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Aide predicts Francis will hold bishops accountable

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 6, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

Buenos Aires, Argentina ? When the Vatican released a statement yesterday indicating that Pope Francis wants to move aggressively on the child sexual abuse scandals in the church, it was met by skepticism from victims groups insisting that ?actions speak louder than words.?

Over the years, perhaps the most persistent such demand for action has been that bishops who mishandle abuse cases should be held accountable. Yesterday, a senior aide and confidante to then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio predicted that Francis will plug this hole as pope.

?Without a doubt,? said Fr. Jorge Oesterheld, who served as the spokesperson for the bishops? conference in Argentina for the six years Bergoglio was its president from 2005 to 2011.

In an interview with NCR, Oesterheld said Francis will be committed to a ?zero tolerance? policy with regard to sexual abuse.

Oesterheld also addressed the failure of the bishop?s conference to meet a Vatican-imposed deadline of May 2012 for submitting anti-sex abuse guidelines, roughly six months after Bergoglio stepped down as president. He said that under Bergoglio?s leadership, the conference was ?very respectful? of each bishop's direct relationship with the Vatican, and the desire not to ?supplant? that relationship may be part of the reason it took more time to hammer out common policies.

The same respect for local authority, Oesterheld said, will likely lead Francis to support a broad ?decentralization? of power in favor of greater latitude for local churches and bishops? conferences.

Bergoglio has also faced criticism for his handling of the high-profile case of Fr. Julio Cesar Grassi, famed in Argentina for running a network of schools, orphanages and training programs for youth in the Buenos Aires slums through his *Felices los Niños* foundation, meaning ?Happy Children.?

In 2010, Grassi was found guilty of sexual abuse of a minor by a criminal court and sentenced to 15 years in prison, though he remains free pending appeal. The case is awaiting review by the Supreme Court of Justice of the Province of Buenos Aires.

While critics complain that Bergoglio didn?t meet with victims, offer financial compensation or remove Grassi from the priesthood, Oesterheld said the cardinal?s approach was to let the criminal justice system take its course, ?without trying to pre-judge its conclusions.?

On other matters:

- In terms of the pope?s management style, Oesterheld said, Francis ?has very clear, very well defined ideas, and he certainly has the capacity to say no when the situation calls for it.?

- During Argentina?s gay marriage debate in 2009 and 2010, he said, Bergoglio accepted the desire of a majority of bishops to take a hard line against any compromise solution, without imposing ?his own feelings on the matter.?
- The most important quality Francis will look for in his aides, Oesterheld said, is ?a deep capacity to dialogue with the world.?

The interview with Oesterheld took place in Spanish through an interpreter; the following are extracts.

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Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?

He?s an extraordinarily human man, close to you. When I was with him, he was always interested in your life and your problems, what you had to say and what you were feeling. He also wanted to know what was really happening with you. And, he would always surprise you. In the ten years I worked with him, after every single conversation we had I was always surprised by something, some gesture or idea.

Can you give an example?

One time we had to issue a written declaration on something, and I asked him how I should write it. He told me, ?Write it so that even someone who can?t read will actually know what it says!?

Based on his record here, how do you think Francis will handle the child sexual abuse scandals in the church?

He?ll continue the same approach that began with Benedict XVI, which has been adopted by the church. I don?t think you should expect any novelties or changes in course, because the line developed under Benedict XVI is the one that ought to be followed.

By that, you mean ?zero tolerance??

Absolutely, yes.

Critics say the church may have zero tolerance for priests who abuse, but it doesn?t have zero tolerance for bishops who cover it up. Would you expect Francis to hold bishops accountable just as much as he does priests?

I believe so, yes. The answer is yes, without a doubt.

You worked with Bergoglio when the Fr. Grassi case arose. What did you see in how he handled it that might have broader lessons for what he?ll do as pope?

The cardinal?s approach was to wait to see what the justice system would conclude about Grassi. He never wanted to get ahead of the criminal investigation and trial, because his idea was to let the justice system run its course without trying to pre-judge its conclusions. I would expect he?d follow more or less the same line as pope.

Why didn?t he move faster to adopt a formal written policy on how to handle abuse cases, as directed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith?

The conference follows all the directives of the Holy See, of course. One thing about the cardinal was that he was very respectful of the fact that individual bishops have their own direct relationship with the Holy See, and

the conference can?t get in the way of that relationship or try to supplant it. That may be part of the reason why it?s taken some time to draft the policies.

He didn?t want to try to get a special sort of norms approved for the entire country, as the bishops did in the United States?

As far as I know, no.

Many people are talking about a reform of the Roman Curia. Based on what you saw from him at the bishops? conference, what kind of reform should we expect from him in the Vatican?

I believe that the priority for Bergoglio is always evangelization, meaning the proclamation of the name of Jesus to the world. That?s his primary concern. Any reform, therefore, will be designed to ensure that the ecclesiastical structures are in service to evangelization.

Can you talk about something he did at the bishops? conference that would illustrate what a reform in the service of evangelization actually looks like?

The cardinal always insisted on respecting the diverse situations in the different dioceses in the way we handled things. He always said that each diocese needs to have the ability to work out its own approach to evangelization, its own language and its own methods, reflecting the realities of the local situation. I believe that as pope, he?ll move in the direction of a decentralization that gives greater scope to each diocese and each bishops? conference to determine what proclaiming the gospel means in their contexts.

For the six years Bergoglio was president of the bishops? conference, what do you think was his greatest success and his greatest frustration?

I think that personally, his biggest concern was always for priests, that they be happy in their vocation and content with the lives they?re leading. As a result, I suppose his greatest source of suffering would be when one of his priests isn?t happy in his ministry, or is running into problems with his vocation.

When that happened, how did he respond?

From what I saw, he responded with compassion, by being as close as he could to them, and with a tremendous capacity to listen. He?s a man with an incredibly deep understanding of the human heart, which allowed him to really understanding what the priest was feeling. That?s one of the reasons that he?s always been a tremendous spiritual director.

Being pope certainly requires great heart and a great spirit, but it also sometimes requires being tough ? being willing to make hard choices and to say no. Is that Bergoglio?

Yes, absolutely yes! He knows very well how to make decisions. He?s got very clear, very well defined ideas, and he certainly has the capacity to say no when the situation calls for it. He tries to do things with deep respect for what others think, but he?s also very energetic about applying his vision.

Again, can you give an example?

There was a very difficult moment in the relationship between the government of Argentina and the church, under the former President [Nestor] Kirchner. The cardinal faced enormous public pressure, especially through the media, but he was strong enough to never waver from his principles. There were several difficult moments like that [in church/state relations], but the cardinal never caved in to the pressure, either from politicians or the media.

One of the more recent such difficult moments came in the debate in 2009 and 2010 over gay marriage. How did he handle that?

At that time, there were different views within the bishops? conference on how open the church should be [to compromise solutions.] Some were more inflexible than others. The cardinal went along with what the majority wanted. He was clear that he thought it was his job as president of the bishops? conference to support what the majority had decided, and he didn?t impose his own views on the other bishops. He never publicly expressed his own feelings on the matter, because he didn?t want to seem to be undercutting the common position of the bishops.

In addition to evangelization, what would you expect his priorities to be as pope?

He?ll want a poor church that seeks out the people, a church that stays close to the real existential problems of the human person. He?s very attentive to discerning the dynamics of our times, which means he?s especially concerned with poverty ? not just material poverty, but also spiritual poverty and social poverty. He?ll want the church to understand these various forms of poverty deeply, and to respond to them.

You know this man extremely well. Has anything he?s done as pope surprised you?

No, he seems to be acting very much like he did in Buenos Aires. I suppose the most striking thing is the way he?s carrying himself more as the bishop of Rome than as the pope. Instead of styling himself as the pope, he?s presenting himself as a bishop. Among other things, this speaks to the question you asked me earlier ? it shows he?s strong enough to swim against the current. He?s not just saying he?s going to do it, he?s actually doing it.

What kind of people does he look for in key positions?

First of all, he looks for a deep capacity to dialogue with the world. He also wants someone with the ability to work well as part of a team. He also wants people with a good capacity to communicate, because the cardinal wants the people around him to have a good relationship with the media and to know how to handle the media.

A lot of people say that the cardinal didn?t really like talking to the media when he was here.

He knows he?s not really good himself in dealing with the media, so it?ll be important to him to have people around him who know how to do it.

In other words, he?s smart enough to know when he needs help?

Exactly.

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