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Can Francis achieve his reforms?

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 27, 2014 NCR Today

As part of the Feb. 25th PBS Frontline documentary, "Secrets of the Vatican [1]," the producers asked me to write an essay assessing the chances Pope Francis can succeed in his agenda to reform the church. This is what I wrote:

Can Pope Francis restore his church?s shattered credibility? Tend the wounds of millions of disaffected Catholics, pillared by decades of clerical sex abuse and cover-up? Can he bury a church authority structure modeled after kings and their courts?

These are tall orders for a 77-year-old bishop who moved to Rome just one year ago to find himself suddenly heading a church of 1.2 billion followers.

Change does not come easily in the Catholic Church, yet I for one am more than modestly optimistic Francis will succeed in ways few have yet to imagine. Consider these points:

One: He was elected by his fellow cardinals with a solid mandate for reform, starting with a Vatican bureaucracy that is widely perceived as inept and out of touch. He has appointed a council of eight cardinals from around the world to move this task forward. A roof leaks from the top down. Francis has wisely started his reform at the top.

Two: Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI were conservatives who stressed church doctrines that have grown through the centuries. Francis is a radical traditionalist who stresses core Christian teachings found in the gospels, most importantly mercy and love. The result is to offer the world a more pastoral side of the faith. Why focus on human failings in the face of an all-merciful God, he tells the world. In this sense, Francis is at once more conservative and more progressive than either of his predecessors. For the first time in a half-century, a pope is successfully bridging painful divides within the church, divisions exacerbated after the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

Three: His pontificate comes as an exclamation point to that pastoral council, which attempted to modernize the church and more actively engage it with the world. Thus it bookends a period of reaction to the council, as Francis is the first pontiff to have studied theology during and after that radical modernization effort in Catholic history. In a historical sense, he is a product of that unprecedented reformist effort. It is often said it takes 50 years for the effects of a council to take hold. We are seeing this today in virtually every move and utterance by Francis.

Four: The reactive era to Vatican II began almost immediately after the bishops of the world left Rome and a resistant Vatican bureaucracy felt free to return to its resistive ways. The papacies of the last four decades ? papacies of restoration ? have coincided with the largest church scandal in modern history, perhaps ever: a pandemic pattern of clergy child sex abuse. The glaring lesson has been ? for all with open eyes ? that the

Catholic church cannot continue to wrap itself in a closed off clerical cast and the culture this clericalism has spawned, and survive. Radical change is required.

Five: Pope Benedict had hoped his papacy would rekindle the faith throughout Europe. As a theologian, he believed correct orthodoxy was the answer to the church?s woes. To achieve this strict orthodoxy he welcomed a smaller and purer church, at least as a new starting point. That church, however, never made the beachhead he envisioned. Instead, Catholic disaffection grew and churches emptied. Francis is taking the opposite path, saying the church should be home to all. This new engagement appears to have a greater chance of success in an increasingly diverse, multi-cultured, and multi-religious world.

Meanwhile, his worldview has prepared him well for hard days ahead. Francis is the first pope to come from the global south. He has internalized the cries of the poor who make up the majority of the human family. When he speaks of the need for justice, he does not deal with abstract notions. He has witnessed the oppressive nature of poverty firsthand.

Importantly, Francis also understands that in the modern digital age, antiquated top down authority systems tend to dissolve. As such, he has rejected monarchy from day one of his pontificate.

So completely tied to the gospels, Francis exhibits an uncanny sense of freedom that comes from great spiritual security. This gives him a solid compass and a will to go forward despite the obstacles. Francis has repeatedly told the faithful that the Spirit is full of surprises. He does not believe he has to control the future. Rather he sees himself as an instrument ? a means and not an end.

Taken all together, Francis? pontificate seems fit for the time.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* Publisher.]

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