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Chris Hayes: Pope Francis is 'the best pope ever'

Pat Perriello | Sep. 18, 2013 The Francis Chronicles

Chris Hayes of MSNBC has declared Pope Francis "the best pope ever [1]."

Hayes anchors an evening current affairs program on MSNBC called "All In with Chris Hayes." He apparently was raised Catholic but stopped going to church in college. He did not say he was returning to church next week, but he did say he thought the pope was awesome.

Hayes is a progressive who believes in same-sex marriage and women in the priesthood, and he is pro choice. While he does not expect the church to change positions on these issues, he is excited about the openness and warmth characteristic of this new pope. The simplicity and genuineness of Francis have struck a chord with him.

I'm pretty sure Hayes is not alone in his response to this pope, who has only been in office for six months. Catholics and non-Catholics all over the world have been struck by the uniqueness of Pope Francis. He has demonstrated that it is by the way we live in the world that we best touch the hearts of others. He has yet to change anything in the church, yet he has changed everything.

He has reminded us that the church is meant to be a loving, caring, compassionate institution. He has shown us that as Christians we are meant to be less eager to judge and condemn and more ready to love and understand. If that mood can be sustained and expanded throughout every corner of the church universal, what an enormous and profound change that would be.

I'm not sure I'm ready to declare Francis the best pope ever. I'm still partial to John XXIII, but Francis has brought back the spirit of that time. John XXIII began the journey, but maybe Francis can move it toward the finish line. Who knows where the Spirit will lead us now?

I do think one thing may be different that could make this new movement more permanent. The Second Vatican Council was about making specific changes many of us believed were appropriate and necessary. The aftermath involved disagreements and conflicts. Conflict developed over what constituted good or bad change. Often these conflicts involved such weighty issues as whole wheat hosts or liturgical dance. There is plenty of blame to go around for what happened after the council, and conservatives and progressives alike need to share the blame.

This time around, the focus is not so much on change except for that internal change of heart. Pope Francis has rightly put the focus on what it means to be a Christian and how we are meant to treat one another. The focus is on being the kind of person and church all of us know we are meant to be. All Christians, left, right and center, can buy in to such a reform. That should give the work of Pope Francis staying power, no matter who the next pope may be. The result is likely to be that authentic and lasting change will follow as appropriate.

If Francis is able in this way to bring a new and better church into being [2], maybe he will become the best pope ever. He certainly is already awesome.

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