Opinion

Guest Voices



The name "Franciscus" is seen engraved on the tomb of Pope Francis inside the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. The interletter spacing, or kerning, of the engraving has come under scrutiny from typographers and the general public alike. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Mario García

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The death of a pope usually brings with it a lot of attention to all things Catholic, with the world watching first the rituals of the nine-day mourning for the deceased pontiff, and then the conclave to elect the new pope. Rarely has typography been included as part of the discussion.

However, when Pope Francis opted for a simple word, "Franciscus," over his tomb, suddenly type and, specifically, interletter spacing — referred to as kerning — moved to the front of the social media ecosystem.

One type expert put it to NCR bluntly: "What were they thinking?"

The New York Times offered its commentary: "Irregularly spaced letters spelling 'F R A NCISC VS' have caused a stir among typography nerds who specialize in spacing and fonts. One called them 'an abomination unto design.' " A headline in Fast Company described the result as "a travesty."

There are rules about how type is selected, positioned and spaced. The spacing between lines of type is referred to as "leading," a word that harkens to the old mechanical days when pieces of metal (lead) were used to compose type. Leading and kerning are key to providing legibility.

Typographer Roger Black, founder of Font Bureau and current chairman of Type Network, tells NCR that "FRANCISCVS" is a hard word to space. But even for a novice, there are workarounds. "My dad, an architect, would tell carvers, 'If you can't follow my drawing and don't know how to space, then go wide. Put a couple of inches between each capital on the stone, and then no one will notice that they're uneven.' "



FRANCISCVS in Centaur set by Roger Black for National Catholic Reporter (Roger Black)

Typeface designer and typographer Jonathan Hoefler, founder of Hoefler&Co. and one of the architects of the modern type industry, says he continues to receive press requests for comment on the tomb.

"The core problem," Hoffler says, "is that 'design' is so widely misunderstood that designers go unconsulted when their help is needed the most."

Hoefler's typefaces have given voice to the world's foremost institutions, publications, causes and brands. Responsible for some of the most influential typefaces of our time, his clients include Apple, The New York Times, Tiffany & Co., The Guggenheim Museum and Obama for America.

"A number of stonecutters ... have positively incandescent talent. That this was a mere font — and Times Roman, no less — is such a disappointment. This was machined, not cut by hand. And for the pope!"

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Ina Saltz, professor emeritus of typography at the City College of New York and author of *Typography Essentials: 100 Design Principles for Working With Type*, agrees that the result is not in keeping with standards of good typography.

"The idea of kerning ... is to create the illusion of an even amount of space between the letters. The spaces must take into account the different shapes of the letters. Specifically, on the pope's simple inscription, the spaces on either side of the A are far too great, as is the space between the C and the V. Other smaller adjustments need to be made as well, but these are the most glaring errors, ones that are apparent to even the lay public, not only typography experts."

"How ironic," Saltz adds, "that the mecca for all those who love and create letterforms is the inscription at the base of Trajan's column — in Rome!"

Related: 'Pope Francis deserves better': Tomb inscription draws criticism

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