development. Through them, moreover, the bourgeoisie reshaped society up to the point that economic-model institutions became the point of reference for all other institutions. The consequence of this process is that any public institution, as well as any religious one, is evaluated according to economic categories of utility, offer and demand, where the best individual choice is simultaneously the most suitable for one’s own personal identity in society. The best religious option for the individual should thus also be considered the best possible option for the chosen religious institution. Today, commercial firms seem to be the new paradigm for institutional development in Western society.

Similarly, the Catholic Church’s public relevance has been understood more and more through entrepreneurial categories. What produces benefits and is useful for society is considered the best. By default, individuals typically consider themselves neither as citizens nor faithful, but rather as beneficiaries of goods, or simply, consumers. The ‘religious market dynamism’ is likewise indicating a demand for religious values and ‘services’ (Gregory 2012, 176). This mindset, which has made part of the social imaginary from the economic boom that occurred after World War II in Western economies, requires that the Church strive to express her mission in common terminology if she wish to be understood by the people (De Lauzun 2012, 20). Free market economy, a fundamental mindset in the public space, involves ideas, praxis and institutions, and the Roman Curia’s economic structures make up part of the latter. In order to construct the frame for understanding and communicating ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’, I will next consider some ideas that shape most public institutions’ government today, such as transparency and reform.

2.2. Transparency and economic reform

Social imaginary is comprised of public views of the whole society that hardly change, and shape up everyone’s ideas and perceptions of reality. Part of the social imaginary is that the Roman Curia, as any other institution, needs to be transparent. The term transparency has in fact gained a ‘quasi-religious significance in debates over
governance and institutional design’ (Hood and Heald 2006, 3). An institution that is not financially transparent, in fact, is almost automatically assumed to be hiding something relevant (Shaw 2008, 24). Transparency, further, is part of a citizen’s right to be informed about public issues, as well as to inform others.

There is a second public definition present in the social imaginary, applied to all institutions, that regards economic reform. Institutions need to be reformed otherwise they are tainted by corruption. As lack of transparency means secrecy and hiding meaningful reality, lack of reform leads to degradation. Reform and transparency are not just public norms by which public institutions are governed but pertain to the good of the individual. Both aforementioned public definitions seem to be part of an individual’s rights in the public space: the right to receive due information, and the right to take part in the decisions regarding public services. Thus, as any individual has the right to receive a better service, reform is necessary for public institutions because better service can only be achieved by an institution improving its activities, according to the natural dynamic of society. Consequently, any institution claiming to be a legitimate player in the public arena, should constantly strive to offer a better service, for fear of being considered as obsolete and boring. Reform, thus, implies newness and attracting public attention.

Roman Curia’s structures are singular in the public space because ‘any element for accountability in the Church would be determined by the unique nature and mission of the Church’ (Wuerl 2010, 7), and not by the social imaginary. As the Roman Curia’s institutions do not follow what we commonly understand as the ordinary economic processes, it is perceived as lacking transparency and in need of reform. On the one hand, the religious institution is in place to serve its faithful and, thus, needs to be in continual reform. On the other hand, transparency almost appears as the thermometer of public service, allowing individuals to choose their best option. Thus, an institution which is hiding relevant information leads individuals to choose poorly (Shipley, 2015).

On the contrary, it seems that the Roman Curia is moving today towards greater transparency and economic reform but not for the sake of corresponding to the social imaginary, or even translating its self-conception in the public square. ‘The Vatican’s economic reform’, instead, responds to the desire of the Roman Curia’s leadership to, ‘make available more economic resources for the mission of the Church, through enhanced economic and financial management’ (Marx and Pell 2014, point c). At the same time, there has been a recognition within the public space of change in the Roman Curia’s structures, that perhaps does not enclose the whole meaning of the Church’s service to society. It does, in any case, makes her institution present in the public square which is a condition of her legitimacy there, as, ‘without the right expression, there would not be space for the comprehension’ of the Church’s truth and ultimate purpose (Taylor 2014, 108).

Thus, for some shapers of the public opinion, the Roman Curia’s administrative reform is beginning to give expression to the Pope’s desire to have a Church which goes ‘forth from its own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries”’ (Francis 2013a, 20). The expression, moreover, is a central part of studies in Church communications. More to the point, our definition of public space could allow us to establish a frame for understanding ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’, indicating at the same time
some of its causes and consequences. I will now consider the economic-management
praxis, expected by the players of the public space under the form of the free market
economy, always within the context of a ‘culture of transparency’.

2.3. Cultivating a culture of transparency

For a long time, human beings have been establishing standards of behavior that cor-
respond to moral expectations and rational concepts of what is commonly understood
as ‘a good life’. These standards seem present not only in the private life but also in
public life, such as in one’s appearance and in social relationships. The standards are
bygone understandings of actions and expressions that someone should endeavor after
if he wants to be considered worthy of love and respect. If someone acts in a way
which fails to meet the standard, his action, thought or desire would not be considered
socially respectable. On the contrary, if his behavior, thought or desire goes beyond the
standard, the individual would be rewarded with plenty of social recognition. This
establishment of standards is what is usually called culture: ‘Culture emerges from our
attempt to settle on standards that will command the consent of people generally,
while raising their aspirations towards the goals that make people admirable and lov-
able’ (Scruton 2011, 152). Culture of course goes beyond our standards, but for the
sake of understanding the Roman Curia’s administrative reform, I will limit the broad
concept of culture to this one.

This application of standards in society does not exactly apply to economic relation-
ships. It is so, on the one hand, because exchange in free market economies has been
growing faster and faster, thanks to new technologies, requiring new laws and spaces
to grasp the importance of clear and easy agreements. It is so, on the other hand,
because a large part of human expectations rests on the ideal of economic develop-
ment, making individuals perceive themselves as an integral part of an international
trading system. Communications are more readily accessible, and with them the cap-
acity to know people from other societies and cultures. While, at the same time, the
importance of knowing new countries and different people, requires the standardiza-
tion of what is commonly understood as social interchange, mostly in economic
categories.

This new culture, mostly coined in economic concepts and according to commercial
aspirations, also requires the Church to express her mission publicly. Thus, the ecclesial
institution has been developing media networks able to reach over 1 billion people dir-
ectly from Rome (Unisinos 2014). The public space however demands for a culture of
transparency not only regarding religious institutions, but also regarding every public
institution, especially international agents, such as the Catholic Church (Dong-hwan
2013).

Transparency and economic reform are becoming standards by which to govern the
Holy See’s structures, as for instance it is occurring with the Institute for Works of
Religion (Istituto per le Opere di Religione, I.O.R.), that is, the wrongly called Vatican
Bank, managing an equivalent to the 0.4% of the Italian banking operation,
that amounts to nearly 3.5 billion euros – the comparison might be useful, although
the I.O.R. does not belong to the Italian banking system- (Demma 2015, 24).
The I.O.R. indeed is not a bank because it performs neither check clearing operations nor fractional banking (IOR 2014, 28).

The I.O.R.’s authorities respond that this financial institution is in place for pastoral reasons and to guarantee freedom of action, not only for Church personnel but also for her financial aid to Church’s activities in countries where regular bank institutions are prohibited, for reasons of commercial conflict and war (Del Re 1998, 305). The media often confuses the Holy See’s financial operations and the I.O.R.’s fiduciary activity. The I.O.R. is actually the only financial institution in the Vatican managing relevant funds that belong to third-party owners. This confusion has lead some of the media to wrongly assume that the Vatican city-state’s value rest in it being a haven of tax evasion, etc. (Magi 2015; Sawicki 2014). The danger here is that media statements shape the Church’s image in the public space, as they do to every institution, because ‘identity goes together with recognition’ (Taylor 2014, 201). The Church’s authorities, however, cater more to the faithful and their needs rather than to their public image. This gap, pertaining to the realm of communications, needs to be somehow narrowed.

Henceforth I will next try to analyze some of the contents and decisions that are leading this administrative reform.

3. Public need for economic reform & Pope Francis’ decisions

To comprehend the sense of this reform, the nature of the Roman Curia’s economic structures first need to be understood, which requires the following: (1) The definition of an institution, as is currently accepted, being the cloth on which the Church is observed, and (2) the prejudices and foregone perceptions that public opinion have had about the Church.

The Holy See is not a relevant macroeconomic actor in the European public arena, and her temporal goods’ management is a secondary goal of the institution (European Central Bank 2015; Reese 1998, 129). Yet, at the same time, it is also true that the Holy See is the oldest institution recognized in international agreements and one of the most important moral points of reference for the whole world, thus making the Church significant in the public space (González-Gaitano 2011, 9–12). Currently, there are two processes of reform of the Roman Curia to be noted.

First, a process of adjustment to the Financial Intelligence Authority’s (A.I.F.) criteria of entities performing financial activities on a professional basis. All Euro zone members ought to make this adjustment since 2010 and the Holy See started it during the pontificate of Benedict XVI (Section 3.2).

Second is the administrative reform of the Roman Curia that Pope Francis started (Section 3.3). Both processes of reform have causes and consequences that converge today in media reports and consequently in the public opinion.

3.1. Media narrative of a Vatican economic reform

Since Pope Francis’ election in March 2013, news agencies have been underlining the importance of a reform within the Catholic Church. Common journalistic wisdom affirmed that he was elected Roman Pontiff in March 2013 ‘with a mandate to clean up the Vatican, and has focused on improving transparency in the centuries-old
institution’ (Grandmont 2015). The media has been applying their standard political language to the Church. Let us now consider the elements of the media narrative:

1. The players involved in the economic reform are defined in political terms, such as, ‘conservative Church leaders’, or, ‘liberal exponents of Vatican reform’. Moreover, the application of such definitions to some of the Roman Curia’s high-ranking officers does not seem to be always accurate.

2. The Pope becomes the protagonist when referring to the central administration of temporal goods, defining it as Holy See, Vatican city-state or Roman Curia, without clearly distinguishing between these names.

3. Some of the Roman Curia’s leaders are stressing the importance of making the Vatican a model of transparency, and of good administration in the public arena (Pentin 2015; Gutiérrez 2015). The narrative, thus, is constructed in such a way as to understand the two millennial-old institution in political and economic terms, a narrative which seems to have practical grounds:

   3.a) Modern society has evolved as essentially individualistic, which does not necessarily mean that it’s being selfish or negative, but that it appears to have a sort of atomistic world vision. Enterprises should respond to individual needs and, if they do not, other enterprises might, causing the former to disappear. There seems to be no obligation to agree with norms or creeds, as well as there is no a system of laws determining what every individual should accept or not, decide or not, etc.

   3.b) Individual rights become a sort of absolute norm which leads society. There is a nonpublic call to duties that pertain to every single individual, but only a call that appears to reference subjective rights. An important part of the public opinion in America and other Anglo-Saxon nations would underscore to some extent that individuals perceive themselves as detached from any society, nation and religious group. They belong solely to themselves, knowing they have a fundamental right to strive for self-development. This self-realization does not occur during the development of society (living human fraternity), the nation (being citizens) or the religious community (as faithful). Human beings consider themselves today as autonomous realities. Accordingly, these same human beings perceive the surrounding world as an information database from which they ought to take what is useful for them. Often, they realize that developing themselves signifies developing society (WEF 2015, 11). Yet it is not by developing society that they develop themselves, as Plato would assert. The observation is simply that, there is usually no contradiction between one’s individual self-development and that of others (Jaeger 1968, 44). Yet, when contradictions do arise, exclusion would be the only democratic solution acceptable.

   3.c) Every institution has a sort of self-narrative that relies on what it can do to make individuals better. Creating opportunities and opening minds are part of what every institution should do, making up part of its mission, or, as it is said today, its institutional identity. Institutional identity is, in fact, setting up the contextual limits of self-being. This definition is analogous to individuals who ask themselves about their own being in this world, as it would apply to an institution trying to define itself in the public sphere. The ecclesial institution’s identity, considered as an individual, belongs to the study of Church Communications; a field which requires one to understand the media perceptions of the economic reform in order to better locate the
Church in the social imaginary. While media unites both processes of reform, we would need to distinguish among them, starting by the one that begun in 2010.

### 3.2. Euro zone requires Moneyval & I.O.R. Regulations

The Holy See is not a European Union (EU) member, but there is a remarkable integration of the Church in the EU’s economic world. The inclusion was evident from the decision of the Holy See to decline its right to have its own currency for the sake of its ‘institutional mission’, that is, the Church’s spiritual aim. Thus, with the creation of Italy, the Vatican currency was the Italian lira. When the currency transitioned to the euro, international rules on monetary policies dictated by the Committee called Moneyval, applied to the Holy See (Moneyval 2012a, 18–25).

The Holy See chose to adopt the Euro as its official currency to stress its autonomy and sovereignty, as well as to facilitate religious institutional operations and the Roman Pontiff’s different projects, which make up part of his ministry to the whole world. These reasons explain the application of these policies for a country with less than 400 citizens, and a financial institution with less than 7 billion in assets, a number lower than the smaller bank institutions in Italy (O’Connell 2015).

The challenge for the Holy See was to justify the rationale of coining a symbolic amount of the European currency with an image of the Pope, being a religious leader and chief of a State who is not a member of the EU. The reason for this is that the Holy See is a sovereign international subject that exists prior to any modern State. However, the Church has a place in the public arena when speaking out on issues that are universally understood as good and useful, such as ecology, common good and human dignity and so then she is heard and accepted (Bielinski 2015). Among the requirements that this inclusion brings with it, we stress the adjustment to international norms of anti-money laundering and the measures to avoid the financing of terrorism (Moneyval 2010).

The EU financial regulations did not regard the financial operation of public institutions in general, but only of those ‘performing financial activities upon a professional basis’, which means public or private institutions making financial investments on their money-lenders’ behalf and funds. A significant part of the Holy See’s financial operation is done by three offices of the Roman Curia: The Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See (APSA), ‘Propaganda Fide’ and the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. These three departments (dicasteries in ecclesiastical language) manage financial investments on behalf of and in the name of the Holy See, but with resources that belong to the Holy See, not to third-party lenders. So the EU Moneyval regulations do not apply to them, but only to one of the Holy See’s institutions: the I.O.R. The Church leadership had to accept the cost of creating a Financial Intelligence Authority office is remarkable, if it will only survey on one single institution, as happens with the A.I.F. of the Holy See (Francis 2015b).

Moneyval required the I.O.R. to implement rules of customer due diligence, wire transfers and suspicious transaction reporting, with the cost of establishing financial control and a double-check processes in its administration. A religious institution, however, does not need to update its finances on a daily basis as a government or a civil institution might (Posner 2015, 468).
3.3. Pope Francis decides to put the administrative reform into action

Unlike the reform of the IOR, which has been prompted by external factors, ‘the Vatican’s economic Reform’ that started with Pope Francis is rooted in a political decision of the Holy See’s authorities. No one is pushing the Holy See for this reform and no one is applauding it in the international public space. The reform is a consequence of the decisions of the Commission of Cardinals and lay experts (Cosea), created by Pope Francis at the beginning of his pontificate (Francis 2013b, 707-708). And it is getting media attraction because most of Cosea’s decisions that gave origin to the Secretariat for the Economy are not public, inspiring to some shapers of the public opinion an image of secrecy in the Roman Curia (Mercado 2015).

The challenge of translating Pope Francis’ call for reform into specific requirements of information and synergy among Holy See’s employees is hard in itself since the different Roman Curia’s offices are on equal foot under Vatican law (John II 1988, 52). Thus it is not easy to set up a control system among them. So far, three broad points of the framework for this reform can be outlined:

1. The Holy See is a sovereign State with a special configuration (John 1983, 120). It is part of an environment where public institutions are considered as highly dependent on State interventionism. Thus, their public image is not always understood as the best way to get things done economically speaking, but rather as the way things have been done for a long time, making the European economic system appear difficult to change (Franch-Parella 2013, 152). In the conception of some shapers of public opinion, the consequence of this situation is not a passive resignation but a growing malaise towards every public institution. Both this malaise and the process of secularization make the Holy See hard to get an immediate positive public appreciation. Its message and public presence need cultural mediation (Anderson 2015).

2. The Holy See wants to build up her reputation again, not seeking to create a good image, but rather disclose her real image, stressing what her institution is, and what it means. In the social context, in which the Roman Curia’s institutions grow, the Holy See is compared and evaluated in relation to other public agents. This last point means that, only by meeting the standards established by public opinion leaders, will the Roman Curia’s institutions be appreciated and respected. The issue here is that the Church is not a corporation and thus aims to establish social standards always focusing on human dignity. So the Church’s leaders do not always look for what some exponents of public opinion understand as individual rights on information, transparency and economic efficiency.

3. Some the Roman Curia’s structures may meet the standards of transparency and reform, established by players in the public space, only when fulfilling the expectations of those individuals who seem to think they have a right to information and knowledge regarding matters of its economic operation. In this context, the Church’s challenge is to supply her faithful with information and, at the same time, respect the autonomy of the ecclesial institution. The latter specifically regards the protection of information pertaining to her faithful and to her donors. A financial disclosure leading to the idea of inexistent wealth would be an error, as it would likewise be erroneous to expose the faithful to kidnappings or robberies in mission territories.
Yet, on the contrary, the aforementioned requirement for information could translate into inclusion in the international public space for the Church, a confirmation that she has done her best to be a legitimate partner in it. Criticisms will, in any case, come from those who would prefer that the Holy See stress its uniqueness, making the Church renounce her public presence. This, however, reflects the unavoidable and permanent tension between the human and divine elements, peculiar to the nature of this religious institution. We will next analyze this reform in detail, leaving the Moneyval reform for future studies.

4. Administrative reform in the Roman Curia

Pope Francis created a Commission of Cardinals and lay experts to determine the way in which the Vatican reform was going to be carried forward. The Commission of Cardinals agreed on the creation of a new Roman Curia Office, naming it ‘Secretariat for the Economy’. This new Office is headed by Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sidney at the time, and member of the Commission of Cardinals (Secretariat for the Economy, Bulletin 1). The creation of the new Secretariat simultaneously marked the termination of the Commission itself, investing power in the Secretariat to operate the financial reform of the Roman Curia’s institutions making relevant financial investments.

The idea is to operate with three principal organisms: A Council with vigilance authority, constituted by eight clerics and seven lay professionals, a Secretariat with executive capacities, and last, a General-Procurator with double check functions (Francis 2015c, art. 5). The entire new office would mostly respond to the organization of local dioceses. In the eyes of Canon lawyers and Church organization experts, this would not necessarily mean simplifying the Church’s central government, at least regarding its financial operations. Some of them affirm that it could be expensive to implement a vigilance and control office over Roman Curia Congregations, Pontifical Councils, Tribunals, and even the Secretary of State. Furthermore, someone pointed out that the norms signed by Pope Francis set a sharp contrast between vigilance and operation, something recognized by media as a positive step towards transparency (Maillard 2015).

Cardinal Reinhard Marx, president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in Germany, was named President of the Council for the Economy. His experience in administration affairs is extensive; the Catholic Church in that country received almost €5.5 billion (2013) through Church tax. It is to be noticed that Caritas in Germany, a Catholic Church institution for social relief, employs 560,000 people, making it the second largest German employer after Volkswagen (Caritas Germany 2016). Besides, in 2014, the Vatican’s biggest expense was staff salaries, amounting to €126.6 million for a total of 2880 staff members (Vallely 2014). In contrast, the diocese of Cologne alone employs a staff of 60,000. This diocese’s 2013 balance sheet, drawn up according to the guidelines of large German companies and approved by an independent auditor, had €3.35 billion worth in assets (Erzbistum Köln 2015, 2). This means that the Cologne diocese’s capital alone is more than the Vatican’s. Pope Francis, driven by the desire to unify the administration, drafted a Papal document (motu proprio) with rules needed
to set in place a dynamic system of triple control of the Roman Curia’s assets management, reflecting a very Anglo-Saxon model of financial accountability.

4.1. Breaking silence: turning point for economic reform

The Secretariat for the Economy’s press releases, regarding its economic reform, maintained a sober description of its internal affairs. The reason behind this approach was that Church authorities were well aware of moving in an international environment marked by financial crisis and banking corruption scandals. The reform process, however, and the urgency to push forward decisions about the Vatican’s financial reform, had a turning point.

Specifically, this was the imprisonment of Mgr. Nunzio Scarano. He tried to bring illegally into Italy around €20 million belonging to an Italian family, presumably to avoid tax payments. Pope Francis decided this would be the last financial scandal reported regarding the Roman Curia. The media made a big issue out of this news, and the image of the Church was seriously damaged. Media reporting presented the case as evidence of the Roman Curia as an institution lacking in transparency, triggering a minor banking crisis which prompted other European and international banks to refuse business with the I.O.R. (Walsh 2015).

Only a few weeks later, both the Director and Deputy of the I.O.R. resigned from their positions. The I.O.R. president, named before the election of Pope Francis, resigned after only 17 months in office. 3,000 accounts and over 2000 ‘personal banking activities’ were closed in the Institute for Works of Religion (Kommersant 2014). On 4 July 2014, Pope Francis decided to maintain the I.O.R., due to the need of this instrument. As a positive remark, the financial institution reported profits of €69.3 millions in 2014 (IOR 2014, 12; Francis 2013c, 635).

Cardinal Pell explained the reasons for these speedily undertakings, affirming that the Roman Curia wanted to become a model of public administration, not only a good place to operate (Secretariat for the Economy, Bulletin 6). Media speculated about Pope Francis’ actions, asserting that they were really a way to ensure further financial contributions from the faithful, especially in Italy. A little fact the media were unaware of, however, is that most gifts the Holy See receives come from the United States (Kington 2014). Nevertheless, Italy represents an important financial source due to the Lateran Treaty that allows the Church to receive tax contributions from Italy, that is, if Italians freely decide to give part of their taxes to the Church. However, this economic aid system does not support the Holy See, but the Catholic Church in Italy. To make the distinction evident, we recall that the Holy See recently signed a tax cooperation agreement with Italy, as part of a long-term strategy, to ensure and promote legality, transparency and ethical behavior in economic and financial fields. This action put the Holy See in equanimity with 62 other countries that signed similar fiscal international agreements.

Pope Francis’ constant call to attentiveness to the transparency issue, and the creation of a responsible group of Cardinals, gave rise to an internal awareness that change was going to happen. A change, moreover, that was felt to be a response to the voice of the majority within the Catholic hierarchy, as it could be sensed through media reports at the pre Conclave. With the arrival of the new Pope, one thing that
changed within the Roman Curia was the idea of ‘being in the majority’, or, ‘of being in the minority’. As it happens in any institution with this kind of shift ‘some tend to speak their minds whereas others not. If there is no variation in climate perception and in opinion expression at a predefined starting point, a spiraling process is unlikely to start’ (Jong 2015, 161). Pope Francis, by changing climate perceptions in the Roman Curia helped to boost administrative reform as a government decision.

4.2. Putting reform in act: asking for advice

Besides the appointments among clergy mentioned before, the Pope also appointed a layman, Danny Casey, as director of the Secretariat for the Economy. The purpose of this appointment was to help Cardinal Pell in his executive tasks to successfully bring about an economic reform in the Roman Curia (Secretariat for the Economy, Bulletin 2). Dr. Casey’s background is in business. He originally met Cardinal Pell in 2003, when he was invited by an important national recruiter firm in Australia to become the CFO of Sydney’s Archdiocese. The Cardinal was looking for a tough negotiator for the Church: ‘If there is something left on the table because we do not know how to negotiate what belongs to the Church, we are not doing the right job here’ (Danny Casey, Personal Interview, Sep 17, 2015). With this, Dr. Casey accepted the task and started to work as CFO in Sidney in early 2004. He worked in the diocesan administration for around 11 years. During that period of time, the diocese increased its annual expenses by almost 250%, and not only kept their assets, but actually doubled them. The formula was not speculation or high risk investments. The formula was rather a matter of taking into consideration the reality of an institution such as the Church. Meaning, ultimately, that every dollar the institution earns is a dollar that should be spent on her mission, without affecting long term properties. Translating this into diocesan administration meant keeping real value on properties, and using the money for pastoral projects and to further advance the mission of the Church (Zech 2008, 109).

New income came into Sydney, especially through the following strategies: lending properties and asking for the rent in advance, credit institutions or those who became users of diocesan assets. This financial development of Church assets allowed the diocesan CFO to dispose of more money, such as to expand properties (also by building in Rome Casa Australia, a pilgrim house for visitors to Rome). Or, to expand money-use without the consequence of new debts or financial burdens in the diocese, that future shepherds or faithful ought to pay. Dr. Casey was the first CFO who was a layman in Sydney’s Archdiocese, and he was certainly paid more than the last priest occupying that job, but it was well worth the cost. In 2014, when Cardinal Pell was appointed as Prefect for the Secretariat for the Economy, he wanted to bring his old administrator to Rome. Dr. Casey accepted, but only for a 2 years period of time, telling Cardinal Pell he had no intention of developing a career in Rome, but only to set in place the economic reform desired by the Pope.

To bring about this reform, first and foremost was the need to establish standards for financial administration and policies. These new standardized policies were not in place inside the Roman Curia. Media narrative read between the lines in regards the Secretariat for the Economy’s indication that, ‘the Dicasteries [offices of the Roman
Curia] will be empowered to spend within the approved budget and any expenditure shall not be authorized’ (Secretary for the Economy, Bulletin 2). Some media stressed the malaise of secret operations within the ‘Vatican Bank’ (Kington 2015). Others underlined instead the Church’s interest in maintaining a good reputation, especially due to the exigencies of U.S. bishops calling for greater transparency (Almeida Fernandes 2015). Both camps, however, have ignored the social context of the Roman Curia. Namely that it is inserted in the Italian Republic which has a significant underground economy, as one of every four Euros traded in the Italian economy are not declared to the Nation’s fiscal authority (Ardizzi et al 2012). Whether the Church, growing in Italy, would need to set up more rigid controls than the state seems to be an open question. In some sense, the Roman Curia’s economic issues reflected, on the one hand, the reality of an institution dealing with the world not as an enterprise, but as that which it is: a religious institution. Yet, on the other hand, media manifests the reality of an institution growing in a culture that has little public control, as could happen in Italy. Reflecting on some positive points, Vatican employees are workers of good faith and great love for the Church, highly committed to the institutional mission. These kinds of characteristics make personnel ‘very open and responsive to changes, which is part of the professional approach required for change in any institution’ (La Porte 2012, 230).

Some media understands that due to the ‘Vatican’s economic reform’ the Roman Curia’s assets will increase by €939 million in 2015 (Scammell 2015), meaning the implementation of policies and budget planning revealed that almost half of those assets were not reported in the financial documents. The reason seems to be that those assets belonged to independent entities, not needing to be reported in consolidated books. So the trend results from a budgetary and financial consolidation that is commonly used when a number of enterprises belong to the same group, to avoid internal credit-debit operations and transactions that would give a wrong idea of the real dimension of the group. And it is also done for fiscal reasons (Whittington 2005, 135). The financial consolidation of a business group is needed for public enterprises that sell stock options, but it is also useful to unite their different financial resources in one fund that might give them better revenues, avoiding financial personnel’s doubling activities and functions (IAS 2011, 27). It seems that it is due to the last reason that the Roman Curia institutions with significant investment activities are in consolidation: to create economies of scale, which is not only a good idea, but could also be a real need.

Nevertheless, the challenge is to explain in the public space why a State that since its beginning does not produce or sell anything (Moneyval 2012b, 17), having financial structures that do not exchange funds among themselves is putting in place a financial consolidation process that approaches the institution more to a private holding corporation than to a State public administration. When the list of entities that will be consolidating will be published, we could also observe if this reform was done on fiscal benefits as well. It should be noticed that the Holy See can accept physical or moral entities from Italian taxes defining them as central entities of the Holy See (Holy See 1929, 17), but I do not think that achieving fiscal benefits is the issue at stake in this reform. What seems to be the real issue here is the desire of having a consolidating fund to obtain better benefits and spend less, the so-called Vatican Asset Management (VAM) (Riva 2015). This fund would need to keep up with the legal, moral and religious obligation of
respecting the will of those donors who have given legacies to the Roman Curia during the years. Some legacies were received for the Peter’s Pence and thus their revenues should be destined for the Pope’s needs. Others were given for the charity and thus they ought to be given to charitable organizations led by the Church; finally others were given for the missions, etc.

Having more resources due to profitable revenues produced by a fund would perhaps provide the religious institution with more economic resources for the charity. The principal mission of the Roman Curia is not to provide these kind of resources, but to embody and guarantee the autonomy of the religious communities, which means good government and unity. Keeping in mind the identity of the Roman Curia would help to maintain the right image in the public space, otherwise the dicasteries managing financial investments could change the image of the Church perceived by the public opinion. The Roman Curia should not depend on the stock revenue of Wall Street, London or Luxembourg, just to give an example of the best options to invest a fund like VAM. Not to mention the responsibility of entrusting a billionaire fund of ecclesial temporal goods to individuals or private companies for financial investment.

Looking ahead, the economic reform will still be in process for the following months, after a period of around two years. The challenge is how to set up a mechanism to make it possible to operate without the current leadership. A possible solution would be to create a position to make up for this loss, such as a director of the Secretariat for the Economy of the Holy See. The idea is that it would last only for two periods, and would involve the participation of CFO’s from large dioceses who could not only learn from the Vatican administration, but also advise it. In this way, Vatican administration would become an international reality and, at the same time, would remain ready for change with regards to its senior staff officers. Most multinationals act in such a way.

4.3. Timetable

To facilitate the understanding and the speed of the process I present a timetable of the most important decisions and events regarding the ‘Vatican’s economic reform’ reported by the media so far in the Pontificate of Francis.

2013
02/14: Ernst von Freyberg named President of the Vatican Bank
02/28: Pope Benedict resigns
03/13: Pope Francis is elected Roman Pontiff
06/27: Francis names a Commission to decide on the future existence of IOR
06/28: Fr. Scarano is arrested for illegal introduction of €20 million to Italy
07/06: General Director and Deputy of IOR resign their offices
07/18: Francis names a Council of Cardinal Advisers and other experts to reform the administration of Roman Curia (COSEA)
07/31: IOR publishes a new web site and makes public its first report ever
10/01: Counselor-Cardinals Commission (G8) meets for first time
11/28: Mgr. Xuereb named Prelate for IOR
12/01: Marranci named director of IOR, Promontory Financial group becomes consultant
12/01: Cardinal Pell states the Vatican aims to be a model in financial transparency
12/06: Cardinal Pell moves to the Vatican leaving the Archdiocese of Sydney
12/31: Deutsche Bank and Banca Italia have a banking crisis regarding IOR

2014
02/24: Francis creates the Secretariat for the Economy, headed by Cardinal Pell
03/08: Cardinal Marx named General Coordinator of the Council for the Economy
03/08: Mgr. Joseph Zahra is named Vice Coordinator of the Council for the Economy
03/22: Mgr. Brian Ferme is named Prelate Secretary of the Secretariat for the Economy
07/04: Pope Francis confirms the mission of IOR and thus its existence
07/09: Jean-Baptiste Franssu named new President of IOR.
07/09: Danny Casey is officially named Director of the Secretariat for the Economy
09/26: The Secretariat for the Economy announces control offices
12/12: APSA (administration of the apostolic see) is officially called the Central Treasury

2015
03/08: Vatican shares tax information with Italy.
03/08: Rolando Marranci confirmed Director of IOR
05/26: IOR report high reduction in its revenue, from €69.3M in 2013 to €2.9M in 2014
06/05: Libero Milone appointed auditor-general.
06/10: Vatican shares tax information with the U.S.
07/06: Cardinal Pell announces Vatican books’ assets increasing in 1.2 billion Dollars
11/02: 2 Cosea members arrested under the accuse of leaking financial documents to the press

5. Conclusions: relationships, social imaginary and connections

In this paper, I have postulated that the public space, formulated through several media statements, takes the form of free market economy exigencies for the Roman Curia’s economic structures. The public space projects the idea of a religious institution which presents herself as consistent with relevant international accounting standards and generally accepted governance and reporting practices, conceiving and categorizing herself as any other international agency in the economic sphere (Rocca 2015). This presentation of the Roman Curia, due to its economic reform, is not so much an institutional goal as it is could be a condition to legitimize her voice in the public arena, and to improve the government of her structures.

Nevertheless, the new setting up of the Roman Curia in the public space creates social expectations that require a non-profit and religious institution to have techniques and data processes able to reach the immediacy and competitiveness of corporations’ information practices. The Roman Curia moreover, if not adequately explained to the faithful of the Church, could give them an erroneous understanding not only of the Holy See’s public image, but also of its identity. There is usually a gap between an institution’s declared identity and how it is perceived in the public sphere, but, in the case of the Church, this is a very important issue because truths, especially today, are accessed through confidence and trust, at least in the public space.
Lack of transparency and reform locate the Church alongside organizations under public pressure and primarily allow individuals to justify their ‘believing without belonging’, in the famous words of Stuart Mill: ‘pagan self-assertion is better than Christian self-denial’ (Taylor 2007, 495). This draws me to stress some contents for Church communicators that could benefit institutional declarations on ‘the Vatican’s economic reform’. It is by outlining these contents that I would like to conclude.

(1) The Church is not the same as any other public organization. Yet, also in her case the image of dishonesty and money-interest-driven activities would immediately drive the individual to reject it. While transparency and reform are thus an exigency for the ecclesial institution, they are even more for the faithful who aim to receive the best possible service, whether from a religious institution or any other human organization.

(2) ‘The Vatican’s economic reform’ could help provide the Church with new strength, dynamism and vitality in four aspects. (a) Sound Financial Administration – by creating budgetary and asset management procedures, (b) Transparency – by setting up procedures to ensure they follow international standards of transparency and accountability, (c) Integrity – the said reform could enable more formal involvement of senior and experienced experts in financial administration, planning and reporting which will make the I.O.R. more consistent with the Church’s mission and (d) Charity – will ensure better use of resources, improving the support available for various programs, particularly the Church’s pastoral works with the poor and marginalized, always remembering that the Roman Curia is in place for the good government of the Pope’s ministry towards unity and communion of the Church in the whole world.

I think, and say with confidence, that, if current difficulties are overcome, these developments could steer in reforms that affect and create a ripple effect in diocesan economic organizations of the Church. By being a model in sound financial administration, integrity, transparency, charity and ‘good-housekeeping’, or stewardship, the Church can too become ‘a light of the earth’, as well as a beacon in the public space for institutions to aspire to – and emulate.

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