

First Impressions of Francis

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 15, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The speculation in advance of the conclave betrayed a myopia that sometimes afflicts journalists, myself included. From the brief and fragmentary comments that came from the cardinals during their pre-conclave meetings, we all deduced that the cardinals were looking for a strong manager to reform the curia, and that they wanted someone who could carry on the New Evangelization with vigor and attractiveness, and that they wanted someone younger, and that?..We forgot the most important thing. They wanted a man of God.

It appears that they found him. In his first full day in office, Pope Francis spent a half hour in prayer before the icon to the Virgin Mary at Santa Maria Maggiore. On the way back to the Vatican, he stopped at the hotel he had been staying at before the conclave to collect his belongings and pay his bill. At Mass in the Sistine Chapel with the cardinals who had elected him the day before, the new pope did not deliver an address in Latin from his throne, but walked over to the pulpit and delivered a simple, but powerful, sermon in Italian. These three episodes showed the world a little bit about the man's style. I use that word not in the sense that we speak of the "Style" section of the Washington Post, but in the sense conveyed by the remark of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: *Le style c'est l'homme*. The style is the man.

We see, and we are intended to see, in Francis' first actions something of his heart. It is an unpretentious heart quite obviously. Watching him preside at Mass yesterday, I was reminded of the phrase we learned in liturgy class: the "noble simplicity of the Roman Rite." Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict, had a love for the baroque, in his musical tastes and his liturgical tastes. We do not yet know what music is in Francis' iPad, but I think it is safe to say that his liturgical tastes are less elaborate than his predecessor. One almost felt sorry for Msgr. Marini, the papal master of ceremonies and architect of Benedict's liturgical style. Almost. I was glad that Pope Francis faced the congregation, not the wall. And, with the gravity of his posture and the prayerfulness of his words, I did not sense that we had lost any awareness of the divine by facing west instead of east. A Vatican diplomat assured me yesterday, "The traditional Latin Mass brigade is finished."

I do not begrudge those with an affection or even a nostalgia for the traditional Latin Mass the chance to participate in it. But, restoring the Tridentine Rite is not exactly a pastoral program for the twenty-first century either. But, over the past few years, and not only in Rome, the sense was growing that this was all about dressing up. The cappa magnas, which play no part in the liturgy itself, were purchased and worn. Cardinal deacons, in dalmatics and miters, served papal masses. If all that goes away, that is fine with me.

More important will be the changes Francis affects in the top management of the curia. Cardinal Bertone is already 78 years old, so the new pope's first appointment will be key. He must choose an Italian, to be sure, and he is well advised to choose someone from the diplomatic corps. Otherwise, the career diplomats will just obstruct any effort at reform if they do not feel that one of their own is at the table leading it. Two names have been circulating as men capable of reforming the curia, but also as men who are deeply prayerful and evidence little of the ambition that has been such a cancer in the curia: Archbishop Celestino Migliore, currently the nuncio in Poland, and Luigi Ventura, the nuncio in France. Both men have been away from the Vatican during

Benedict's tenure and are not associated with Bertone's mess. It will be curious to see whether Cardinal Marc Ouellet stays at the Congregation for Bishops. If recent appointments in the U.S. are any indication, it would be better if he went to a different job. It would be strange for the new pope to remove Archbishop Muller from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seeing as he just got there last year, but it is also far from clear if Muller is up to the job. These are three jobs at the Vatican ? Secretary of State, Prefect for the Congregation for Bishops and Prefect of the CDF ? that can't be faked. You need competence in all three. The new pope must put men in each job that he can trust, as well as men that can engage the reforms that the cardinals have demanded.

Francis has a mandate from the cardinals to provide better governance. But, that is only part of the job and the part best achieved by selecting strong, competent, and holy assistants. What will matter more to those of us in the pews is how he leads the Church in prayer, what he says to us in his homilies, the example he gives of being a Christian in the world. Already, we have pictures of him on Holy Thursday, not only washing the feet of women ? a practice that drives some conservative Catholics nuts ? but of then-Cardinal Bergoglio going to a shelter for drug addicts on Holy Thursday and washing the feet of the addicts. His tensions with the government of Argentina were not only over same-sex marriage but over the government's handling of poverty which, in Argentina as in the U.S., often involves other social pathologies like drugs and violence. The fact that this man not only talked about the poor and the addicted, but washed their feet, that is what I think most of us want in a pope, no matter our different ideologies.

Each day over the next week, we will learn a little more. Not only about Francis, but about ourselves. Clearly, he sees issues like same-sex marriage as flowing from the same consumer culture that creates vast poverty: When Francis condemns globalization, it challenges both the left and the right to reconsider some of their own prejudices. We in the U.S. forget, or refuse to consider, how the rest of the world views us. And, Benedict, in his sermons and speeches, tended to go to the foundational issues of theology. The prospect of a plain-speaking pope who invites the U.S. Catholic community to confront its own affluence and all the sinfulness that affluence invites, that is a prospect that is at the very least, intriguing. Buckle up, my friends. Watching the new pope conduct himself yesterday, I had the distinct impression that he is not going to be bossed around, not by Msgr. Marini and not by anybody. We are in for an exciting ride.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/23/2014 - 07:42): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/first-impressions-francis>