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Three things to learn about Francis from his sainthood surprise

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 5, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

We used to call John Paul II the ?pope of surprises,? but Francis clearly has demonstrated that he?s more than capable of pulling a rabbit out of the hat himself. Today?s surprise announcement that John Paul II will be canonized along with John XXIII seems to tell us at least three things worth knowing about the new pontiff.

First, it confirms his determination not to be bound by the usual Vatican protocol. Francis dispensed with the usual requirement for a second miracle to proceed to canonization, following John XXIII?s beatification in 2000. (The miracle certified by the Vatican in that case involved the healing of an Italian nun of severe bleeding and infection.)

In multiple ways, Francis has already demonstrated his willingness to break with convention ? not living in the papal apartment, not heading off to the summer residence at Castel Gandolfo for his vacation, even pulling out of a Vatican concert at the last minute because he felt he had better uses of his time.

Today?s announcement is thus another indication that for Francis, tradition is more a guide than a master.

(It?s worth noting, however, that he?s not simply acting out of blind instinct. As Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, underscored this morning, theologians have long debated whether separate miracles for beatification and canonization are necessary ? or, for that matter, whether the distinction between a local cult and sainthood for the universal church even makes sense in the context of a global village.)

Second, the decision to package John XXIII and John Paul II also underscores the inclusive spirit of Francis? papacy.

As it happens, Francis also released his first encyclical this morning ? *Lumen fidei*, ?The Light of Faith,? which was drafted in part by Benedict XVI. It?s marked by a strong spirit of outreach to the seekers of the post-modern world, saying that anyone ?open to love? and concerned for others is ?already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith.?

With the canonizations, Francis is speaking not just to the outside world but to rival camps within the Catholic fold who see John XXIII and John Paul II as their heroes ? meaning liberals and conservatives, respectively. The message seems to be, ?You both belong here.?

That?s not to say, of course, that the primary logic for the canonizations is political. Francis is certainly convinced that both men lived holy lives worthy of sainthood, totally apart from their ideological appeal.

Yet Francis is no naïf either, and he knows that by putting these two pontiffs together, he ensures that the canonization ceremony can?t be styled as a victory lap for one side or the other.

His inclusive ethos is also clear from the fact that today he also approved a miracle attributed to Bishop Alvaro

del Portillo, the successor of St. Josemaria Escriva as the head of Opus Dei, after earlier this year signaling his desire to move forward with the beatification of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador.

Romero is typically seen as a hero of the liberation theology movement, while Opus Dei is often identified with the right-wing reaction against it. Once again, it seems clear that Francis wants to stress what the diverse expressions of the faith have in common, overcoming old animosities.

Third, although Francis could have set a date for the canonization ceremony himself, he?s decided not to make that call until after a consistory with members of the College of Cardinals. Given the likely tidal wave of people that will crash through Rome whenever it happens, the choice of date is no small matter, and it?s telling that Francis wants to take the temperature of the cardinals before setting it in stone.

Francis has already made clear that he wants the cardinals to play a larger role in governance, beginning with the decision to empanel a body of eight cardinals from around the world to serve as his kitchen cabinet.

The process he?s following for the canonization is another small gesture in the direction of collegiality, meaning avoiding *diktat* in favor of ruling by consensus whenever possible, beginning with the cardinals.

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