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Dolan: Francis is, and isn't, what we expected

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Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York was among the 114 cardinals who elected Pope Francis in March, so he's in a unique position to answer a fascinating question about the recent conclave and its aftermath.

The question is: Did the cardinals really know what they were getting in Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina? Or, have the first four and a half months of his papacy been as much of a revelation to them as to the rest of the world?

According to Dolan, the answer lies somewhere in the middle.

The pope's simplicity, humility and closeness to the people are no surprise, Dolan said, because the cardinals had heard all that -- the only surprise is how well he seems to be pulling it off.

On the other hand, Dolan said, the cardinals also thought they were electing a dynamic manager, and so far the pace of change has been slower than some expected.

Perhaps, Dolan said, Francis has built such a reservoir of goodwill that it may be easier to push through change down the line.

Dolan spoke Wednesday in an interview with *NCR* on the margins of World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, where he's leading a delegation of roughly 50 pilgrims from New York and delivering catechetical sessions to English-speakers from around the world.

On other matters:

- Dolan confessed to fears for Francis' safety and said he may have to learn to allow himself to be "handled" a bit more.
- Francis has boosted the "reputation and credibility" of the church, Dolan said, making it easier for bishops to move the ball on many fronts.
- Dolan conceded he's resentful of praise heaped on Francis at the expense of Benedict XVI, saying it's both "hurtful" to the former pope and also "inaccurate."
- Dolan said Francis is pushing him to a personal examination of conscience -- for instance, Dolan said, he's wondering about the wisdom of living in the relatively elegant archbishop's residence in New York and in general about some of the "perks" and "cushiness" of being a bishop.
- In response to recent criticism over his handling of sex abuse cases while serving as the archbishop of Milwaukee from 2002 to 2009, Dolan expressed frustration, insisting that, in his own mind, the charges "were already behind us."

The following is a transcript of the interview.

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You were one of the cardinals who elected Francis, and presumably you had some idea of what kind of pope he would be. To what extent has it turned out the way you expected?

In some ways, it's been exactly what I expected. One of the things we looked for was a very savvy pastor, a good man on the ground. To use the expression of [Cardinal] George Pell [of Australia], we wanted somebody with "dirty boots," because he's used to going through the sheep fields. We got that, and we got it in spades.

The simplicity, sincerity, humility, that ability to speak from the heart which the world is seeing now, are all things we'd heard about him. One of the cardinals said we needed somebody with the mind of Benedict and the heart of John Paul, and I think we got it. He's been called the world's parish priest, and I think that's right on target.

If there's a surprise, it's that he's even better at it than we had anticipated. We thought he was pretty good, and the reports we got about him in Buenos Aires were excellent, but he's doing it all on steroids.

What would your biggest surprise be?

We also wanted someone with good managerial skills and leadership skills, and so far that hasn't been as obvious. It's a little bit of a surprise that he hasn't played his hand on that front yet. However, I think that's part of his strategy. He knows that the things we talked about a moment ago are more important because, in many ways, impression is reality. Having created this extraordinarily appealing impression -- which, by the way, is very genuine -- that he's a man of simplicity, holiness and simplicity will make it easier to do other things down the line. I think that was his first goal, and he's done it.

I would expect that after the summer lull, we'll see some more signs of management changes. In the meantime, I think calling the eight cardinals together was brilliant. As you know, that came up in the meetings before the conclave. Many of the cardinals said the new pope would have to look at some sort of "council of wise men," some more precise way to exercise collegiality beyond the Synod of Bishops. (By the way, the congregations said the synod needs to be reformed, too.) The idea was an ongoing exercise of collegiality that would assist the pope permanently. His "G8" with the cardinals was a good move in that direction.

Are you surprised, for instance, that it's taken this long to make a change in the Secretary of State?

If something doesn't happen by October I'd be surprised, but I don't think there's anything surprising that he wants to take his time with it. First of all, this is a man of exquisite charity, and I don't think he wants to hurt anybody's feelings. Second, he realizes that he needs somebody for a transition period. I mean, he's got to have somebody who knows where all the keys are. I thought maybe it would come at the end of June or July, but it hasn't, and so now I think it's probably going to be the fall.

You're known for media savvy. Are you struck by how positive the media tone has been about Francis?

Yes, very much so. New leaders always enjoy a sort of honeymoon, but this guy's early reputation is just extraordinary. For instance, when I take my walk in the morning and talk to the trash collector or to the policeman or to the cab driver, the waiters, the bartenders, they all love this guy. It's basically unanimous. They say, what a great gift, you did a good job with this Pope Francis. It's a real booster shot for the church.

You're a big fan of Benedict. How do you react when you see people praising Francis for being different from Benedict?

It bothers me. Personally, I love Benedict, but beyond that a lot of it just isn't accurate. Take all this talk about how Francis has rejected the "opulence" of the Apostolic Palace. I've been in the pope's apartment, and sure, that public study is very nice, but the rest of it is just functional. It's as if Benedict is being caricatured as this more regal, monarchical kind of pope. It's the same with the business about Francis not going to the "palatial" summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, which is actually fairly simple, too. All these comparisons bother me, both because I think they're probably hurtful to Benedict, and I also think they're not accurate.

The Brazil trip has caused a few security scares around Francis. You're somebody who likes to be close to people, too. Over the years, have you had to learn to let yourself be handled?

Yes, I have, and it started right away. Since the days of Cardinal [Francis] Spellman, the New York Police Department has assigned a detective to accompany the archbishop, and when I got there, I told the commissioner, "Thanks a lot, but it's really not necessary. I don't need one." He said to me, "It's really none of your business. If something happens to you, I'm the one who's in trouble, so grin and bear it." I did, and I've learned to listen to them. There will be times in a group when I'm trying to greet as many people as possible, he'll say, "Turn to your right, there's trouble coming on the left." I don't know what he's talking about, but I do it. Or he'll say, "We're going out this door rather than that one," and so on, and again, I listen.

Of course they know that I want to see as many people as possible, and they know their job is to try to get people to see me, not to keep them from me. But within those confines, if they say to me, "We're not going to do this" or "We're not going that way," I have to listen.

Do you think that's something Francis may have to learn?

I think so, and it's probably happening right now. That said, I don't believe his drive to be close to the people is some sort of strategy. I think he just does it naturally and spontaneously.

Are you worried for his safety?

Yes, definitely. I didn't see the pope's arrival on Monday, so I asked somebody how it went. They said the crowds were so enthusiastic, and when his car took a wrong turn, they were really worried. They told me he's OK now, but it was really touch-and-go. I turned on the news and watched the video, and I was scared, too. There's a wisdom in people being able to see him, and he's not visible if he's in the back seat of a limo. There's also, however, a wisdom in some kind of safety. They're going to have to figure that out without cramping his style.

You were criticized recently for your handling of sex abuse cases in Milwaukee, when the archdiocese released a series of documents[1]. What did you make of it?

I was disappointed. Naively, I thought that was behind us, that we had done our best, meaning the people both in Milwaukee and New York.

Basically, they criticized me on two things. One was the transfer of cemetery funds to a more secure, segregated account, but that was in conformity with Wisconsin law and it was at the direct recommendation of the finance council of the archdiocese of Milwaukee. I felt like I was being criticized for obeying the law. The other was giving some type of sustenance to priests while they were waiting for laicization, which I think most bishops view as a step that may be regrettable, but in justice and charity, you're obliged to do it. Canonically and

morally, you're still responsible for them, so some type of provision for housing and health care and so on seems like the charitable thing to do.

Does it help to have a popular pope?

Sure, because the reputation and the credibility of the church are much higher now. Even the cynics and those who are constantly carping are standing back and saying, "Let's give this guy a chance." He's the talk of the town.

I've said before that we bishops lack a lot of credibility in many areas, and it's clear that the goodwill Francis enjoys right now makes things a little easier.

Is there any way in which Francis is having a personal impact on you?

I find myself examining my own conscience ... on style, on simplicity, on lots of things.

For instance, I saw the pope open his own car door, close his own door, and carry his own carry-on bag. That says something to me. I used to do those things for myself, and it's not that I think I'm above it now, but it's just that as archbishop of New York people are doing it for me all the time. That's a very down-to-earth example, but I'm beginning to say that I need to watch this guy closely because he's a good example for me.

I also find myself thinking about living arrangements, because that's a pretty nice house I'm living in. In some ways it's not clear what I could do about it, because it's the historic, traditional residence of the archbishops of New York, and it's not like we can sell it. [Note: The residence is attached to St. Patrick's Cathedral.]

In general, I find myself thinking about some of the perks, the cushiness, we associate with being a bishop. He's pushing me to ask whether they're necessary, and if they might actually be counterproductive.

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