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Beneath the hype, Rio a major test for Francis

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 24, 2013 All Things Catholic
World Youth Day 2013

In exactly two months, Pope Francis will make his first overseas trip to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for World Youth Day [1]. It shapes up as the biggest Catholic blowout of the early 21st century, a massive celebration of history?s first Latin American pope folded into what?s already the Catholic version of Lollapalooza.

At one level, it?s tempting to start writing success stories now. The crowds will be huge and enthusiastic, Brazil desperately wants the event to go well to showcase its status as the emerging superpower of the developing world (and as a trial run for both the World Cup next year and the Summer Olympics in 2016), and Francis has already proven that he?s more than ready for prime time.

Beneath the hype, however, there are four challenges awaiting the new pontiff on this outing, and however many beguiling visuals and moving testimonials the trip generates, triumph is hardly a foregone conclusion.

Church/State Relations

The broad recent trend in Latin American politics is what analysts have called the ?Pink Tide,? referring to the success of center-left parties representing a break with the ?Washington consensus? in favor of open markets and privatization. Typically, these regimes blend a sort of managed capitalism with moderate-to-progressive positions on women?s issues, reproductive policies and gay rights.

Of the 21 nations regarded as constituting Latin America, 14 of them are presently ruled by left-leaning parties, including Francis? host nation of Brazil.

The key question facing the church is whether it can carve out constructive relations with these governments, or whether ties will be ruptured by disputes over social policy. Francis carries some experience on this front, having had a notoriously ambivalent relationship [2] with the government of Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, especially over gay marriage.

In many ways, Brazil is an ideal test case.

When President Dilma Rousseff was elected in 2010, it was over the perceived opposition of the country?s Catholic bishops, primarily rooted in fears that she would legalize abortion. (Abortion is permitted in Brazil only in cases of rape and threats to the life of the mother.) The Guarulhos diocese, for instance, issued a statement during the campaign referring to Rousseff as the ?candidate of death.?

Things became so tense at one stage that an aide to former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Rousseff?s mentor, warned the bishops the church?s concordat might be revised if they kept up their attacks. When Benedict XVI accepted the resignation of Bishop Luis Carlos Eccel of Huntingdon in November 2010, it was widely perceived as punishment for his support of Rousseff. (Eccel was only 58 at the time, and did not step down for reasons of health.)

Since the election, however, there really haven?t been any titanic church/state rows. Rousseff has backed away from support for expanding abortion rights, and last year she pushed through a controversial national registry of pregnancies that was blasted by pro-choice groups for a variety of reasons, including that it defines a fetus as a person.

Moreover, Rousseff also opposes gay marriage, favoring civil unions instead ? basically the same position that then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio took in Argentina. Many analysts credit pressure not only from Catholics, but also from Brazil?s increasingly influential Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, with driving Rousseff to the center.

In terms of economic policy, a pope who famously longs for a ?poor church for the poor? should see a fair bit to applaud.

Although Brazil set records for income inequality in the 1990s, it?s made significant progress over the last decade. According to the World Bank, the income of the country?s bottom 10 percent grew at almost 7 percent per year, nearly three times the national average of 2.5 percent. Meanwhile, the income of the country?s richest 10 percent grew at only 1.1 percent per year. Government statistics say that 28 million people have been lifted out of poverty, while 36 million Brazilians have entered the middle class. In the main, that?s been achieved without sacrificing competitiveness; despite a recent downturn, Brazil averaged 4.5 percent GDP growth a year over the last decade.

All things considered, Rousseff and her Workers? Party profile as the sort of center-left regime with which this pope ought to be able to do business. The signals he sends on the trip, especially in his July 22 meeting with Rousseff, could lay a template for church/state relations more broadly on his watch.

The Evangelical and Pentecostal Challenge

Arguably the biggest religious realignment of the late 20th century was Latin America?s transition from a homogeneously Catholic region to a competitive religious marketplace, driven primarily by massive gains among Pentecostals and Evangelicals. At one stage during the 1990s, the Latin American bishops estimated they were losing 8,000 people every day to these various Protestant movements.

This reality poses three distinct tests for Francis.

First, the Latin American bishops reflected on the new realities of the continent in a document adopted at their 2007 meeting in Aparecida, Brazil, the heart of which was the call for a ?Great Continental Mission [3].? The idea was to revive the evangelical energies of the Catholic church, breaking with the clericalist model of opening the doors and waiting for people to show up, instead stealing a page from the Pentecostals in terms of street-level missionary hustle.

Bergoglio was one of the primary authors of that document and it remains close to his heart, reflected in the fact that he?s presented a copy to every Latin American leader he?s met since becoming pope.

To date, however, the ?Great Continental Mission? remains more an ambition than an accomplished fact. It

remains to be seen whether Francis can inspire a new missionary spirit in Latin America, and the trip to Rio looms as an initial shakedown cruise.

Second, the rise of Evangelicals and Pentecostals is also pressing the Catholic church to develop new models of ecumenism. The post-Vatican II paradigm for relations with other Christians has been dialogues with Orthodoxy and the established churches of the Reformation, especially Anglicanism. It?s a point of pride in Rome that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Patriarch of Constantinople have become fixtures at major Vatican events.

Statistically speaking, however, those denominations are basically footnotes to the Christian story of the times.

The Anglican Communion has a worldwide following of 80 million, while the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople ? including not just Turkey but the Orthodox diaspora ? can claim no more than 3 million. (Although Constantinople is ?first among equals? in the global Orthodox universe of 250 million, it?s far from given that the other Orthodox churches are willing to follow its lead.)

Pentecostalism, meanwhile, has an estimated following of 300 million, and if you add the charismatics in mainline churches, the global footprint of Pentecostal-style spirituality expands to over 500 million.

To date, Catholicism?s relationships with the Evangelical and Pentecostal world remain underdeveloped, partly because there?s no official leadership structure to engage, partly because there?s a strong anti-Roman streak in some Evangelical and Pentecostal circles.

Yet on many fronts, Catholics, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have common interests, especially vis-à-vis the mounting weight of secularism. In Brazil, for instance, the growth of Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism has cooled, while the most rapidly expanding religious cohort in the country is the ?nones,? i.e., Brazilians who say they have no religious affiliation at all.

In some ways, it seems a situation tailor-made for the shift from theological to ?inter-cultural? dialogue laid out by Benedict XVI.

How well Francis is able to reorient ecumenical outreach toward the most consequential form of non-Catholic Christianity in the world today will be a key measuring stick for the success of his papacy. At present there?s no ecumenical encounter on the pope?s itinerary, which can?t help but seem a fairly glaring omission. It remains to be seen if he can do or say something apart from the official program to generate new ecumenical momentum.

Third, the Catholic church in Latin America also faces the challenge of learning a new language. It can no longer speak as the quasi-official arbiter of public morality. It?s now one actor among many on a complex religious landscape, albeit still representing the religious sentiments of a substantial bloc of the population.

The authority of establishment, in other words, must give way to the authority of witness. In Buenos Aires, Bergoglio was among the pioneers in navigating this transition, positioning the church as a credible social force based not so much on magisterial pronouncements as its effectiveness in ministering to the most neglected strata of society.

Now he faces the task of ?scaling up? this approach across the continent, with Rio shaping up as his breakout performance.

The media and the message

So far Francis is still basking in a love affair with the press, largely because the early imagery of his papacy has been irresistible ? spurning the papal apartment, calling up his cobbler in Buenos Aires to order his own shoes,

and so on.

It?s also striking that since Francis took office in mid-March, the usual stream of Vatican leaks in the Italian media has largely dried up. That suggests he?s successfully following his script from Buenos Aires, making decisions himself, playing his cards close to the vest, and consulting only those he can trust not to let the cat out of the bag.

To date, however, Francis? exposure to the media has been mostly on his own terms, coming at Vatican events and in anecdotes that his friends have chosen to reveal. Rio will mark the first time that others have a hand in setting the pope?s agenda, and while he can certainly count on the authorities in Brazil to promote a positive storyline, the same can?t necessarily be said of the media.

If things hold to form, Francis will take some questions from reporters aboard the papal plane, which will be especially interesting if he indulges his penchant for speaking off the cuff. Benedict XVI learned the hard way that even having the questions in advance doesn?t necessarily prevent headaches; his 2009 trip to Africa was capsized by controversy over his remark on the plane that condoms make the problem of HIV/AIDS worse [4].

Benedict?s 2007 outing to Brazil, the last time a pope visited the country, also brought a rough moment when he said that the arrival of Christianity ?did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Columbus cultures, nor was it the imposition of a foreign culture.? That stirred controversy among indigenous groups and Brazilians with bitter memories of the colonial period, and the pope was forced a week later to acknowledge that ?unjustifiable crimes? had been committed in the European conquest.

Francis has already had a taste of the hot water that unreflective ad-libs can generate when he told a group of 800 nuns [5] on May 8 that they should be mothers rather than ?spinsters,? which some took as a derogatory reference to women religious.

That potential land mine didn?t really explode, in part because the mere fact of meeting nuns was seen as a gesture of rapprochement, in part because in-house critics are still inclined to give Francis the benefit of the doubt. (As a thought experiment, imagine what might have happened if Benedict had said it!)

In Rio, it?ll be interesting to track whether this ?extemporaneous pope,? who loves to veer off-script, manages to avoid stepping on his own message during the biggest public outing of his young papacy.

Youth appeal

To predict that a pope will be well received at a World Youth Day is a bit like forecasting that Rush Limbaugh would get a warm welcome at CPAC, or Gloria Steinem at a National Organization for Women rally. Given the kind of young Catholics who show up, they?re going to be thrilled to be in the presence of the pope no matter who it is.

That said, some popes establish a livelier bond with youth than others, John Paul II being the most obvious example of a pontiff who connected. Since Francis wants to inspire a more missionary church, his ability to galvanize young apostles will be critical, and Rio shapes up as the first clear test of his capacity to reach that cohort.

Francis has never attended a World Youth Day before, either as a priest or a bishop. He wasn?t even present for the 1987 edition in Buenos Aires, the first held outside Europe, which coincided with a period when then-Fr. Bergoglio was in Germany for studies on Romano Guardini.

In response to an *NCR* inquiry, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said May 14 that

Francis never attended World Youth Days primarily because of his preference only to travel out of ?strict necessity,? noting that as a bishop and cardinal he only came to Rome when it was absolutely required.

His absence at previous World Youth Days, Lombardi said, ?should not be connected to a lack of concern for pastoral work with young people,? saying there are ?many significant testimonies? to his concern for youth.

If you?re going to make a debut at World Youth Day, showing up as pope is obviously a singular way to do it. Francis already profiles as the ?pope of the poor.? The question now is whether after Rio, he?ll also come off as the ?pope of the young.?

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