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The world watches the elevation of Pope Francis

Pat Perriello | Mar. 18, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

The world is watching every move Pope Francis makes. All are united in hoping for and praying for a successful new beginning for Francis and the church of Rome. Progressive and conservative Catholics alike are searching for signs of renewal from our new pope. There appears to be common ground on many issues at this time among the most conservative and the most liberal of Catholics.

Prior to the opening of the recent conclave, I suggested [1] a number of qualities that would be desirable in a new pope. I said we needed a holy man of prayer. He needed to exemplify Gospel values and a preference for the poor. He also needed experience beyond the Vatican and a pastoral instinct. It is encouraging, I believe, that at first sight, Francis seems to embody these qualities, and I believe it is fair to say both conservatives and liberals find these to be important and attractive values.

The first days of Pope Francis have given us tantalizing tidbits of anecdotes that whet our appetite for more. He took the bus back to the hotel with his fellow cardinals rather than going in an available limousine. He packed his own bags and paid his own hotel bill. We know of the stories of his refusal to live in the bishops' residence in Buenos Aires, Argentina, as cardinal, and how he cooked his own meals and used public transportation. The very choice of Francis for the papal name illustrates a devotion to the poor and social justice. Again, these are actions all Catholics find appealing.

There are, of course, countervailing points of view, and there are articles regarding his response -- or lack thereof -- to the so-called "Dirty War" in Argentina. Yet there will be time enough to criticize this new pope. For now, who cannot wish that the Holy Spirit will bring us together under this first Latin American pope to take the journey Francis himself spoke of in his first remarks to the people in St. Peter's Square?

The danger now is for unrealistic expectations. Hopefully in the time he has with us, Pope Francis can firmly address the sex abuse scandal and make meaningful reforms in the Curia and the governance of the church. If he can introduce a new tone in the relation of the church to its people that manifests greater compassion, understanding and care, then we can all be grateful for the elevation of Pope Francis.

In addition, it just may be that if Pope Francis can accomplish all these things, he may set the stage for a successor who might actually consider such cherished liberal agenda items as married priests, a female clergy, greater autonomy among regional conferences, and a greater role for the laity in the future direction of the church. As far as doctrinal changes are concerned, the most important is the recognition that when it comes to moral decisions, it is the primacy of conscience that must prevail. The truth is, this is already church teaching as enunciated in the Second Vatican Council's decree on religious liberty.

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