

Five tests of whether Pope Francis' reform of the Vatican could be real

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 22, 2013 All Things Catholic
Pope Francis

Saturday will mark 10 days since the start of the Pope Francis era, and as introductions go, it's been a tour de force. Polling around the world suggests that overwhelming majorities have a positive impression of the new pope, and the media have fallen in love with a man who packs his own bags, makes his own calls and prefers to walk rather than taking the limo.

Everything Francis does, however banal, is now a sensation. The fact that TV cameras caught him checking his watch near the end of Tuesday's inaugural Mass, for instance, launched an essay in one of the Italian papers about his pastoral concern for not holding people too long for an overly elaborate liturgy.

The new papal style certainly has registered with his underlings. On Thursday, I had lunch in the Trastevere neighborhood of Rome in an eatery popular among Vatican personnel who work in the Palazzo San Callisto, and I bumped into a cardinal who's a veteran insider now over 80. When I noted he was dressed in his basic clergyman clothes rather than the usual finery, he smilingly said he was taking his cues from the new boss.

Under Francis, simple is the new chic.

As soon as Holy Week wraps up, however, the focus will shift from style to substance. Hard questions will begin to be asked about whether he's capable of delivering the reform in the Vatican that many cardinals believed they were voting for in electing him.

(Cardinals made that expectation clear in their pre-conclave comments, and the new pope indirectly confirmed it when he revealed that some cardinals had suggested he should call himself Adrian after Pope Adrian VI, whose attempted house-cleaning in the early 16th century helped launch the Counter-Reformation.)

Already there have been hints that Francis may be in earnest. On March 16, the Vatican issued a terse two-line statement indicating that heads of departments, who lost their jobs when the previous papacy ended, [have been reappointed](#) [1] only *donec aliter provideatur*, meaning "until other provisions are made."

Among insiders, those three words shook the world because they suggested major changes may be coming sooner rather than later.

As Francis navigates the transition from tone-setting to governing, five litmus tests loom on the near horizon. How he handles them should tell us a good deal about what kind of reformer he intends to be.

Secretary of state

Every pope's choice for secretary of state is important, since the job is akin to being the Vatican's prime minister. This time around, it's even more crucial because the incumbent, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is widely faulted for breakdowns in business management under Benedict XVI.

Bertone, in other words, is a symbol of a broken system, and whomever Francis chooses to replace him will be seen as a test of how genuinely committed the new regime is to breaking the mold.

Here's the trick: As a complete outsider to the Vatican, Francis will need someone who knows where the bodies are buried. As a reformer, he'll also need somebody who's willing to shake things up. It's no easy matter to find someone who knows the system from the inside but who's also not captive to the status quo.

Various names have been tipped as possible choices:

- Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the former substitute, or chief of staff, in the Vatican
- Archbishop Pietro Parolin, the pope's ambassador to Venezuela and the Vatican's former undersecretary for relations with states
- Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello, head of the Vatican City State
- Archbishop Luigi Ventura, formerly the nuncio to Canada and currently the papal ambassador in France
- Archbishop Celestino Migliore, nuncio to Poland and the Holy See's former representative to the United Nations

The common denominators are that all five are Italian, which some believe to be crucial under a non-Italian pope; all are perceived as highly competent, and all are perceived to have lost internal power struggles at one point or another to the old guard in the Secretariat of State, meaning they might be more inclined than others to rattle some cages.

(As a footnote, arguably no one lost out in the 2013 conclave more than Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, the Vatican's former substitute under John Paul II. Not only was he mentioned as a possible pope, which obviously didn't happen, but he was also considered a front-runner as the next secretary of state. An Argentine pope, however, probably would hesitate to appoint a fellow Argentine to the No. 2 position.)

If Francis really wants to roll the dice, he could reach into the ranks of diocesan bishops and find someone with a proven record as an administrator but who's never been part of the Vatican scene and has no investment in its tribal rivalries.

Whomever he chooses, it will speak volumes to those with eyes to see about how much change is likely and how quickly it may come.

The Vatican bank

There's talk in Rome that the Institute for the Works of Religion, better known to the world as the Vatican bank, may soon be placed under the control of the government of the Vatican City State, headed by Bertello. Technically, the IOR is not an organism of the Holy See; it's constituted as a privately held entity that reports to a committee of cardinals, and through them, directly to the pope.

In the fall, the Council of Europe's anti-money-laundering agency, Moneyval, raised questions about the lack of external regulation. Placing the bank under Bertello's purview would be one way to responding to those concerns by inserting it into the normal governance structures of the Vatican.

If Francis signs off on the plan, it would be at least a modest step toward reform.

On the more radical end of the spectrum, some observers have suggested that the IOR is an anachronism and that its roughly \$6 billion in assets could be administered by an independent "ethical bank" or some other institution external to the Vatican. The idea would be that the Vatican doesn't need its own bank, and getting rid of it would eliminate a perennial source of speculation and conspiracy theories.

(Most of that \$6 billion, by the way, isn't Vatican money. It belongs to dioceses, religious orders and Catholic organizations, which use the IOR to transfer funds around the world.)

Yet protecting its autonomy is hard-wired into the Vatican's DNA, and even a reforming pope such as Francis might find ceding control over the church's nest egg to be a bridge too far. At a minimum, however, he might demand more transparency, such as opening the bank up to external audits and asking its leadership to provide more details on its operations.

Insiders say the current director of the IOR, Italian layman Paolo Cipriani, is a "clean hands" figure who launched an internal reform long before the current round of controversy. One positive step might be to make Cipriani more available to the press, tackling questions about its operations head-on and in full public view.

If there's a decent story to tell, many outsiders can't help wondering, why don't they tell it?

Vatileaks

On Saturday, Francis travels by helicopter to Castel Gandolfo to meet his predecessor, the now-retired Benedict XVI. From a media point of view, the encounter is basically an engraved invitation to revive the Vatileaks story, since the secret dossier on the affair prepared by a team of three cardinals for Benedict XVI is now in the hands of his successor.

That dossier, of course, was the object of sensational pre-conclave reports suggesting it treated the existence of a supposed "gay lobby" within the Vatican that might have had a role in betraying the pope's trust. Vatican spokespersons dismissed those reports as "fantasies," and frankly there was little evidence from the reporting that this was anything more than a hypothesis.

Nonetheless, the question of who was really behind the leaks affair remains a classic Vatican *giallo*, meaning a mystery that many people believe will never be resolved, akin to who was behind the 1982 death of Roberto Calvi or the 1983 kidnapping of Emanuela Orlandi.

Certainly the testimony of former papal butler Paolo Gabriele during his Vatican trial in October seemed to leave some major questions hanging. They include:

- Were others involved? Gabriele testified that he discussed the general situation in the Vatican with at least four people: retired Cardinal Paolo Sardi, a former official in the Vatican Secretariat of State; Cardinal Angelo Comastri, archpriest of St. Peter's Basilica; Ingrid Stampa, a longtime assistant to Pope Benedict going back to his time as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; and Bishop Francesco Cavina of Carpi, who also worked in the Secretariat of State. In 2011, when Gabriele appeared on an Italian news broadcast in disguise, he asserted he was acting on behalf of "more than 20" insiders, but the accuracy of that claim was not pursued.
- Gabriele asserted during his testimony that he decided to begin leaking documents when he noted Benedict XVI would occasionally ask questions that suggested the pope was not being accurately informed about internal Vatican matters. Whether that's true, and the extent to which it's been remedied,

were never resolved.

- Gabriele also said during his testimony that there was "profound unease" inside the Vatican related in part to perceptions that Benedict XVI's desire for purification and reform weren't being faithfully implemented by some of his aides. The extent to which Gabriele accurately described the internal climate was also left hanging.

The willingness of the Vatican to provide convincing answers to these questions will likely be seen as a major test of whether there truly is a new standard of transparency under Pope Francis.

One clear way to tackle the problem would be to approve publication of the secret report. If there are good prudential reasons for not doing so, Francis could authorize the three cardinals to prepare a précis of its major conclusions for public release, perhaps in tandem with a briefing to discuss the fallout.

If the era of generating new *gialli* is over, shedding light on Vatileaks is the obvious place to start.

The sexual abuse crisis

Amid the general public love affair with the new pope, there have really only been two clouds on the horizon. One came with charges that he was complicit in Argentina's "Dirty War" in the 1970s, though those claims have largely been laid to rest. The other involves reports that as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio did not take decisive actions with regard to two priests convicted of sexual abuse charges in 2007 and 2008.

Victims' groups have called on the new pope to release all the files on these two cases. Defenders note that by 2012, Bergoglio seemed to have adopted a much harder line, saying in an interview that "we must never turn a blind eye" to abuse.

He also criticized the earlier practice of shuffling abuser priests from parish to parish.

"It is a stupid idea," he said. "That way, the priest just takes the problem with him wherever he goes."

Given the gravity of the church's sexual abuse crisis, observers would be watching how the new pope handles it closely in any event. In light of these question marks about the pope's personal record, however, Francis' early moves will be especially important.

Impartial observers generally give Benedict XVI credit for moving the church toward a "zero tolerance" policy for abuser priests but say the charge wasn't matched by an equally zealous "zero tolerance" policy for bishops who mishandle abuse complaints.

If Francis finds a way early in his reign to signal that bishops who drop the ball will be held accountable, that would likely be read as a clear indication that a season of reform has begun.

Communications

Many in the Vatican press corps believe the period from Benedict's resignation Feb. 11 through the first week of Francis' papacy will go down as the finest hour for Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman.

In addition to Passionist Fr. Ciro Benedettini, Lombardi also brought on Basilian Fr. Tom Rosica of Canada's Salt and Light network to handle the English- and French-speaking press and Fr. José María Gil Tamayo, a well-known communications expert in Spain, to handle the Spanish-language side. All four drew rave reviews for their accessibility, stamina and understanding of media needs.

That said, when cardinals talked about the need for greater transparency as part of the broader landscape of Vatican reform, greater savvy about communications is part of what they had in mind.

Famously, pulling the plug on daily briefings by American cardinals during the General Congregation meetings became a symbol of a clash of cultures between the Vatican's old guard and bishops on the pastoral front lines -- prelates who have learned, often through painful experience, that it's better to feed the beast than to let the storyline be driven by others.

It's not yet clear whether, and for how long, Lombardi will stick around as the Vatican spokesman. Whoever plays the role, one signal of reform would be to put the spokesperson on the pope's regular weekly schedule of meetings with department heads so he or she doesn't have to suffer the indignity of reporters whispering that a few of them have better access to the pope than his alleged mouthpiece.

More broadly, Francis could make himself available to the press on a more regular and less scripted basis than has heretofore been the case. He could also encourage his deputies to do the same.

Despite some hiccups, the transition period between Benedict and Francis represented a high-water mark in terms of the Vatican's determination to open itself up to the world. The question is, will it last?

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