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Will the new Francis be a 'rebuilder' for the Catholic church?

Richard Gaillardetz | Mar. 15, 2013
Pope Francis
Analysis

The only question about the election of our new pope is which is the greatest surprise: that he is a Jesuit, that he is Latin American, or that he is 76? I am not sure what significance to make of the election of the first Jesuit, but I do suspect the latter two surprises are linked.

The conclave made a bold decision in electing the first Latin American pope in history. Electing a proven doctrinal conservative who was relatively advanced in age may have been a way of hedging bets against the possibility of a long pontificate that would depart too much from the last two pontificates.

There is one initial sign of papal continuity that is worth mentioning. Over the last three weeks, much has been made of Pope Benedict's decision to resign. Many, including me, praised the move as an important step toward the demystification of the papacy and a reminder that a pope is only pope by virtue of office and should be able to resign just as any bishop can. That is why many of us were disappointed when the announcement was made that Pope Benedict would keep his papal name and would carry the title "pope emeritus."

Yet here was Pope Francis, in his opening words, never once using the title "pope" but referring to himself as "bishop of Rome" and speaking fondly of the local church of Rome. There was also a very interesting statement about his need to "say a prayer for our Bishop Emeritus Benedict XVI." Was Pope Francis making it clear, in spite of the announced protocol, that there can be only one pope?

Pope Benedict was making a clear statement about the orientation of his papacy when he took the name of St. Benedict of Nursia. One can hope the same is true of our new pope, who chose his name to invoke not the Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier, but St. Francis of Assisi. Born into a medieval church rife with ecclesiastical corruption, that 13th-century Francis quite consciously rejected the allure of clerical privilege and instigated sweeping church reform using the potent instruments of evangelical poverty and a spirit of humble discipleship.

Was Pope Francis signaling his own conviction that, in a church racked by financial scandals, ecclesiastical cronyism and clerical privilege, the reformist spirit of St. Francis of Assisi was required? One finds some support for this hope in a speech that then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio gave in the fall [1] in which he denounced "a rigorous and hypocritical neo-clericalism" and a "pharisaical Gnosticism" found in too many priests who would withhold the sacraments from the morally fallen in order to preserve their own supremacy.

In the weeks and months ahead, the Catholic church's new pastor will have to develop an agenda for his papacy. Like his predecessor, at the age of 76 he will be aware that the years given to him may be limited. He was chosen, I believe, because many of the cardinal electors saw him as well suited to undertake the transformation of church governance and curial reform they called for in their many pre-conclave meetings. Whether Pope Francis is in fact the man for the job remains to be seen. What we can say is the need for such reform is real and urgent.

Many of the cardinal electors, and not a few ordinary Catholics, have been dismayed by the public scandal caused by the Vatileaks fiasco, concerns about the Vatican bank's possible complicity in money laundering, and the tawdry revelations of cronyism and careerism that have been unearthed. This has led to calls from across the ideological spectrum for a more transparent and efficient Curia, one with fewer turf wars and siloes. They called for greater communication among dicasteries and between dicasteries and bishops. Worthwhile goals, to be sure, but they simply do not go to the heart of what ails our church's leadership.

Real reform can't mean simply making sure "the trains run on time." One of the lessons to be learned from Pope Benedict's retirement is that the papacy, in its present form, places an impossible burden on one locus of authority (the pope and his Curia) and is fundamentally unworkable. In spite of the hopes of the Second Vatican Council, what we have in the Roman Catholic church today is an institution with an unprecedented centralization of authority in the papacy. Yet the dominant globalizing impulses of our time suggest instead the need for a much more diffuse and distributed exercise of authority.

For Catholics, the Petrine ministry is vital to the life of the church, but fundamental changes are necessary. The last two popes made their greatest impact on the church and the world not by their juridical, disciplinary actions, but through public suasion in their preaching and teaching. Yet that focus led to their neglect of the unwieldy Vatican bureaucracy, with horrible consequences. Only a dramatic shift of administrative responsibility away from the Curia and toward more regional loci of authority would free Pope Francis to serve as "missionary-in-chief" and make more effective use of the most influential bully pulpit in the world without worrying about the danger of administrative neglect

In all but the most extraordinary of circumstances, Pope Francis should orient his Petrine primacy toward "confirming his brothers"; that is, supporting and facilitating the effective ministry of his brother bishops at regional and local levels. This in turn would require a far more robust application of the principle of subsidiarity to church leadership: "Higher authority" should intervene in church matters only when those matters cannot be effectively handled at the local levels. Necessary curial reform must go beyond pursuit of greater transparency and efficiency to seek a fundamental de-centering of curial authority by redistributing much of that authority to properly episcopal structures (e.g., global and regional synods, episcopal conferences, provincial metropolitan structures).

Effective curial reform will also require the de-clericalization of curial authority. There is no reason to have the Vatican's bureaucracy populated almost exclusively by clerics. The tradition of ordaining senior bureaucrats and church diplomats to the episcopate undermines the ministerial heart of the episcopate and turns it into an honorific. In the wake of a redistribution of administrative responsibility away from the Curia to the regional and local levels of ecclesial life, the bureaucratic structures that would remain should be populated with a healthy dose of laypeople and particularly women at all levels of curial leadership.

Authentic ecclesiastical reform must work toward the formation of a community of faith purged of arrogance, rigidity, careerism and clerical privilege. May our new Francis hear the divine call to "*re*build my church."

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