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A pope for the Catholic middle; countdown to the G-8

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 20, 2013 All Things Catholic

Having spent the early part of this week in Australia and New Zealand, I'm arriving today in Rome, where the buzz is about Pope Francis' blockbuster interview [1] with 16 Jesuit publications around the world, including *America* magazine in the United States, in which he pointedly rejects a church of what he calls "small-minded rules."

In political terms, Francis says something out loud that arguably had already become clear, but with a degree of candor that popes don't often provide: "I have never been a right-winger."

At the level of content, there's not much groundbreaking in the interview with respect to his hour-and-20-minute press conference aboard the papal plane July 28. He offers the same blend of traditional doctrine with a deep emphasis on mercy, stressing that the church needs to be more pastoral and less judgmental in engaging questions such as abortion, homosexuality and women.

Francis offers extended reflections on his Jesuit vocation and identity, and also some insights into his personal reactions to the experience of taking on the Catholic church's top job. The full English translation of the 12,000-word interview, which was conducted in Italian, can be found here [2].

Standing back from the details, what seems clear -- not just from the interview, but from the balance of the pope's first six months -- is that the election of Francis in March did not just signify the rise of the first pope from the developing world or a rejection of patterns of business management in the Vatican held responsible for the leaks scandal and other meltdowns.

Perhaps most fundamentally, it represented a breakthrough victory for the Catholic middle.

Truth be told, the liberal wing of the church will be cheered by the new pope's language -- his rejection of a "restorationist" mentality in Catholicism, for instance, and his insistence that "thinking with the church" cannot simply mean thinking with the hierarchy. At some point, however, they'll demand movement from rhetoric to policy, and on that front, many may be disappointed.

Francis has twice now uttered a firm "no" to women's ordination to the priesthood, and he's unlikely to radically change teaching on matters such as gay marriage, abortion or contraception. A desire to project a more merciful tone on those matters isn't the same thing as disagreement with their substance.

Meanwhile, for at least some on the Catholic right, it must now seem powerfully obvious that this just isn't their pope. Francis is determined not be a cultural warrior, meaning he doesn't intend to use his bully pulpit primarily to fight political battles. He acknowledges some conservatives are disappointed he hasn't been more forceful on the life issues, but insists church teaching is already clear and he doesn't intend to go around repeating it. He also underscores that this won't be a terribly disciplinary papacy.

That leaves the Catholic middle as the pope's natural constituency.

In broad strokes, these are people generally content with church teaching and tradition, though inclined to a hermeneutic of generosity in applying it. They don't have a chip on their shoulder about authority in the church, though they're also not inclined simply to shout "hosanna" every time someone in leadership speaks. They're eager for reform, not so much for revolution.

Mostly these are people who regard Catholicism fundamentally as a force for good in the world and who long for moderate, accessible and inspirational leadership who can lift up the whole gamut of Catholic thought and life rather than a selective version of it tailored to advance a specific political or theological agenda.

In a nutshell, that seems to be more or less Francis' aspiration.

There are plenty of such middle-of-the-road Catholics, probably a majority of the church, though their Achilles' heel has always been that they're not organized and not especially vocal. Liberals and conservatives publish newspapers, post blogs, create organizations, hold press conferences, and otherwise dominate public conversation; moderates generally keep their heads down and stay out of the fray.

The drama now is whether the Catholic middle will mobilize effectively to support the best pope for their interests they're likely to see in a long while, because the truth is that over the long run, other ideological camps may not always have the pope's back.

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Also in Rome, the countdown has begun for the looming G-8 summit Oct. 1-3, meaning the maiden gathering of eight cardinals tapped by Pope Francis to be his kitchen cabinet on church governance and reform.

Though it's an important crossroads moment, there are at least four reasons why we probably shouldn't be expecting a new world as of Oct. 4 -- that is, why the Franciscan reform probably won't emerge fully formed:

- Francis has set up two other bodies to ponder reform: one commission on the Vatican bank and another on the economic and administrative structures of the Holy See. Presumably, he'll want to hear their recommendations before making sweeping decisions.
- The pope has asked the G-8 to consider the pastoral care of marriage, including the tough question of Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. He's also announced that will be the topic of the next synod of bishops, however, so once again, he'll likely wait for its deliberations before making a final call.
- Like the Jesuit provincial he once was, Francis is in the habit of collecting input from a variety of sources and then making his own decisions. He'll listen carefully to this group, since they represent the cardinals who elected him, but there's no reason to believe his policies will be determined exclusively by it.
- Since the lineup of the G-8 was announced in April, each cardinal has been collecting suggestions and assembling ideas on his own, but the work really hasn't been coordinated. As a result, the eight members are arriving in Rome with different, and in some cases contrasting, proposals -- whether to commission secular management consultants at this stage of the game, for instance, or whether the pope really needs a "moderator of the Curia." Sorting all that out will take some time and means this may be more of an organizational gathering rather than a decision-making event.

One issue they'll have to consider is the role of the panel of cardinals itself. Is this simply an informal body with no legal standing, or is it a new level of authority positioned somewhere between the pope and the Vatican? Is it just a temporary instrument, or will it be an ongoing vehicle for giving popes advice?

On that front, there seems to be at least one role the G-8 could play that a couple of its members on background say they find appealing: emerging as a sort of informal "Congregation for Bishops" with regard to Vatican appointments, advising the pope on who might be best suited to head its various departments.

The idea would be that when the pope needs to appoint a new prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for instance, or a new president for the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, the G-8 would provide him with a *terna*, or a list of three names they believe would be well-suited for the job.

The pope, of course, would not be bound by those recommendations, but presumably in most cases, he'd take the advice seriously.

The church already has a fairly elaborate process for choosing bishops, which is well-known. Bishops' conferences generally keep lists of clergy they believe ought to be considered, and when an opening occurs, the nuncio, or papal ambassador, in that country is supposed to do an inventory of the needs of the diocese and to study the profiles of possible candidates.

The nuncio then forwards a set of names to the Congregation for Bishops in Rome, whose members generally meet twice a month on Thursdays to study the materials. They can approve the *terna* sent over by the nuncio, add or delete names or change the order of recommendations, or even ask that that a new *terna* entirely be prepared.

Once the congregation votes to approve a set of names, they go to the pope, who is theoretically free to disregard them and appoint whomever he wants, although in probably 95 percent of the cases he simply goes with the top recommendation presented to him.

It's long been a source of frustration for some that there's no similar process for matching talent to openings when it comes to running departments in the Vatican, although one could make an argument that heading the Congregation for Bishops or Clergy is at least as important as serving as the diocesan bishop of Terni or Santa Rosa.

There's also long been grumbling that sometimes, little consideration seems to be given to subject-area competence when assigning key Vatican jobs.

During the late John Paul II years, for instance, the Congregation for Divine Worship was led by a prelate with no real background in liturgy; the Congregation for Education was presided over by a non-educator; the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples was headed by a bishop with no experience of the missions; and the Council for Health Care Workers was run by someone who'd never dealt with heath systems prior to that job.

Defenders of the system often say it allows for looking past résumés to the inner qualities of potential appointees, and sometimes this allows candidates with the right stuff to surface and shine in unexpected ways. On the other hand, it also means people sometimes end up in jobs as rewards or to inject geographic balance and find themselves in way over their heads.

In that light, some cardinals perceive the need for a new mechanism to do a better job of matching skill sets with responsibilities in the Vatican, and perhaps that's a role the G-8 can either pick up itself or invent some new mechanism to address.

Some of the cardinals taking part in the Oct. 1-3 meeting are likely to float that possibility, though on this front, too, one probably shouldn't expect immediate results.

As Francis said in his Jesuit interview, "We always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change ... and this is the time of discernment."

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On Monday, I was in Sydney, speaking at the Australian Catholic University for an event organized by the archdiocese's office of Catholic Youth Services, with an opening act consisting of selections from a musical put on by Artists for Life.

Then I popped over to Rotorua, New Zealand, where I spent most of Wednesday speaking to the Assembly of Priests of New Zealand, a gathering that also included most of the country's bishops along with the apostolic nuncio, German Archbishop Martin Krebs.

I want to thank both of my hosts for a fantastic time. Francis has talked repeatedly about the need for the church to be a welcoming place, and if my experience is any measure, the church down under is already ahead of the game.

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