

The “Francis Effect”: One Bishop’s Impression



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It has been said of recent Popes in the Roman Catholic Church that “John Paul II told us *what* to do; Benedict XVI told us *why* we should do it; Francis is telling us to *‘Do it’* (Bishop Blaise Cupich, “Response to Cardinal Rodriguez at The Catholic University of America”, June 3, 2014)”. While that is an interesting and succinct “sound-byte” it is very difficult to give “Cliff Notes” for the past 36 years of papal history with precision, especially since the papacy of Pope Francis is so recent and is currently unfolding. There is a danger, precipitated by the media, in taking any Pope’s words at face value or divorcing them from his larger message without doing a disservice to the man’s thought. While that is certainly true of the various types of message delivered by any Pope, it is more of a temptation when a Pope goes “off script” or makes brief remarks at a press conference or informal social setting that then flash across the internet without context or nuance.

Such has been the case with Pope Francis since his election to the papacy on March 13, 2013. His predecessors, Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, did not give press conferences and rarely went “off script”. They were deep thinkers, one a philosopher and the other a theologian, who carefully crafted their ideas into sermons, speeches or writings that required equally deep analysis and study. Pope Francis, however, while equally profound in my opinion – a Jesuit by training and experience! – has demonstrated a very different style, one to which we are not accustomed to observe in Popes. We should not mistake a “difference in style” from a “difference in substance” simply because we are witnessing a different manner of communicating. When thinking about Pope Francis, that is an important thing to keep in mind.

No one can doubt – whether a member of the Roman Catholic Church or not – that Pope Francis has taken the world by storm since

assuming the papacy less than two years ago. There is an expression used in the Roman Catholic Church to describe that phenomenon and it is called “the Francis Effect”. People frequently say that Pope Francis has made a real difference in the way that the papacy and, therefore, the Roman Catholic Church are viewed in the world in recent months. I think that is true. But, again, I credit his “style” of being Pope for that more than any substantial difference from the thought or teaching of his predecessors.

I think anyone with experience as a leader will tell you that it is not “what” you say or do that most frequently generates a response – positive or negative – from people but, rather “how” you say or do something. In Pope Francis’ case, his manner of communicating, his “style” if you will, has created more openness or, at least, more interest from the broader public. The media has created more “space” for him in its reporting and that is a good thing – not simply for him personally but for the message, the “good news” he hopes to share.

Let’s be honest, however. Pope St. John Paul II, 59 years of age at his election, was regarded as a “rock star” wherever he went and he was seen by more people than any other human being in history. Pope Benedict XVI, by contrast, much older at his accession to the Chair of Peter, seemed more reserved, more academic, more interested in being heard and read than being seen. Yet the crowds came out for him, too, wherever he went. In either case, there was never a doubt that each was a Pope as the world traditionally considered Popes to be, with some modest innovation here or there.

Pope Francis, only one year younger than Pope Benedict XVI at his election, is seen as simpler, perhaps humbler, clearly softer in tone, much more of a listener than a speaker, more given to open discussion and dialogue than to papal pronouncement. The fact of the matter is that everyone is different, no two people are the same no matter what their role or status might be. When considering papal elections, there is an expression used in Italian that takes such difference into account: “*Papa grosso, Papa magro*”, “fat Pope, skinny Pope”. The current Pope will differ from the past Pope and the next Pope will differ from him.

There is something else that should be kept in mind when thinking about the three Popes of the last 36 years and that is their national origins and cultural backgrounds. Pope John Paul II was a European, born and raised in Poland, who lived through the experience of the Second World War in his native homeland and that background shaped his worldview. He participated in the Second Vatican Council which initiated the Roman Catholic Church into the modern era. Pope Benedict XVI is also a European, born and raised in Germany, also a product of the Second World War in his native homeland and that background shaped his worldview as well; he also was a participant in

the Second Vatican Council. Both of these men became bishops at a young age, John Paul II was 38 and Pope Benedict XVI was 49.

Pope Francis, by contrast, is not European, the first non-European elected Pope in over 1300 years. He is from the Americas, from Argentina. Francis was only 10 years old at the end of the Second World War. He was not ordained a priest until five years after the Second Vatican Council ended, in 1969, and he became a bishop at the age of 56. He was born, raised and ministered in the environment of an emerging Latin American country and culture that shaped his worldview. Unlike his predecessors, he was not a diocesan priest but a member of a religious order, a Jesuit, the first religious to assume the papacy in over 160 years. John Paul II was a poet and an actor, a philosopher and an academic. Benedict XVI was a musician, a theologian and an academic. The two had similar European cultural and professional experiences prior to the papacy. Pope Francis, a Latino, was a chemical technician and an academic as well, although with more limited experience in university teaching. In terms of background, Francis' experience differed from that of his immediate predecessors. That also should be kept in mind.

I had the privilege of meeting all three Popes: Pope St. John Paul II twice; Pope Benedict XVI – who appointed me Bishop of Trenton – many times as Cardinal and Pope; and Pope Francis for several days in January of this past year. Each man radiated holiness and impressed me as men of God and the Church. John Paul II appeared keenly aware of his role and responsibilities and the impact and effect of his “presence”. Benedict XVI was scholarly and intense, very friendly but somewhat reserved. Francis also seems a bit reserved but very interested, very simple, warm and gracious. Unlike his two predecessors, Pope Francis does not speak English easily – “it is difficult”, he told me – which made our conversation a bit awkward. In the *Domus Sanctae Marthae* where he lives rather than in the Apostolic Palace inhabited by his predecessors, Pope Francis is very unassuming, going about his day to day activities without any fanfare but put him in front of a crowd and he comes alive with joy and warmth, almost like a different person. There is something very attractive about him, almost grandfatherly, that draws you to him. That is one aspect of his “style” that has captured the world’s attention and imagination. Add to that his emphasis on inclusivity and broad pastoral understanding and you can immediately see the basis for such interest.

Let’s admit the fact that all three Popes drove around the piazza outside St. Peter’s in a jeep greeting pilgrims after an audience. All three Popes reached out into the crowds, lifted up and kissed babies. All three Popes embraced disfigured and handicapped people. All three Popes visited prisons and hospitals. All three Popes travelled outside of Rome. All three Popes addressed world crises, advocated for the poor

and advanced the Catholic faith. Why is it, then, when Pope Francis does these things he seems to be getting much more attention? Is it simply a matter of style or is there something deeper, more substantial at work? The focus of my reflections here will not be a comparison and contrast among three different papal “styles”. Rather, I would like to concentrate on Pope Francis and the substantial rather than stylistic impact he is making on the Roman Catholic Church and beyond. To accomplish this, permit me to say something about what it means to be Pope, the Bishop of Rome.

The Pope is the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church, roughly 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide. He is called: Bishop of Rome – the title he seems to prefer – the seat of governance of the Roman Catholic Church; Vicar of Christ on earth; Successor to St. Peter; Supreme Pontiff (from a Latin term, “*pontifex*” meaning “bridge builder”); Servant of the Servants of God; Holy Father; His Holiness, the title properly used when addressing him in speech or in writing. He is also the Head of the State of Vatican City, the world’s smallest independent country, an absolute monarchy with the Pope as leader. It is about 110 acres in size, enclosed within a wall in Rome, the size of a golf course here in the United States. Its population is around 830 people, mostly clergy, religious and employees of the Vatican. The Vatican is also called the “Holy See” or “Apostolic See (a reference to the Apostles Peter – the first Pope – and Paul, who were martyred there)”. The Holy or Apostolic See also includes all the offices or departments of the Vatican, in addition to the Office of the Supreme Pontiff.

The Pope’s relationship to the Vatican City State as its national head is probably his least important responsibility since there is a “governor” who runs its daily affairs. The Pope is a “spiritual” or “religious leader”, a person most would acknowledge is the most important, certainly the most visible such leader in the world. The primary focus of his attention is the Roman Catholic Church worldwide and everything connected with it. He embodies, more than any other Catholic, Christ’s three-fold mission: to teach, to govern and to sanctify the baptized people of God. Roman Catholics believe that Christ created the role of Pope when he identified St. Peter as Head of the Apostles and the one to whom he gave the Keys of the Kingdom of God. Hence, the papacy is considered “divinely instituted” as is the Roman Catholic Church founded by Christ. For that reason, the Pope is given – owed really – the respect, reverence and adherence of all the baptized Catholic faithful, especially in the area of faith and morals.

Unlike elections that we are used to in the United States, there are no announced candidates, campaigns, primaries, or conventions preceding a papal election or “conclave”. Elected by the College of Cardinals, the man chosen to be Pope – or those who watch or observe papal conclaves – have no idea who will emerge from the locked Sistine

Chapel as Bishop of Rome once the white smoke rises. There is no campaign agenda or party platform that carries the man through to the papacy. The old saying goes “the man who enters the conclave as Pope comes out as Cardinal”. I am sure that Cardinals have some ideas of whom they like when processing into the Sistine Chapel but the whole process, cloaked in absolute secrecy that each Cardinal vows never to break, is really the result of inspiration. Catholics believe the election to be divinely inspired. Jorge Cardinal Bergoglio – Pope Francis – was not one of the big names on the rumor circuit.

With that as background, you can see why the person of the Pope – whoever holds the Office – carries such sway with Roman Catholics. Whatever he says – whether in official intentional teaching which binds the consciences of baptized Catholics or in other commentary he makes – is important to believing Roman Catholics. It is, therefore, very difficult for Roman Catholics to ignore or dismiss what he says. At the same time, gestures of the Pope, what he does, also have a meaning, sometimes symbolic and other times “instructional” in themselves. The Pope teaches by what he does. Let me give you an example of both.

Like Popes before him, Pope Francis issued a document called an apostolic exhortation ***Evangelii Gaudium***, “The Joy of the Gospel”, on November 24, 2013. In this document sometimes called the “manifesto of Pope Francis”, the Pope presented the major themes for his pontificate, especially regarding social justice and care for the poor. It captured the world’s attention as a major instruction by Pope Francis. Given some of its critique of contemporary market economies as contributing to world poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth, the Pope’s words drew a quick and critical reaction in some corners.

Several months before, Pope Francis issued his first papal encyclical ***Lumen Fidei***, “The Light of Faith”, on June 29, 2013 completing the work of Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclicals on “Charity” and “Hope”. Apostolic exhortations and encyclicals are very important teaching documents issued by the Pope and are meant to be substantial influences applied to shape Catholic thinking. An “apostolic exhortation” usually follows a Synod of Bishops and is addressed to a particular group or groups within the Roman Catholic Church on the topic discussed at a Synod. It advances elements of Church doctrine intended for the group to whom it is addressed. An “encyclical” is a formal letter written by the Pope intended to communicate particular Church discipline, doctrines or moral teaching. It has more weight than an exhortation.

Gestures or actions of the Pope, on the other hand, are also instructive but not in the same way as official papal documents intended to teach the faithful. They convey the Pope’s attitude or disposition toward something important to Roman Catholics. One of Pope Francis’ first such gestures was his choice not to wear the traditional papal vest-

ments when he first appeared on the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica after his election. On that same occasion, rather than simply offer the traditional blessing, the Pope asked the people gathered in the piazza and around the world to bless and pray for him. Both of these gestures were a departure from papal tradition, symbolizing humility and servitude rather than pageantry often associated with the papal office. Similarly, Pope Francis’ decision not to live in the Apostolic Palace as his predecessors but, rather, in a religious boarding house and hotel nearby were interpreted as a sign of his simplicity and desire not to isolate himself in traditional surroundings considered more triumphal.

On Holy Thursday 2014, in a ceremonial action traditionally reserved to male clergymen of high rank – successors to the Apostles – Pope Francis chose to wash the feet of men, women and even non-Catholics. That inclusion was seen as a radical change from past ceremonial practice at the Vatican, and interpreted as a gesture to be imitated by bishops and priests throughout the world as they celebrated the rituals of Holy Thursday. A difference in style to be sure but perhaps, also a communication of something more substantial.

Words and gestures of Pope Francis have become the prism through which Catholics and non-Catholics alike look at him and the direction of his papacy. They also become a lens for looking at the Roman Catholic Church. Observers of the Vatican have been quick to offer many, varied and even contrasting interpretations of their meanings. One thing is sure, however: neither can be ignored when trying to gain an insight into the “Francis effect”.