

Are the media giving Pope Francis a pass?

Eric J. Lyman Religion News Service | Oct. 1, 2013
Analysis Vatican City

Are the media pulling their punches when it comes to Pope Francis?

Whether it's because he carries his own bags or cold-calls troubled Catholics who write to him, or because he so clearly loves interacting with crowds or drives a beat-up Renault around the Vatican, it's hard to tell. But at some point, much of the world's media fell for the new pope.

Now an increasing number of Vatican insiders are asking whether the largely positive view of Francis affects the way the media cover the Holy See.

Nobody accuses Francis of making calculated moves to win positive press. But the fact remains that from relatively low-key cases like the pope telling 800 nuns not to be spiritual "spinsters" to more serious issues such as the quiet and underreported removal of church leaders in abuse-related cases, there's a different tone to media coverage of this pope's Vatican.

In short, Francis' honeymoon has the global media swooning after the media's abrupt breakup with his predecessor, Benedict XVI.

"Take the interview Pope Francis gave on the papal plane on his return trip from Brazil," said Cardinal Kurt Koch, head of the Vatican's Office of Christian Unity, referring to Francis asking "Who am I to judge?" on the question of gays and lesbians. "That could have just as well been given by Pope Benedict. But Benedict could have been criticized by various media, whereas Pope Francis was praised."

Here are five big reasons Francis' young papacy is treated much differently from that of Benedict XVI.

1. Few knew Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio before he became Pope Francis.

That's not uncommon for popes but stands in contrast to Benedict, who as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was a high-profile church figure. Before becoming pope in 2005, Benedict was the longtime prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith -- essentially the church's doctrinal enforcer -- which automatically meant Vatican watchers looked at him with suspicion.

In contrast, the few stories about Bergoglio before he became pope centered on his riding the bus to work, saying Mass in the slums and cooking his own meals, things that played well in headlines.

The worst press he got was on his role in Argentina's "dirty war," a story that was quickly overshadowed by a photo of him checking out of his conclave hotel and settling up his tab.

"It's much more attractive for most people to think about Bergoglio's humble field work and pastoral experience than it is to think about Ratzinger sitting in some 16th-century palace poring over issues of orthodoxy," said Robert Mickens, Vatican correspondent with the U.K.-based Catholic publication *The Tablet*.

2. Francis is empathetic and humble.

It is notable that the new pontiff eschews most of the pomp and pageantry of the papacy: He dresses simply, and he declines to live in the ornate papal apartments of his predecessors. His manner of speaking is frequently off the cuff and easy to follow, and he treats the faithful as peers, asking for their prayers, sharing events about his past -- and often posing for pictures afterward.

In his first hours as pope, he asked the crowds in St. Peter's Square to pray for him before he blessed them, and then passed up the chance to bless the media so as to avoid offending non-Catholic journalists.

"His speaking style feels less like a lesson than as spontaneous dialogue," said Chiara Parenti, co-author of the new book *Papa Francesco -- Apertura, dialogo e umilta (Pope Francis -- Openness, dialogue and humility)*. "He has a sincere empathy for the people he is talking to, and that translates."

3. Style becomes substance.

On matters of doctrine, Francis is not nearly as radical as he appears at first glance. His statements about not judging gay Christians, or stating that the church is "too obsessed" with hot-button issues of sexual morality, did not result in any changes in church doctrine. But the way he talked about it won him many fans.

"Most church leaders look to teach when they speak, but Francis has a way of speaking in a way that hugs people first, before he teaches," said Paolo Rodari, the Vatican correspondent for *La Repubblica*, one of Italy's leading newspapers.

That may seem like a superficial issue of style. But with time, a compelling style can change perceptions. And in the church, as in politics, perception impacts reality.

Though nobody would argue that the tone from the Vatican hasn't changed under Francis, few rules or policies have changed. And yet an overwhelming majority of people say they see a new direction from the Vatican: The Rome polling firm Opinioni said last week that three in four Italians liked the direction the church was taking, compared with less than 45 percent last year. A YouGov/HuffPost poll of U.S. Catholics released this week showed that more than four in five thought Francis had a positive effect on the church.

"Most people clearly believe the church has turned a corner, and if they believe that then that's half the battle," said Maria Rossi, Opinioni's co-director.

4. He practices what he preaches.

Most religious leaders speak about the need to help the poor, but Francis lives that message with gusto: In a recent trip to Sardinia, he met with unemployed youths and told them of his own family's economic struggles upon emigrating from Italy to Argentina, and then he shared a meal with some of the island's poorest residents.

This is a pope, after all, who has told his bishops to be shepherds "who smell like the sheep."

"I think it would be difficult for someone who didn't know who Francis was to recognize him as the pope based on the things he says and does," said Alistair Sear, a retired church historian.

Mickens agreed: "You'd sometimes read about Pope Benedict taking a trip somewhere for four days and having 10 of his 12 meals there alone or with his personal secretary," he said. "But Francis loves being with people."

5. Francis is not Benedict.

This could hardly be more obvious, but Francis has a kind of credibility Benedict never had: Francis' background, empathy and style allow him to cast himself as a champion of the poor and destitute in a way that would have seemed forced or perhaps insincere from Benedict, richly dressed and speaking from the balcony of his lavish Vatican apartment.

That allows Francis to communicate in ways that would have been impossible for his predecessor. At a general audience earlier this month, Francis compared the church to mothers: "All mothers have defects," the pope said. "But when we speak of our mother's defects we cover them up -- that's how we love her."

Mickens laughed talking about that: "If Pope Benedict had ever uttered the words 'cover up' and 'church' in the same sentence, imagine the outcry!" he said.

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