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Election of Pope Francis brings humility, simplicity, maybe even teamwork

by Antonio M. Pernia

Pope Francis
Perspective

"Yes, I'm very happy with the election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the new pope of the Catholic church," I answered when a fellow student here at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., asked.

I do think this was a truly inspired choice. For as Pope Francis, Bergoglio has the potential of responding to some of the more important challenges facing the Catholic church today.

Personality. Many have commented on the humility, simplicity and spirituality of the man. And it is true that, when you meet him, one can easily sense these characteristics. I have met Bergoglio only twice, once in Buenos Aires and another time in Rome, but both meetings were very inspiring.

In May 2001, I visited my confreres of the Divine Word Missionaries in Argentina. One morning in Buenos Aires, a confrere generously offered to show me around the city. When we were at the cathedral and the archbishop's residence, my confrere said: "Let's see if the cardinal is here and, if so, let's pay him a visit."

I protested that we had not made any appointment with him. But my confrere said we should just try. It turned out the cardinal was in, and he welcomed us like we had set an appointment. It turned out to be a very refreshing visit, and I was deeply impressed by the simplicity and humility of this "Prince of the Church." One can see he had a true love for people, especially the poor and the marginalized in society.

Thus, one is not surprised with his choice of Francis as his pontifical name. He will make a good pastor of

a church for and of the poor.

Origin. The first non-European pope in the modern era, the first Latin American pope. Bergoglio's election puts a new face to the Catholic church, one that is no longer a European church, but a truly global church.

It also reflects the so-called "demographic shift" of the Catholic church, from heavily populated in the "global north" to the "global south" (that is, Latin America, Africa, Asia), where about two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics now live. In fact, almost 50 percent of all Catholics live in Latin America alone. So it is only reasonable that the head of the Catholic church should originate from the same continent.

To speak of the "global south" is also to speak about mission and evangelization, if only because these used to be the traditional "mission territories," but also because more and more missionaries are now originating from these young churches. Indeed, the first important challenge of the Catholic church is the "ad-extra" dimension, and that is, mission and evangelization, or bringing the Gospel to peoples. As theologians put it, the church exists by mission just as fire exists by burning.

If something is wrong with the church today, maybe it is because it is not doing (or not doing enough or not doing well) what it is supposed to do. There is no fire because there is no burning. There is less church because there is less mission and evangelization.

Religious belonging. Not only is Bergoglio the first Latin American pope, he is also the first Jesuit pope and the first pope belonging to a religious order in recent history. It is therefore possible Pope Francis would see the need to reform not just the Curia, but the papacy itself along the lines of the more democratic and collegial style of governance of religious congregations.

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For instance, just as the superior general of religious orders has a council to govern with him, cannot the pope, too, have a council (e.g., of six, or eight or 10) who would share the responsibility of leadership with him? In a more complex world -- more multicultural, pluralistic, post-modern, global and technological -- it is no longer possible for one person to govern alone.

Team leadership, or participative leadership, is becoming more and more a necessity. It would seem the Second Vatican Council's intuition about collegiality now needs to be taken seriously.

Indeed, a second important challenge of the Catholic church today is the "ad-intra" dimension; that is, the question of governance and consequently the reform of the Curia and the papacy itself. Indeed, the "ad-extra" challenge of evangelization will not progress if the "ad-intra" challenge of governance is not tended. The church needs to put its house in order if it is to effectively bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Our new pope seems to be strategically poised to lead the Catholic church in meeting these challenges. With God's grace and the light of the Spirit, we may still see the Catholic church rebuilt under Francis.

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