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# Francis vows to press Benedict's fight vs. 'dictatorship of relativism'

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 22, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis
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For those tempted to draw an overly sharp distinction between Pope Francis and his predecessor, the new pope offered a clear reminder Friday that he may have a different style than Benedict XVI, but on substance, he's cut from much the same cloth.

In a speech to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See on Friday, Francis lamented not only the material poverty of the early 21st century but also its "spiritual poverty," meaning a rejection of God and objective standards of morality.

In that regard, Francis quoted Benedict's famous critique of a post-modern "dictatorship of relativism," delivered during a homily for the Mass in 2005 that opened the conclave that elected him pope.

(In its English translation of the pope's remarks, the Vatican actually rendered the term as "tyranny," but the idea is the same. Francis said it "afflicts the so-called richer countries particularly seriously.")

The message seemed clear: Pope Francis will try to live up to his namesake, Francis of Assisi, as a man of the poor and of peace, but that doesn't signal any retreat from the moral and cultural positions associated with the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

"There is no peace without truth," Francis told the diplomats.

"There cannot be true peace if everyone is his own criterion, if everyone can always claim exclusively his own rights, without at the same time caring for the good of others, of everyone, on the basis of the nature that unites every human being on this earth."

References to universal human nature are often shorthand in Vatican discourse for defense of traditional teaching on matters such as sexuality, marriage and the family.

Francis spoke Friday morning to representatives of 180 nations, leaving just 15 internationally recognized countries that do not have formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

Francis said he hoped today "will also be an opportunity to begin a journey" to establishing relations with those remaining nations, which include China, Saudi Arabia and North Korea.

Noting that one of his titles is "pontiff," meaning "bridge builder," Francis pledged to try to create "real spaces of authentic fraternity" among peoples and cultures. He said religions have a special role in that regard: "It is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God," he said. But he said the opposite is also true: "It is not possible to establish true links with God while ignoring other people."

In terms of hints of his foreign policy agenda, Francis placed special emphasis on dialogue with Islam, fighting

poverty (both material and spiritual), building peace, and protection of the environment.

In his brief remarks, delivered in Italian, Francis did not address any specific global hot spots such as Syria, where the country's embattled Christianity minority is struggling to hold on [1] amid a bloody civil war and rising currents of Islamic radicalism. He also did not come off the cuff, as he has often done during his first week in office, sticking entirely to his prepared text.

Friday's headline, however, is probably less about Francis and foreign policy than about Francis and ecclesial policy.

Based on Friday's speech, at least, anyone who saw his election as a repudiation of the broad philosophical and theological outlook of Benedict XVI probably has another think coming.

One footnote: For the French, it was a bit of a mini-scandal that Francis did not deliver his speech today in French, the language popes traditionally use in diplomatic settings. On background, Vatican officials say the new pope can understand both French and English, but needs time to become accustomed to using those languages in public. Aside from a few lines in Spanish, so far Francis has used Italian almost exclusively for his public remarks.

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