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What?s in store for the new pope's first days?

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If it hasn?t happened by the time you are reading this newspaper, sometime very soon the Catholic church will have a new pope. Naturally the world will be waiting to find out what kind of leader he?s likely to be, and his first few days therefore loom as critical moments to begin shaping his papacy.

The very first hint may come with the new pope?s initial blessing, delivered shortly after his election from the central balcony of St. Peter?s Basilica. When Pope John Paul II stepped out to greet the crowd in October 1978, he broke with custom and offered a few spontaneous remarks in addition to the formal prayer.

The papal master of ceremonies at the time, Fr. Virgilio Noe, tried to steer him back after the blessing, as if to say that papal protocol did not allow anything else. John Paul gently slapped his hand away, the first clear sign that this was not a pope who would be shackled to precedent.

Likewise, when Pope Benedict XVI stepped out onto the balcony in 2005, photographers caught images of a plain black sweater under his new papal vestments. (As a footnote, the sleeves of the sweater were later airbrushed out of official Vatican portraits of the moment.) The new pope declared himself ?a simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the lord.? Both the sweater and the words were hints that Benedict didn?t have an overly grandiose notion of his own role, an outlook that culminated eight years later in his resignation.

If the new pope holds to form, he?ll ask the cardinals who elected him to stay an extra night in the Casa Santa Marta, the hotel on Vatican grounds where they?re lodged during the conclave, and then join him the next morning for Mass in the Sistine Chapel.

Eight years ago, Benedict prepared a four-page speech in Latin for the occasion, committing himself to work toward ?collegial communion,? a proper interpretation of the Second Vatican Council, ecumenism and dialogue with cultures, ?authentic social development? and outreach to the young. How well he pulled off any of that is a matter for debate, but it was nonetheless a basic blueprint for his pontificate.

The first bit of business for the new pope usually comes on the second day after his election, when it?s customary to reconfirm the heads of Vatican offices who temporarily lost their jobs during the interregnum. This time, if the new pope doesn?t issue that order right away, it could be the first hint that the cardinals got their wish for someone who truly intends to clean house in the Vatican?s bureaucracy.

Benedict also spent his early days in the Apostolic Palace answering congratulatory telegrams from heads of state and other VIPs. Responding to Rome?s chief rabbi, for instance, the new pope vowed to pursue good relations with Jews: ?I trust in the help of the Almighty to continue and to strengthen the dialogue and collaboration with the sons and daughters of the Jewish people.?

Quite probably, the new pope will stage a brief audience with journalists on hand to cover his election. Benedict did so last time on April 23, four days after becoming pope. Speaking to more than 4,000 members of the media, he thanked them for their efforts.

?I know how hard you have worked, far away from your homes and families, for long hours and in sometimes difficult conditions,? he said.

The pope did not, however, take any questions, even a symbolic one or two just to toss the media a bone, nor did he say anything of substance about his papacy. It will be interesting to see if the next pope uses the occasion to signal a bit more availability to the press -- or, alternatively, whether he decides not to do it at all, which would offer a hint in the opposite direction.

The new pope?s real debut comes with his inaugural Mass, usually held four or five days after the election in order to provide time to work out the logistics of accommodating heads of state and other dignitaries, as well as the roughly 500,000 people who turned out last time.

During the Mass, the new pope will receive the symbols of his office. He accepts the fisherman?s ring and seal -- representing his continuity with St. Peter -- and a lamb?s wool pallium, a sash that signifies the pope?s role as the shepherd of the faithful.

In 2005, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, then the secretary of state, brought a golden jewelry box before the new pontiff with its lid ajar, exposing the glittering fisherman?s ring, emblazoned with a relief of Peter casting his fishing net -- the image traditionally used to seal apostolic letters. Benedict plucked it from the box and slid his right ring finger through it.

Twelve people representing Christ?s disciples then lined up to kneel before Benedict and kiss his ring. Among the 12 chosen was a Benedictine sister, the first religious woman ever to participate in the ritual.

Benedict used his homily at the inaugural Mass to lay out a broad vision for his pontificate.

?My real program of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen, together with the whole church,? Benedict said. He extended his call to Christian churches ?not yet in full communion? with the Catholic church and to the ?Jewish people,? whom he characterized as ?brothers and sisters,? heirs to an ?irrevocable? bond with God, united with the church through ?a great shared spiritual heritage.?

In 2005, dignitaries from more than 131 countries attended the Mass, including German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Prince Albert II of Monaco, and Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, head of the American delegation. The crowd also included Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams; Metropolitan Chrisostomos, a top envoy for Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of the world?s Christian Orthodox; and a senior representative of the Russian Orthodox church, Metropolitan Kirill. All met with the pope later in the day.

After the inaugural, it?s customary for the new pope to schedule audiences with groups of people in Rome for the festivities, including ecumenical and interreligious figures who turned out for the inaugural and pilgrims from his native country. These aren?t exactly policy speeches, but they can sometimes drop hints about where things might go.

Last time, Benedict used the session with German pilgrims, held one day after the inaugural Mass, to become the first pope in history to compare his own election to the death penalty.

?As the trend in the ballots slowly made me realize that -- in a manner of speaking the guillotine would fall on me -- I started to feel quite dizzy,? he said.

Today it?s hard to remember that line and not see the beginning of a trajectory that culminated in the pontiff?s decision to step down.

To be sure, the first few days are never a papacy in miniature. In April 2005, no one foresaw Benedict?s explosive speech in Regensburg, Germany, that ignited protest across the Islamic world, or the contretemps over a Holocaust-denying bishop in 2009, or the explosion of the sex abuse crisis in Europe in 2010, or the Vatican leaks mess. Papacies, like presidencies and other positions of leadership, are to some extent always hostage to unforeseen events.

Nevertheless, first impressions are always the most important, and for that reason alone the early days of the next papacy will be well worth watching.

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