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Francis hits 'em where they ain't in meaningful papal interviews

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Oct. 8, 2013 Bulletins from the Human Side

Everybody is telling us what Pope Francis means in what he does and says, particularly in what the media refer to as his "blockbuster" interview [1] published recently in Jesuit magazines throughout the world. He followed that up with an even more provocative conversation [2] with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*.

His Jesuit-oriented interview has been analyzed more than evidence at a crime scene. Each of these interpretations, like Versailles' hall of mirrors, reflects one way of appraising the new pope. The Jesuits are naturally interested in exploring how his training and commitment to the exercises of St. Ignatius affect his outlook and mode of operation. Those interested in his foreign policy look for clues about that while Catholics of the Second Vatican Council speculate on whether he is another John XXIII or not. Others, remembering that a race course once stood where the open arms of the colonnade of St. Peter's Square now close in on new popes, wonder whether he will win the race against old curial racehorses or fade in the stretch.

Bishops, including Chicago's Cardinal Francis George, are quick to reassure us that no matter what you think or wish for, Francis cannot and will not change basic church teachings. The secular media press every new pope on whether he will change such church teachings as those on abortion, birth control or gay marriage. Although the answer is always no, this adds to the angles of our vision of Francis. However you appraise his recent interviews, one cannot miss his big-hearted, inclusive pastoral approach to a world in which he sees the church as a field hospital for the wounded rather than a holding cell for sinners.

The interviews may best be seen as illustrations of how Francis seems to be following the mantra of the turn-of-the-20th-century baseball Hall of Famer Willie Keeler: "I keep my eyes clear and I hit 'em where they ain't."

Through these interviews, Francis is following a clear if unreported strategy of avoiding direct and noisy fights with a Curia anxious to get him, as they have previous popes, under its control. As John XXIII observed to a friend, "The Curia, they think they have me in a bag here."

The interviews provide another example of how Francis refuses to fight directly with the Curia. Instead, he keeps his eyes clear and, much to the Curia's frustration, moves forward in areas "where they ain't."

As a former student, management consultant Michael Burkhart, told me, Francis is "masterly" in "moving things by taking actions that are easy. He's not wasting energy by getting into power struggles with those that will resist the changes. He is using movement in areas that they don't control."

Beyond all the speculation and analysis, Francis' interviews containing his pastoral worldview are not only blockbuster in general, but Curia-buster in particular. His words evade the bureaucratic Vatican mill that grinds everything into the characterless sawdust of the bland orthodoxy that makes Vatican monsignors smile. "We have saved the church again," they say, blowing out the candles that flicker over their 19th-century desks before going home in no need of dinner after gorging on self-righteousness.

Francis side-stepped the Curia's control from the moment he was elected and refused to wear the ornate armor-

like vestments that curial assistants drape immediately on new popes like nets dropped on their quarry by hunters. Francis stepped forward in a white cassock and pewter cross not as a just-crowned king, but as a just-appointed pastor greeting his parishioners with a simple "Good evening" and a request for their prayers.

The curial officials eager to become his handlers were stunned when, after lying in wait for him along their gaudy Vatican midway, Francis walked serenely past them, leaving them holding the bag, as John XXIII would have said, in which they wanted to place him.

He kept out of their control and out of conflict with the officials who expected him, like most of his predecessors, to follow their lead in learning how to be pope. Instead, he got the world to follow him as he climbed on a bus with the cardinals who elected him to return to the plain hotel where, a man in no need of an entourage, he paid his bill himself.

His decision to live and work at the Casa Santa Marta in a small suite, spartan in comparison to the regal papal apartments, also revealed how well he understood himself and the ambitious Vatican personnel who were stunned when he declined to live in the spacious apartments where they could control appointments, visitors, schedules, phone calls, mail -- in short, his complete agenda. Francis, as gracefully as a matador puzzling the bull by the sweep of his cape, made a declaration of personal independence as popular with Vatican careerists as America's was with King George.

He showed unwillingness to climb into a limousine in which the Curia wanted to take him for a ride and the armored popemobile that kept him at a safe distance from the crowds with whom he felt safe anyway. He favors a 30-year-old clunker in which he can drive himself around the Vatican, separating him further from the veteran Vatican hands whose aim is to keep him under their control. Francis does not argue with the tag-team officials ready to work in shifts to place themselves between him and the people. He just smiles and mingles undefensively with the ordinary people with whom he must mingle, as he has said, for his functioning well as a priest and bishop.

He also makes his own appointments; eats with groups often assembled spontaneously; and makes phone calls on his own, sometimes back to Buenos Aires, Argentina, to order his own shoes and sometimes to troubled people who have written to him of their burden of woe. "No, popes can't do that," controlling Curia members murmur, but he continues to do it anyway, revealing himself as a man who, like John XXIII, has learned much in his long career about how distant the church can drift regally away from the world in whose midst it should find itself every day.

Francis has avoided conflict with the Curia by avoiding much contact with them at all. He has freed himself from the intermediaries who would, in a dozen ways each day, monitor his contact with others and his daily schedule of activities. He who controls the pope's appointment schedule to a large extent controls the pope, the documents and reports that come to him, and the personnel who have access to him to shape his views and present him with the duties he is to carry out as if he were a figurehead monarch in a European monarchy that long ago died intestate.

Francis is a self-confident man who in these interviews again made an end run around the officials who would presume to prepare or censor it beforehand, taking pride in never leaving traces of their DNA on anything, content with the role they planned for all their lives, to serve as puppeteers to the papacy, convinced that the church must be preserved from popes with their own ideas and that, as the latter come and go, they remain in charge of the church.

He even gave a remarkable definition to the Curia, referring to them as the "quartermaster's office" of the church, filling an essential function, overseeing logistics and providing workaday supplies but far from being the general staff in charge of the entire Catholic church.

Francis has, without starting a fierce and distracting fight with the Curia, made clear he intends to reform it through the collegial help of the international group of cardinals who met last week to advise the pope on how to proceed. Francis has taken control of the papacy out of the hands of the hierarchical inheritor class and is transforming it back into service to those wounded less by sin than by their lack of being loved and to those he now places at the head of the line, the marginalized and the disinherited of the earth. Francis is indeed keeping his eyes clear and hitting 'em where they ain't.

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