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Hospital visit shows for Francis, 'It's the attitudes, stupid!'

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Every so often a day rolls around that seems to perfectly sum up the arc of a story, and Saturday, Dec. 21, felt like one of those days vis-à-vis the priority of attitudes over structures in Pope Francis? ongoing reform campaign.

Indeed, if the Vatican under Francis were the 1992 Clinton campaign, there might well be a sign in room 201 of the Casa Santa Marta reading: ?It?s the attitudes, stupid!?

To set the scene, Francis had two big appointments on his calendar for Saturday. One was the pope?s annual year-end address to the Roman Curia, and the other a visit to Rome?s Bambino Gesù hospital that specializes in the care of sick children.

Going in, most observers assumed the speech would bring the day?s drama, since it loomed as a sort of ?State of the Union? summation of Francis? vision for overhauling a sometimes dysfunctional bureaucracy in the Vatican. The hospital swing, on the other hand, profiled largely as a photo-op.

In the end, however, the pope?s outreach to sick and suffering children actually felt like the main event ? an outcome that would seem to reveal something about how Francis understands genuine reform.

Back in September, Francis laid out a vision of reform in his celebrated interview with Jesuit publications.

?Structural and organizational reforms are secondary?that is, they come afterward,? the pope said. ?The first reform must be the attitude. Ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people?s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials.?

Saturday drove home how much he meant what he said about focusing on attitudes first.

Given that a clean-up operation in the Roman Curia was a large part of the mandate Francis received from the cardinals who elected him, and given today?s fevered speculation in Rome about what further changes might be coming, many observers were anxious to see if Francis would drop some hints in his speech Saturday morning ? which departments might be on the chopping block, for instance, or whose jobs might be at risk.

In the end, there was nothing like that.

To be sure, the speech produced a few vintage Francis sound-bites, such as his warning that the Vatican must not be a ?ponderous bureaucratic customs house,? bent on constantly ?inspecting and questioning,? as well as his plea to Vatican personnel to become ?conscientious objectors? to a culture of gossip.

That, however, was attitudes language, and virtually everything had been said by the pope in various ways

before.

The speech was also notable for its brevity.

When Benedict XVI delivered his first curia speech in December 2005, it ran to a robust 5,700 words, and offered one of the most memorable rhetorical tropes of his papacy. In it, Benedict contrasted a ?hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture? with regard to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), styling the council as a repudiation of the church?s past, with a ?hermeneutic of reform? that accents continuity with earlier layers of tradition. In a sense, that speech was the intellectual blueprint for his entire papacy.

Francis? maiden curia speech, however, barely reached 1,000 words and took all of 15 minutes to deliver.

The visit a few hours later to Bambino Gesù offered a study in contrast. Popes have visited hospitals before, of course, including previous stops at Bambino Gesù by John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. However, they rarely stick around this long. Francis stayed almost three hours, personally greeting scores of children and their families.

Bottom line: Anyone following the pope yesterday couldn?t help but draw the conclusion that the hospital visit was more important to him than the speech.

The stop produced another of the iconic images of this papacy, this time a shot of Francis kissing a child bald from illness and wearing a surgical mask to ward off infection. Italian TV carried interviews afterwards with delighted kids and moved parents, and one news channel even produced an evening special on how to cope with the suffering of innocents motivated by the pope?s visit.

While Benedict XVI delivered a thoughtful 800-word address during his September 2005 visit to Bambino Gesù, defining the hospital as ?an outpost of the evangelizing action of the Christian community in our city,? Francis offered only one paragraph of formal remarks Saturday afternoon.

That paragraph, however, delivered to children suffering from tumors and their parents, produced the day?s headline: ?Jesus is always close to you,? the pope said, a phrase subsequently splashed across papers and websites.

?Thank you for your dreams and your prayers,? the pope said, referring to a basket with notes from the children presented to him.

?Let?s offer them together to Jesus,? Francis said. ?He knows them best of all, he knows what?s in the depths of our heart. Jesus has a special connection with you children, he?s always close to you.?

Projecting that attitude of closeness, both human and spiritual, to suffering people clearly seemed to be Francis? priority on Saturday. Presumably, the pope would say that?s not a distraction from the heavy lifting of curial reform ? it?s the basis for it.

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