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Francis and Mary; Benedict the reformer; India's Christians; and Ukraine

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 13, 2013 All Things Catholic

While pop culture remains fascinated by small clues to Pope Francis' personality -- such as the fact that he was once a bouncer -- we got a reminder on Sunday of something far more fundamental, albeit a point that probably won't get much play on TMZ: his incredibly strong devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Dec. 8 was the festival of the Immaculate Conception, known in Italy as the *Immacolata*, and Francis made the traditional outing to Rome's Piazza di Spagna to venerate a column with a statue of Mary erected in 1857 to celebrate the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed by Pope Pius IX three years earlier.

Francis composed a special prayer for the occasion, the heart of which was a plea that "the cry of the poor may never leave us indifferent, the suffering of the sick and of those in need may never find us distracted, the loneliness of the elderly and the fragility of children may always move us, [and] every human life may always be loved and venerated by all of us."

It was a classic Francis outing. He showed up in a blue Ford Focus, not a Mercedes limo, not even riding in the back this time but sitting in the front chatting with his driver. He stopped briefly to greet shopkeepers, then decided to take an impromptu walk the rest of the way. He paused to greet locals and tourists, paying special attention to children and the sick. Some folks tossed the flowers they brought to honor Mary in the pope's path, and he bent over to pick them up and carry them to the column.

Afterward, Francis crossed town to visit the Basilica of St. Mary Major, Rome's premier Marian shrine, to pause a few moments before the famous icon of Mary as *Salus Populi Romani*, "Protector of the Roman People." He didn't give a speech, and there was no scrum of photographers and TV cameras because Francis wanted it to be an intimate act.

This was the sixth time Francis has stopped at St. Mary Major since becoming pope, with the first coming on March 14, less than 24 hours after his election. It's easily his most visited location in Rome outside the Vatican, illustrating how important the basilica and its dedication to Mary is to Francis' spirituality.

As Argentine journalist Elisabetta Piqué notes in her terrific recent biography of Francis, the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio made a point of visiting St. Mary Major every time church business forced him to travel to Rome. The only difference now, Piqué writes, is that he shows up in a white cassock rather than a simple priest's outfit. (She might also have observed that he no longer takes the bus.)

In popular parlance, "the Vatican" is shorthand for the papacy. One could argue, however, that the real spiritual center of this pontificate lies across town in St. Mary Major.

All this tracks with what we know about Francis' Marian devotion throughout his life.

For instance, we know that when Bergoglio was in semi-exile in Germany in 1986, related to tensions within the

Argentine Jesuits, the future pope took comfort in an image of the Virgin Mary he discovered in a church in Augsburg. It's the famous 18th-century image of "Mary Untier of Knots," a reference to St. Irenaeus, who wrote that "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosened by Mary's obedience."

Perhaps sensing a connection with the knots in his own life, Bergoglio was consoled by the image and promoted devotion to it in Argentina. He encouraged the construction of a shrine with a replica of the painting in the Church of San José del Talar, located in the Agronomía neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

Nowhere was the emotional depth of this pope's Marian devotion on clearer display than in Brazil, where Francis took a day trip to the shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida. It was the site of the gathering of Latin American bishops in 2007 where Bergoglio was lead author of the "Aparecida document," a call for a more missionary church that in some ways is the charter for his papacy.

When he prayed before the image of Mary, Francis seemed on the point of tears while entrusting his entire papacy to Our Lady of Aparecida.

For those with eyes to see, signs of devotion are impossible to miss. Clergy who have concelebrated Mass in the Casa Santa Marta, for example, report that Francis has asked them to join him after Mass for a hymn of honor in front of a statue of the Virgin.

The Marian streak also sheds light on Francis' thinking on some of the most contested issues in the church.

For instance, Francis repeatedly has said that while the issue of women priests is closed, he wants stronger roles for women in Catholicism. Some may see that as a contradiction, but his point of departure is Mary -- who, though never a priest, played a decisive role in salvation history.

He made that connection during his airborne press conference on the way back to Rome from Brazil:

"A church without women is like the Apostolic College without Mary," Francis said.

"The role of women in the church is not only maternity, the mother of the family, but it's stronger: It is, in fact, the icon of the Virgin, of Our Lady, the one who helps the church grow!

"But think that Our Lady is more important than the apostles! She is more important ... A woman's role in the church must not end only as mother, as worker, limited. No! It's something else ... I think we must go further in making the role and charism of women more explicit."

For a Marian thinker, in other words, ordination and influence are thoroughly distinct things.

That Marian angle may also help shape the perspective Francis brings to discussions about divorced and remarried Catholics and people in other irregular relationships. It certainly hasn't escaped his attention that when Mary conceived the Christ child, she was technically still outside wedlock.

Francis recalled the point Sunday in his Angelus address before heading out to Piazza di Spagna.

"When the Angel of the Lord calls her 'full of grace,' Mary is 'greatly troubled,' because in her humility she felt like nothing before God," the pope said. "The announcement [that she would bear a child] upset her all the more, in part because she wasn't yet married to Joseph."

It's hard to imagine that his meditations on that moment haven't had an impact on how Francis thinks about the pressures faced by women and couples in all sorts of situations.

Bottom line: If you're looking for insight into Francis, you'd probably do well to look less at the bars in Buenos Aires where Bergoglio once tossed people out and more to the Marian shrines, where he delights in seeing them come in.

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Speaking of the popular fascination with Francis, the latest confirmation came Wednesday with *Time* magazine's designation of him as Person of the Year. It's the third time a pope has claimed the honor, after John XXIII in 1962 and John Paul II in 1994.

Since those two pontiffs are slated for canonization in April, *Time* is arguably functioning as a proxy for the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

I offered some brief reflections on the significance of the honor here [1].

Notably, John XXIII garnered the nod four years after his election, while John Paul II had been pope for a full 16 years when it was his turn. With Francis, it only took nine months, another telling indication of how much he's stirred the popular imagination.

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Financial transparency has become an acid test of whether reform under Francis will be more than talk, in part because of a series of scandals that unfolded under Benedict XVI and continued on his watch.

Despite the feel-good vibe about the new pope, there are indications that his personal aversion to the corrupting influence of wealth hasn't fully taken hold at lower levels, including the sensational arrest in July of a former accountant at the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See (APSA) in a $30 million cash smuggling scheme.

A new report by Europe's top anti-money-laundering experts says Francis has made the right moves in terms of issuing rules, but the system needs to be tested in practice and the Vatican's watchdog unit needs enhanced personnel and resources to do its job effectively.

That verdict came from Moneyval, the Council of Europe's body devoted to the fight against money laundering and the financing of terrorism, in a progress report on the Vatican published Thursday. My story on the report is here [2].

Here's one additional observation about the Moneyval process.

It's fashionable to style Francis as a dramatic break with the past, and there's a sense in which that's real. On the other hand, several substantive reforms for which he's getting credit actually began under Benedict XVI, and nowhere is that more true than in the arena of financial transparency.

It was Benedict who made the historic decision in 2010 to welcome outside secular inspection by inviting Moneyval to conduct the same detailed review of anti-money-laundering protocols it carries out in other European nations. Never before had the Vatican opened its books in this fashion, and the decision met internal resistance. Some members of the old guard objected that in earlier centuries, popes had paid in blood to resist such external involvement in church affairs while Benedict was rolling out the red carpet.

Benedict also created the Financial Information Authority to act as a watchdog on Vatican finances and began the process of issuing new rules designed to bring the Vatican into compliance with accepted international

standards.

Assuming that process reaches completion under Francis, he'll rightly win praise for finishing the cleanup operation. Certainly, no pope has ever done so much so quickly to recalibrate popular impressions of the church's attitude toward money or to set a new standard of simplicity for church leadership.

At the same time, a good case can be made that if we're talking about financial glasnost -- or, for that matter, recovery from the church's child sexual abuse scandals -- the "reform pope" was actually Benedict XVI, and much of what Francis is now doing amounts to running plays crafted on his predecessor's watch.

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In my book *The Global War on Christians*, I try to make a clear distinction between a perceived "war on religion" in places such as the United States and real anti-Christian violence and persecution in other parts of the world.

If there's a war on religion in America, it's a metaphorical one being waged in courthouses and legislatures and pop culture. In other global neighborhoods, there's a decidedly literal war on religion underway, and Christians are often its primary victims. To put the point differently: In the States, a threat to your religious freedom means, at worst, that you might get sued; elsewhere, it means you might get beaten or killed.

We got a reminder of the point Wednesday in New Delhi, India, where several priests and nuns were beaten by police and Archbishop Anil J.T. Couto was arrested for leading a peaceful protest in favor of Christian and Muslim rights.

Leaders of Anglican and Protestant denominations were also arrested, along with advocates of minority rights. The march had been called to protest a 1950 law in India that gives economic, educational and social advantages to members of the Dalit underclass who are Hindu. That law was amended in 1990 to extend the same privileges to Sikhs and Buddhists, but Christians and Muslims remain excluded.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, president of the Indian Bishops' Conference and a member of Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals, publicly blasted the crackdown on the Christian leaders.

"The excessive violence on our bishops, priests and nuns" was a disgrace, he told the Asia News service [3]. He said Couto and the other protestors had been "arrested and detained because they fought for the rightful demands of the country's poor and marginalized."

According to Asia News, this is the first time since 1997 that a Catholic bishop has been arrested in India for supporting Dalit emancipation.

Despite Hinduism's generally tolerant ethos, there's a virulent form of Hindu radicalism, usually tied to Indian nationalism, that poses lethal risks to religious minorities generally and Christians specifically.

The northeastern state of Orissa, to cite the most specular example, was the scene of a violent anti-Christian pogrom in 2008, when a series of riots ended with as many as 500 Christians killed, many hacked to death by machete-wielding Hindu radicals, thousands more injured and at least 50,000 left homeless. Many Christians fled to hastily prepared displacement camps, where some languished for two years or more. An estimated 5,000 Christian homes and 350 churches and schools were destroyed.

Though rarely that intense, anti-Christian assaults have become a routine fact of life in some parts of India. An investigation by a high court judge in Karnataka state in March 2010, for example, found that Christians in the

state had faced more than 1,000 attacks in the past 500 days, meaning an average of two per day.

Notably, Wednesday's violence wasn't carried out by radicals but by the police, illustrating another aspect of the problem. In some regions, local authorities are allied with the radicals and either turn a blind eye to anti-Christian attacks or, as in this case, directly perpetrate them.

In sum, India is one of the primary arenas for the global war on Christians, and this week brought a new front in that conflict.

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Sometimes anti-Christian violence is like the weather, a force that falls on its victims almost at random. Other times, however, Christians make choices that place themselves in harm's way, and such a case may be taking shape in Ukraine.

The country is currently in the middle of a political crisis that blew up last month when pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych spurned a free trade deal with the European Union, with most observers believing he did so under pressure from Moscow. The resulting uprising has brought the most serious street protests in Ukraine since the pro-democracy Orange Revolution in 2004.

Catholics have long been among the social actors in Ukraine supporting a less subservient position vis-à-vis Russia. They represent an important minority, with somewhere between 3 million and 5 million Greek Catholics and a million Latin Rite Catholics out of a total national population of 44 million.

Catholics were important players in the Orange Revolution, and now the leadership of the Greek Catholic church appears to have given its blessing to the current uprising.

Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk and his fellow prelates issued a statement Wednesday saying they were "profoundly disturbed" by a crackdown on protesters by state security forces and expressing "support and solidarity" for the protest leaders "who are standing with dignity and witnessing to the dignity of their fellow citizens and of the whole nation."

Catholic leaders have paid a price for such stances in the past, including ominous visits from security officials and threats of various kinds of reprisals such as hassles in getting accreditation for church-run schools. It's entirely possible that the church could experience a new wave of blowback now, either from the government or from some of Yanukovych's most fevered supporters.

Shevchuk and the other bishops certainly have to be aware of the risk, but apparently they've concluded it's a price they're willing to pay.

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