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Francis On His Own

Ken Briggs | Dec. 13, 2013 NCR Today

Does anyone else get the impression that Pope Francis is out there by himself apart from any institutional ties?

In a few short months he's been crowned Time's "Person of the Year" and as moldy as that award has become it makes a certain amount of sense with regard to the pope. He's become a world personality, an enormously popular and captivating figure, by creating his own narrative, a freelancer who appears to be virtually on his own. He speaks compassion and tolerance and lots of other Christian things yet the institution he belongs to bumps and grinds along quite apart from his appeals. On the one hand, Francis the beacon of hope; on the other, the church still mired in perhaps the worst swirl of bad news and bad behavior ever.

Every square inch of his public persona is rooted in Catholicism yet he's chosen so far to avoid occupying the chair of St. Peter. He has his own digs and his own priorities, which seem straight out of the Gospel, and shows little inclination to insist that the throngs of official underlings put his lessons into practice. No sooner does he advise bishops to quit harping on issues such as birth control, for example, than the American bishops go hammer and tongs against the Obama Administration's policy of providing artificial contraception to non-Catholic employees of Catholic institutions free of charge. Is it a disconnect or simply a display of separate spheres -- the pope can say what he will, and continue giving the church a better name by changing the story, but what he does is his business without any obligation on the hierarchy. The pope can scorn inevitable abuses of capitalism, and it even sounds like something that the unrealistic Jesus might say, but it doesn't prevent the rest of the church from using that system for all it's worth.

There's every reason to believe the pope is serious about preaching and practicing Christian faith and virtue but he does so as a free spirit, perhaps, a combination of Johnny Appleseed and Ralph Nader with plenty of St. Francis cameos. He comes across as a solitary figure, in a sea of strangers who either don't understand him or are nervous because they do. The bulletin-like words and actions continue to flow from the cheerful pontiff and it's easy to suppose that the Establishment, as we used to call it, wonders whether the other shoe will drop, shaking the foundations of the basilicas. That remains to be seen, of course, but right now the question has been posed. Will Francis continue to be a solitary prophet like Jeremiah or Amos, censoring and goading an institution distant from his example, or will he actually shake those foundations? Shall loving the poor be a message of inspiration and a ministry of actual sacrifice or is the message enough?

Maybe getting the message right IS his thing; and institutions not so much.

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