NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Francis at 100 days: 'the world's parish priest'

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Pope Francis

Cognitive dissonance is how psychologists describe the anxiety generated when experience conflicts with one's model of the world. Either the facts have to be recast to fit the model, or the model has to give way in light of the facts, because people just can't live very long in a state of perpetual confusion.

In effect, that's precisely the crossroads at which the Catholic world stands after the first 100 days of the Pope Francis era.

By traditional standards, it's been quiet on the Vatican front. To date, Francis has announced only one truly bold policy move -- the mid-April appointment of a group of eight cardinals from around the world to serve as his kitchen cabinet. Its first meeting, however, isn't until October, and it's still unclear what it might do.

Otherwise, as of this writing, Francis has named 48 new bishops and a handful of second-tier Vatican officials. Most of these appointments were in the works before his election. He's approved a few sainthood causes, erected some new dioceses, and met some heads of state, by no means a departure from business as usual. He's not issued any major teaching documents, nor has he taken any substantive steps toward a much-discussed reform of the Roman Curia.

Because there's been little substantive action, there's been little controversy. Even an April 15 statement that Francis had confirmed a Vatican-mandated shakeup of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States didn't really roil the waters except in narrow activist circles, with the most common reaction being, "Let's wait and see."

At the moment, Francis is preparing for a trip in late July to Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day, and afterward the Vatican enters its summer doldrums. It's likely to be September at the earliest before any decisions considered significant will be unveiled, such as the appointment of a new secretary of state.

The usual models would thus say that so far, Francis has been all sizzle and no steak. Yet at the grassroots, there's a palpable sense something seismic is underway.

Crowds for Francis have been enormous, forcing police to close the area around St. Peter's Square to traffic as if Mother Teresa or Padre Pio were being canonized. Vendors across Rome report a boom in sales of papal paraphernalia, always a reliable bellwether of popular enthusiasm.

Around the world, there are anecdotal accounts of spikes in Mass attendance and demand for confession, which many attribute to a "Francis effect." Polls, such as a mid-April survey in the United States by the Pew Forum, show overwhelming approval ratings, and the global media remains fascinated well beyond the customary honeymoon period. All indications are that the trip to Rio will shape up as the biggest blowout Catholic party of the early 21st century.

In other words, Vaticanology and the *vox populi* are at odds.

Perhaps the key to resolving the conflict boils down to this: Francis seems determined to function as a pastor, at least as much as a primate or politician, so the right model may not be the one used to assess chief executives. Rather, it's how Catholics tend to think about a parish priest. Their basic question usually isn't what his policy positions are, but whether he inspires.

Perhaps the root lesson of Francis' first 100 days is that when it comes to spiritual leadership, sometimes style really is substance.

Bishop Jorge Eduardo Lozano of Gualeguaychú, Argentina, says it's a mistake to wait for the real pope to emerge from beneath the largely symbolic flourishes of his early days. Instead, those flourishes are the real pope, insists Lozano, a close friend of the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio who worked under him as an auxiliary in Buenos Aires for six years.

"They're an expression of his magisterium," Lozano said in mid-April.

"He's sending a message to other cardinals, bishops and priests that this is what we need to do -- to reach out to people, not being content to wait for them to come to us," Lozano said. "More broadly, he's sending the same message to all Catholics everywhere."

That message can be unpacked in terms of four defining features of Francis' leadership style: simplicity, humility, remaining largely apolitical, and being remarkably accessible to ordinary folks.

Simplicity

Before his election, one of the few things the world actually knew about Bergoglio was his penchant for simplicity. This was a prince of the church who took the subway to work rather than using a car and driver, and who lived in a modest apartment rather than the opulent archbishop's mansion.

(His Buenos Aires quarters were so spartan that he had to leave the oven on over weekends during the winter to stay warm, because management turned off the heat.)

Francis has carried that approach into the papacy. He often walks across Vatican grounds rather than hopping into the customary black Mercedes with the "SCV-1" license plate denoting the pope's limo, and he resides in a modest suite in the Domus Sanctae Marthae residence rather than in the cavernous papal apartment.

Simplicity of life often connotes a special concern for poverty and the poor, and that's clearly a cornerstone of Francis' agenda. During a March 16 encounter with journalists in Rome to cover the conclave, Francis expressed his longing for a "poor church for the poor."

Francis has pushed this spirit of solidarity at the level of policy. For instance, during a May 16 audience at which he received the credentials of four ambassadors to the Holy See, he warned that "while the income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling."

Vatican communications personnel told reporters that Francis called them before the speech to urge them to pay attention, suggesting the pope thought what he had to say was especially important.

"This imbalance results from ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and thus deny the right of control to states, which are themselves charged with providing for the common good," the pope said. "A new, invisible and at times virtual tyranny is established, one which

unilaterally and irremediably imposes its own laws and rules."

A week later, Francis visited a Vatican soup kitchen run by the Missionaries of Charity and spoke out against what he called "a savage capitalism [that] has taught the logic of profit at all cost, of giving to get, of exploitation without looking at the persons ... and we see the results in the crisis we are living!"

As evidence that people are taking notice, the august business journal *Forbes* felt compelled in a mid-May editorial to admonish the pope. "Profit isn't what drives poverty," the editorial asserted; rather, "profit is what overcomes poverty."

Of course, *fervorinos* on behalf of the poor have long been a staple of papal rhetoric. What seems to give Francis' appeals punch is the perception they're backed up by personal commitment.

Simplicity also shines through in Francis' reliance on gestures rather than elaborate pronouncements to get his point across. Instead of preaching about the priesthood as service during his Holy Thursday Mass, for instance, he visited the Casa del Marmo youth prison in northwest Rome and washed the feet of 12 inmates, including two young women and two Muslims.

The inclusion of women was technically a violation of a 1988 edict from the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which held that because the rite re-enacts Jesus washing the feet of his apostles, only men should participate. It's telling that Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, justified the decision precisely on the grounds of simplicity.

"This community understands simple and essential things; they were not liturgy scholars," Lombardi said at the time. "Washing feet was important to present the Lord's spirit of service and love."

Humility

If Catholics were polled about the virtues they associate with the Jesuit order, they would doubtless tick off many admirable qualities -- brilliance, zeal, a capacity to think outside the box, a drive to stand on the missionary frontiers, and so on. Traditionally, however, "humility" might not finish near the top of the list, based largely on personal experience of Jesuits who often have a fairly strong sense of their own aptitudes.

Ironically, it's the first Jesuit pope who seems to be accenting humility as a defining quality of ecclesiastical leadership.

In his debut on the world stage the evening of March 13, Francis humbly asked the crowd in St. Peter's Square to give him a blessing and bowed to receive it, before he said anything himself. It was a harbinger of things to come.

In ways large and small, Francis has rejected many of the usual modes by which popes separate themselves from the hoi polloi. He makes his own phone calls, usually beginning conversations simply by saying, "It's Jorge." The new pope phoned back to Buenos Aires to cancel his newspaper subscription and to make arrangements with his cobbler for a new pair of shoes.

As in Buenos Aires, Francis has not appointed a priest-secretary to be his key aide, meaning there's no Stanislaw Dziwisz or Georg Gänswein of this papacy -- secretaries to John Paul II and Benedict XVI respectively, who functioned as gatekeepers and interpreters, and who occasionally were viewed almost as deputy popes.

In part, that's a reflection of Francis' hands-on management style, but it's also an expression of humility, of not being above doing his own routine chores.

Whenever Francis now meets a group in the Vatican, he typically doesn't sit on the papal throne and wait for the VIPs to come forward. Instead he steps down off the dais, meeting his visitors at eye level, and greets them as equals -- another humble flourish that veteran Vatican correspondent Andrea Tornielli recently noted has prompted more than a few old-timers to "turn up their noses."

Humility has also become a defining trait of the papacy at the theological and ecclesiological level. For instance, most observers see his decision to empanel a body of cardinals to help him govern as a commitment to a more collegial and collaborative way of exercising authority.

That approach obviously isn't everybody's cup of tea. Italian liturgy writer Mattia Rossi has said that it represents a step toward the "demolition of the papacy," because it replaces the notion of a divinely instituted authority with a fuzzy concept of collegiality -- thereby transforming the papacy, according to Rossi, from first above equals to first among equals. (Rossi derisively asked if the cardinals who are supposed to reform the Curia could even find its bathrooms.)

In a similar vein, Francis prefers to refer to himself not as "pope," but as the "bishop of Rome," which most see as reflecting a less imperial conception of the papacy, closer to its historical roots.

Some ecumenical experts believe that Francis' humility could pave the way for progress toward greater Christian unity, given that resentments over perceived papal arrogance have long been a stumbling block.

"In the feudal era, we developed this notion of bishops as princes," said Capuchin Fr. William Henn, a veteran ecumenist who teaches at Rome's Gregorian University. "With Francis, I think other Christians can see episcopal ministry more clearly as a service to communion, and will become more open to it."

Staying out of politics

Try as they might, even religious leaders least inclined to political activism often find it difficult to stay above the fray. That's especially true for popes, since the Catholic church has a vast body of social teaching with political consequences.

Already, Francis has said plenty of things with obvious political relevance. Aside from his comments on the economy, he's also spoken out about protection of the environment, labeled war the "suicide of humanity," and, addressing a May 12 March for Life in Rome, said that legal protection of every human life must be guaranteed "from the very first moment of its existence."

There's no indication, in other words, that Francis intends to lead the church away from its traditional political concerns. Yet most observers believe this is not a pope who's going to get out of bed in the morning thinking about politics. The evidence of his first 100 days seems to back up that hunch.

No comment from either the pope or his top Vatican aides followed an April 10 vote in Uruguay to legalize gay marriage, despite the fact that it borders the pope's home in Argentina. Uruguay became the third nation in Latin America to embrace same-sex marriage, after Brazil and Argentina, and many analysts styled it as a tipping point that suggests the rest of the continent will eventually follow suit.

The move seemingly amounted to an engraved invitation for history's first Latin American pontiff to speak out, yet Francis didn't bite.

Once again, that tracks with his background. Those who followed Bergoglio in Argentina say he generally preferred to stay out of political tussles, operating mostly behind the scenes. The one time he did wade into a fight was in the run-up to Argentina's legalization of gay marriage in 2010, and observers say it was largely because he was president of the bishops' conference and felt compelled to articulate the hard line of its majority.

Especially in Italy, where people are accustomed to thinking of prelates as political heavyweights, the change in tone has raised eyebrows.

Following a May 23 address by Francis to the Italian bishops' conference, Tornielli styled the event as the "end of an era." In the 12-minute address (the shortest such speech on record, by the way), Francis never referred to politics or to any business before the Italian parliament, which is customarily the meat of these sessions.

Tornielli wrote that the event launched a "Copernican revolution," away from thinking of the church as a political power broker and toward a return to the pastoral essentials.

One noteworthy signal came when Francis told the bishops, "Dialogue with the political institutions [of Italy] is up to you." That was seen as an indirect rebuke of the secretary of state under Benedict, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who had tried to reclaim pride of place on the Italian political scene for the Vatican.

In the wake of the session, Archbishop Luigi Negri of Ferrara-Comacchio summarized what he took away. His comments are especially revealing given that Negri hails from the Communion and Liberation movement, traditionally seen as one of the most politically active players on the Italian scene.

"I don't believe it's necessary to abstain from speaking out when certain values are at stake," Negri said, but in light of the new tone from Francis, "we may have to change the way we do it."

Negri said, "We have to form laity to defend nonnegotiable values. As far as everything else that concerns political life, it would be better for us bishops to keep out of it. The autonomy of the laity has to be respected."

Italian sociologist Luca Diotallevi echoed the assessment.

Francis, he said, represents "a strongly innovative approach with respect to the model of exercising episcopal ministry during the last two decades," one that promises to "reopen an enormous space for the laity" to take the lead on the intersection of faith and politics.

Accessibility

In the early days after Francis' election, the joke in Rome was that the only people not charmed by the new pope were his security personnel, who found themselves scrambling to keep up with a pontiff determined to escape the protective bubble in which major world leaders usually move.

"We hope that after these early days things get back to normal," one of the security officers told the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* on March 18. "If not, he's going to drive everybody crazy!"

Of all the images from his first week in office, perhaps the most striking came when Francis visited the Vatican's small Church of St. Anne to say Mass on Sunday, March 17, ahead of his first Angelus address. Run by the Augustinian order, St. Anne is where the roughly 400 personnel who live on Vatican grounds have what passes for a normal parish life.

After Mass, Francis stood outside the church and greeted people as they left, patting kids on the head and kissing them, shaking hands and exchanging hugs, with a quick word and a smile for everybody. It's a scene that plays out every Sunday at Catholic parishes across the world, but one rarely sees a pope doing it.

Italian papers immediately dubbed him "the world's parish priest."

That desire not to detach himself from ordinary experience has been a hallmark of Francis' early days. He works the phone with relish, calling friends and sources in various parts of the world to take the temperature of the church in their neighborhoods.

The commitment to accessibility also involves using freewheeling and unscripted language, even if it drives his spin doctors to distraction and causes heart palpitations among theological purists, who typically prefer a pound of verbiage to an ounce of imprecision.

As part of that picture, Francis has adopted the custom of celebrating Mass each day at 7 a.m. at the Domus Sanctae Marthae rather than in one of the private chapels in the Apostolic Palace. A group of roughly 50 people takes part, composed of a mix of whoever happens to be staying at the residence that day, invited guests and Vatican personnel.

As he does in other settings, Francis often relies on homespun language to make his points. On May 10, for instance, he compared overly grim Christians to "pickled peppers." On May 18, he said that gossip in the church is like eating honey -- it tastes sweet at first, but too much gives you a "stomachache."

Because they're not systematic treatises, these homilies are open to widely differing interpretations. Sometimes they 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. Conservatives celebrate every time he uses traditional argot, such as his strikingly frequent references to the devil. They also applauded an April 5 homily in which Francis warned, "When we start to cut down the faith ... we take the path of apostasy."

The homilies can also trigger theological kerfuffles. On May 22, Francis said that God "has redeemed all of us ... not just Catholics. Everyone, even atheists." The line prompted a spate of headlines and blog posts about whether the pope was, or was not, tweaking established Catholic doctrine about the limits of salvation. (For the record, a lengthy Vatican clarification insisted he wasn't.)

Francis is known as a plugged-in figure, well aware of realities on the ground. Presumably, he knows that his homilies have become a daily source of competing spin. So far, however, he appears determined not to let the risk of misinterpretation deter him from functioning as a pastor.

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

Catching on?

If Francis is trying to shape a new culture for leadership in the church, as Lozano suggests, is there evidence it's catching on?

In the deepest sense, it will undoubtedly take time before the answer becomes clear. The Catholic church is legendary for thinking in centuries, and the Vatican in particular tends to respond to pressure for rapid change the way teetotalers react to an offer of Scotch and soda -- with a mixture of terror and disgust.

In the here and now, however, there are small but telling indications that something may be afoot. A recent vignette from Rome makes the point.

In late April, a veteran Italian cardinal entered a restaurant in the Trastevere neighborhood frequented by Vatican personnel who work in the nearby Piazza San Calisto. Now well over 80, this cardinal generally looks the part of an ecclesiastical heavyweight, wearing crimson-trimmed garments and sporting elaborate insignia of office. On this day, however, he was dressed in modest black clerical clothes without the usual refinements.

Asked about his look, the cardinal delivered an epigrammatic reply.

"Under this pope," he declared, "simple is the new chic!"

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