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Is Pope Francis bringing a new church into being?

Pat Perriello | Aug. 5, 2013 NCR Today

Pope Francis is back at the Vatican after a whirlwind World Youth Day celebration in Brazil. Not a single doctrine of the Catholic church was altered during this event. Frankly, there seems little likelihood there will be change to any Catholic doctrine in the foreseeable future. Pope Francis even made clear that there will be no female priests during his papacy.

What is the excitement all about? Are the words of the oft-sung hymn "Sing a New Church" about to become prophetic? We are told that the pope has changed the tone of the discourse. He has. But how significant is that change? Let's look first at the ways in which Pope Francis has indeed changed the tone.

We know many of the indicators reflect more personality than substantive change. These signs include carrying his own bags (or, in the case of the trip to Brazil, his briefcase), kissing babies and choosing not to live in the Vatican apartments. There is indeed some significance to these gestures in that it is clear the pope expects others in the hierarchy to adopt much of his way of responding to others. We are even seeing signs of simpler dress and communication among the hierarchy.

We also know of his emphasis on the poor and a return to the simplicity of the Gospel. There are some who feel [1] he is responding to the call of the conclave to make such moves, but in any case, there seems to be enough support and he seems to have enough momentum to make these kinds of changes and to force or persuade others to join him in this new approach.

Yet the clearest expression of the change in tone comes from the impromptu press conference Pope Francis conducted [2] on the plane during his return trip to the Vatican. The press conference itself represented a dramatic change from the past. Whenever recent popes have spoken with the press, written questions were required from which would be selected a few that the pope would respond to. Here we had a free-wheeling, Barack Obama-type press conference where there were no rules, and Francis seemed willing to respond to any question.

Still, for me, the key question was the one on abortion. It is notable that Pope Francis has almost never used the word abortion since his elevation to the papacy. He was asked about this in his press conference. He forthrightly answered that the church's position on abortion was clear and he wanted to present a positive message. In other words, he wanted to change the subject. He understood there are many issues the church needs to talk about, and by limiting itself to commenting over and over on abortion, homosexuality and other sins of the flesh, the church has failed to provide a strong voice on so many other important issues. For Pope Francis, poverty is at the top of that list. These issues also include the excesses and injustices of capitalism, the abuse of power, the repression of the poor and the outcast. In short, the pope wishes to focus on the Gospel values of Jesus presented in the New Testament.

How does changing the subject change the church? One change, I believe, will be an end to what has essentially become a spy network ready to accuse clergy or other officials of minor liturgical discrepancies or some perceived failure to adhere to official church teachings. Under Pope Francis, such accusations will likely be

referred back to the ordinary of the diocese. The fear of being caught doing something wrong will be significantly reduced.

Francis specifically changed the subject on the issue of homosexuality. The church essentially teaches two things regarding homosexuality. Homosexual acts are considered sinful, yet homosexual individuals are to be treated with respect and dignity, as are all human beings. Up to now, the church has focused on sin. What a difference it makes when the focus is placed on the humanity of the individuals involved.

The key to the new church is a stance of compassion and mercy. It represents an understanding that it is not necessary to utter major condemnations every time someone does something you disagree with. It is a stance that looks at the good in people and in the whole world. It is a church that is so busy doing good and caring about people that it doesn't have time to sit around decrying all the terrible things that are happening.

Pope Francis did speak against materialism in Brazil. He wanted young people to avoid too great an attachment to material things. He didn't, however, speak of atheistic secular materialism. After all, aren't there plenty of Catholics and Christians who need to re-examine themselves in regard to how they feel about material things without embarking on a diatribe on all the "-isms" of the world?

The train has left the station, and it is time to jump on board. I see signs of Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York doing just that. On the "Today" show on Friday, he said Pope Francis is forcing him to reassess the way he does things [3], and he is excited about this challenge. I believe inner examination will be something many clerics will be thinking about in the months to come.

Finally, let me say a word to those who may want more from this new pope. I would place myself in that camp, but let me point out why that would be a really bad move: Any clear break with John Paul II or Benedict XVI would create a backlash that would destroy everything Francis is trying to do. He would be seen as illegitimate, and we could wind up with the first impeached pope in history. Conservative elements in the church would usurp the power of Francis and the church would move into a retrenchment that would likely last for centuries.

The genius of Francis: Although some or even many may be upset with the moves he has made, they really can't complain. How can one object to a pope who speaks out for the poor? Who can object to a message of love and compassion? Announcing a determination to live Gospel values in all simplicity is not up for scrutiny by traditionalists. Can anyone really question a desire to treat every individual with dignity and respect? I believe Francis knows exactly what he's doing and he just may be the person to bring a new church into being.

Besides, Pope Francis is just getting started. He's not done yet.

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[3] http://www.bing.com/videos/watch/video/cardinal-dolan-pope-francis-challenging-us/17w06c17p?cpkey=a0abe1e1-76a7-47d4-85f1-b718f15310a1%257c%257c%257c%257c