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Editorial: Things are different under Francis

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Editorial

You've probably seen or heard quotes like these:

"The religious and secular left grossly misinterpret the statements made by Pope Francis."

"It's disgraceful that some would manipulate the words of Pope Francis to get us in line with their agenda."

"What the pope meant to say was ..."

Such statements have become -- particularly for those who wish to contain change in the church -- the way of challenging any notion that a pope could be different, other than cosmetically, from a predecessor or from the church of centuries earlier. We saw very similar arguments about the hermeneutics of discontinuity and continuity, often from the same parties, over the meaning of the Second Vatican Council.

With Francis it has served as a dismissive meme, a way of brushing off what is patently obvious: In Francis, we see a great deal of discontinuity with Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II. And it is about time. How can Francis' Nov. 24 apostolic exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," be seen as anything but a clarion call for discontinuity?

During the interregnum in 2005, it was virtually impossible to make a critical case against the papacy of John Paul II, and the reasons were understandable. He was a giant of an age and had taken the church along dramatically new paths on the world stage. For those accomplishments alone, he should be called blessed and will soon achieve sainthood.

But as *NCR's* John Allen expressed it in the obituary he wrote, John Paul left a world more united by his

actions, but a church more divided. Outside the church, Allen wrote, he built bridges; inside, he was "a bruiser."

By the time Benedict resigned -- a courageous act by a man who probably will never get the credit he deserves for dealing with the overwhelming crises that he inherited from his predecessor -- the electing cardinals themselves were voicing a critique of clericalism, the Curia and church governance that at times sounded as if it was lifted from the back page of *NCR*.

The fact is, they knew things needed to change, change radically and change quickly. Under the previous two papacies, the church had lost an enormous amount of moral credibility. Each time a new wave of abuse was unearthed in another country and the patterns played out with a numbing familiarity, the world became more convinced that the church was corrupt and that its leadership was beyond accountability.

Let us all stipulate and accept a known: Francis will not engage in any precipitous change to church teaching, if he should ever advocate changing anything at all. He certainly will not change the fundamental dogma of the church.

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If that's what is meant by Francis being continuous with previous papacies, then, yes, there's nothing new. But that's like saying Barack Obama is continuous with George W. Bush, is continuous with Bill Clinton and so on down the line. None of them would advocate nullifying fundamental constitutional freedoms and protections; none would campaign on a return to slavery or decide that women no longer deserve the vote.

However, as president, each viewed the world differently and saw the responsibility of government and politics differently. In that way, they can be quite discontinuous, one from another.

It is time to put aside such weak attempts to fashion a papacy after one's own wishes. "Continuity" and "discontinuity" are now the equivalent of an ecclesial sound bite. As is often the case with sound bites that aspire to capture complex realities, they end up conveying very little meaning.

Many in the church were less than pleased with previous papacies but stuck with it for a host of reasons, not least of which was the conviction that God's church is bigger than scandals, contention and a hierarchical culture gone off the rails.

It must be recognized that a great many people invested enormous amounts of human effort, belief and work in the way things were under John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It is only natural that some would be distressed at the change in direction. We've discovered in very embarrassing ways that the church is not a perfect society, as popes once declared, and that change is sometimes imperative. Things *are* different under Francis, who seems far more comfortable applying pastoral theology first and consulting the moral texts and canon law later. If that's a mistake, the church has survived far worse.

No pope is perfect; no community of Christians ever, anywhere, is a complete expression of the fullness of God. As persistent as our reach might be toward divinity, we are the human expression of God. It is, for better or worse, ours, in turn, to make God known to the world. Whatever magnificence of thought and action John Paul and Benedict brought to the modern papacy, it was also obvious that serious flaws and deep corruption had taken over significant areas of the church and its governing apparatus. The assembled cardinals recognized the need for deep change. They voted for it.

"I dream of a 'missionary option,' " Francis writes in "The Joy of Gospel," "that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world, rather than for her self-preservation."

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