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Francis and the perils of an improv pope

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 3, 2013 The Francis Chronicles
Pope Francis

In the early days after the election of Pope Francis, it was jokingly said in Rome that the only people not charmed were his security personnel, who found themselves scrambling to keep up with a pontiff determined to break protocol and to expose himself to the crowds.

More and more, Vatican spin doctors probably have to be added to the list of aides at risk of heart attacks over the perils of an improvisational pope.

Famously, Francis has adopted the custom of celebrating his daily 7 a.m. Mass not in the private confines of the Apostolic Palace, where the goings-on can be kept under wraps, but in the chapel of the Casa Santa Marta, the hotel on Vatican grounds where he's taken up residence. Each morning, he delivers a largely off-the-cuff homily for a group of around 50 people, excerpts from which are later provided by Vatican Radio and Vatican TV as well as the daily newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*.

The homilies are pastoral in nature, often using homespun language to make his points. On May 10, for instance, Francis compared overly grim Christians to "pickled peppers." On May 18, he said gossip in the church is like eating honey -- it tastes sweet at first, but too much gives you a stomachache.

There's no ghostwriter penning these homilies, nor do they reflect a script worked out in a Vatican war room. They're highly personal reflections from the pope himself, tied to the day's Scripture readings.

Because they're not systematic treatises, the homilies are open to widely differing interpretations. Sometimes they almost seem to function as an ecclesial Rorschach test, revealing the agenda of constituencies eager to put a frame on the new pope.

Liberals, for instance, jumped on an April 16 homily devoted to the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, in which Francis criticized "those who wish to turn the clock back" on the council's reforms. They also cheer every time Francis criticizes careerism in the church, as he did most recently May 28, styling it as a sign that the new pope represents a break with clericalism and triumphalism.

Conservatives, meanwhile, celebrate every time the new pope uses traditional argot, such as his strikingly frequent references to the devil. They also applauded an April 5 homily in which Francis warned that "when we start to cut down the faith, to negotiate faith, a little like selling it to the highest bidder, we take the path of apostasy, of disloyalty to the Lord."

Vatican-watchers scour the homilies for clues of impending policy moves.

When a group of personnel from the Vatican bank turned out for morning Mass on April 24, for instance, Francis told them that bureaucratic structures are necessary "up to a certain point," but if they supplant the primary imperative of love, then "this is not the way."

In some quarters, that was taken as an indication that a shake-up of the Vatican's financial operation is in the works.

The homilies can also trigger theological kerfuffles.

On May 22, for example, Francis said God "has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone!" He added: "Even the atheists."

That line prompted a spate of headlines and blog posts about whether Francis was or was not tweaking established Catholic doctrine about the limits of salvation. (For the record, the debate largely overlooked an April 22 homily in which Francis also said that Jesus is "the only gate" for entering into the Kingdom of God and that "all the other paths are deceptive, they are not true, they are false.")

In the wake of that controversy, Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who functioned as a Vatican spokesperson during the papal transition, issued a 2,300-word clarification May 23 insisting Francis had "no intention of provoking a theological debate on the nature of salvation."

Part of the difficulty is that so far, the Vatican is not providing either an unedited broadcast or a complete text of the daily homilies. Instead, Vatican Radio provides a brief podcast of some selections and *L'Osservatore Romano* offers printed excerpts.

Some observers have wondered if there's an agenda involved in what they choose to run and what they leave out. After the April 24 homily, for instance, Vatican Radio included the aside about the Vatican Bank, but *L'Osservatore* omitted it.

In the old days, the Vatican would occasionally "edit" the pope's remarks. Famously, Pope John Paul I's novel use of the first person singular was sometimes changed to "we" in official transcripts. With Francis' homilies, some suspect a similar effort to rein in the pope may be occurring through truncation and selective release rather than outright redaction.

Noted Catholic commentator Fr. John Zuhlsdorf, for instance, has written that "we should either get everything Francis says, or nothing."

Partly in response to such criticism, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, issued a 400-word statement last Friday explaining that Francis wants his daily Mass to have a "familiar" atmosphere and has "specifically requested that the live video and audio not be broadcast."

Lombardi noted that Francis preaches in Italian, "which isn't his mother tongue," and what he actually says is often quite different from the written text. To provide a transcript, Lombardi said, would require editing by the pope, and that's not "what the Holy Father intends to do each morning."

Lombardi insisted on a distinction between the pope's "public and private activities." The former, he suggested, come with complete texts, but the latter are designed to foster "spontaneity and familiarity."

The Vatican wants to respect the pope's wishes, Lombardi said, while at the same time "allowing a wide public to have access to the main messages that the Holy Father offers the faithful in those circumstances."

In truth, church-watchers probably should be grateful to Lombardi and the Vatican's other communications personnel because the real choice likely is not between portions of what the pope says versus the whole enchilada. Given the nervousness institutions typically feel about message control, the real-world choice is probably between excerpts or nothing at all, expect for whatever attendees might reveal secondhand.

Francis is a legendarily plugged-in figure, not an isolated leader unaware of realities on the ground. Presumably, he knows his homilies have become a daily source of analysis and competing spin. So far, however, he appears determined not to let the risk of misinterpretation deter him from functioning as a pastor, not just a legislator and theologian-in-chief.

For now, therefore, the Vatican's various spokespersons and key officials seem destined to wake up each morning wondering if today will bring another insta-sensation sparked by this remarkably off-the-cuff pope.

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