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In pope's person of the year award, a new church of attraction

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 11, 2013 NCR Today

Nine days ago, a Catholic bishop from the Netherlands steeled himself to tell something to the pope.

Speaking during a small meeting at the Vatican Dec. 2, Bishop Jan Hendriks told Pope Francis how popular he was in the northern European country.

"[You are] many times on the news, which is not something we have had in the last 50 years," Hendriks, the auxiliary bishop of the Haarlem-Amsterdam diocese, recalled telling the pope in an interview with *NCR* [1].

"Let us put aside what we think about this," Hendriks said the pope responded. "But use it. Use it to spread the Gospel."

Commenting on news Wednesday that Francis had been selected [2] as *TIME* magazine's person of the year, the Vatican had a similar response.

The pope, said Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi in a statement, "does not seek fame and success, since he carries out his service for the proclamation of the Gospel and the love of God for all."

"If this attracts men and women and gives them hope, the Pope is content," Lombardi continued. "If this nomination as 'Person of the Year' means that many have understood this message, at least implicitly, he will certainly be glad."

In an expansive, nearly 6,000-word piece explaining their choice of the new pontiff as the person who has done the most to influence the events of the last year, *TIME* magazine recounts much of what has captured the world's attention since Francis' election as Bishop of Rome on March 13.

There's the recalling of his simple bow the night of his election, when he asked the crowds gathered in St. Peter's Square to pray for him; the decision to create an eight-member "kitchen cabinet" of cardinals to offer "real consultations" on the church's functioning; his provocative question "Who am I to judge?" when asked about priests who are gay or before their ministry had been in gay relationships.

Most of all, *TIME*'s account of Francis focuses on three aspects: His message of mercy, his popularity around the world, and his shifts in the tone of the church's central command structure.

In explaining the magazine's choice, Nancy Gibbs, their managing editor, said [3] the pope "has not changed the words, but he?s changed the music."

One possible purpose for the melodic shift? Pope Francis explained it himself in his recent apostolic exhortation *Evangelli Gaudium*? ("The Joy of the Gospel).

"We cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him," the pope wrote [4].

"Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone," he continued. "Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but 'by attraction.'"

If nothing else, Wednesday's award is a stunning testament to the power of that attraction -- coming from a pope we can imagine sitting at the foot of the table at that banquet.

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