

Francis: What is in a name?

Thomas Reese | Mar. 13, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

In picking the name Francis, the new pope sent his first message to the world, but what is that message? Four possibilities come to mind, and perhaps they are all true.

First, St Francis of Assisi was known for his life of poverty. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was also known and respected for refusing to live in the archbishop's palace in Buenos Aires. Rather, he lived in a simple apartment where he cooked his own meals. He also put aside the chauffeur-driven limousine and rode the bus to work. Will Pope Francis try to bring a simpler life style to the papal court? Is this a man who will be comfortable in silks and furs?

Here is a quote that should worry the papal court:

"The cardinalate is a service is -- it is not an award to be bragged about. Vanity, showing off, is an attitude that reduces spirituality to a worldly thing, which is the worst sin that could be committed in the Church. ... An example I often use to illustrate the reality of vanity, is this: look at the peacock; it's beautiful if you look at it from the front. But if you look at it from behind, you discover the truth ... Whoever gives in to such self-absorbed vanity has huge misery hiding inside them."

Second, early in his career, St. Francis heard a message from God: "Rebuild my church." At first he thought God meant the building in the forest near where he was living. Only later did he realize it was the institutional church, which was in disrepair, that he was to rebuild. With all the problems facing the church -- sexual abuse crisis, declining membership in Europe and the Americas, and a Vatican Curia in need of reform -- this name may point toward an ecclesial agenda.

Third, Francis was also famous for his love of animals and nature. With the environmental catastrophe of climate change facing the world, his choice of name could point to an aggressive and prophetic stance on environmental issues. This is certainly one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century, and it would be great to have the pope be a real leader on environmental issues.

Finally, Francis was known for his peaceful and positive attitude toward Islam. He was no crusader when his time was marked by war between Christendom and Islam. Rather he walked through the battlefield unarmed to meet with the sultan, who was so impressed he listened to him and sent him back unharmed. At a time when peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians are again necessary for the good of the world, he could be sending a message not only to Christians, but also to Muslims.

There is another Francis the new pope is connected to because of his Jesuit roots: St. Francis Xavier. This Francis was known for his missionary zeal. There is much talk in the church about evangelization because of the church's losses in Europe and the Americas. Xavier was a man who did it. And he died on an island off the coast of China, which today is seen as a field ripe for the harvest.

Yes, there is a lot to learn from a name.

Update

I guessed right. In explaining to journalists on March 16 why he took the name Francis, the pope said:

During the election, I was seated next to the Archbishop Emeritus of São Paulo and Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Claudio Hummes: a good friend, a good friend! When things were looking dangerous, he encouraged me. And when the votes reached two thirds, there was the usual applause, because the Pope had been elected. And he gave me a hug and a kiss, and said: "Don't forget the poor!" And those words came to me: the poor, the poor.

Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars, as the votes were still being counted, till the end. Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation; these days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we? He is the man who gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man ? How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!

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