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Theologians hopeful for Pope Francis' name, outlook

by Joshua J. McElwee

Pope Francis

As the world learned of the news of the election of Argentinean Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the first Pope Francis, several global theologians told *NCR* they hope the new pontiff will reflect the spirit of his namesake while shifting focus to the developing world and ecological issues.

Following are excerpts from several of their statements, made via email.

Susan Ross, head of the 1,400-member Catholic Theological Society of America and professor of theology at Loyola University Chicago:

The Catholic Theological Society of America joins Catholics around the world in welcoming our new Holy Father, Pope Francis I. With all of our sister and brother Catholics, we offer our support and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit on his pontificate. ...

I would say that it is a welcome sign for the world to see a Pope from Latin America. The church is growing in the global south and so to see a Pope who represents this growing area is very exciting.

The name is significant: Francis ... it may indicate the kind of simplicity that Francis advocated. Francis is also thought of as a saint who was "ecological" in his love of all of the creatures of the earth and everything on it. ...

From what I have read about him, the new Pope shares the theological conservatism of his predecessors as well as their social progressivism. I was impressed with his asking the people to bless him before he blessed the people and I was also impressed that he stood there for awhile, perhaps listening to the people, perhaps a bit in shock, perhaps both, before he spoke.

Like other Catholics around the world, I hope and pray that we will have a Pope who listens and who can provide courageous leadership in challenging times.

Tina Beattie, professor of Catholic studies at London's University of Roehampton:

There is no need to rehearse all the challenges that face Pope Francis, and we know that he has inherited a devastated and desolate Church.

Nevertheless, there are already signs that this will no longer be the Church of baroque extravaganza and rigid authoritarianism that it became under Pope Benedict XVI. ...

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For me this morning, if this man remains as attentive as he has been to the voice of the poor, if he makes it a listening as well as a teaching Church, a Church of the people rather than of the Curia, then I for one will keep quietly cheering and thanking God.

The name 'Francis' implies not only humility and compassion, but also care for creation and all God's creatures. What more could we ask for? Here is a man who might well bring the humble carpenter of Nazareth back into the life of the Church, remembering that through him all things were made in our wounded and wondrous planet.

Agnes Brazal, professor of theology at the St. Vincent School of Theology in Manila, Philippines:

I love the name of our new Pope -- Francis! St. Francis of Assisi symbolizes my hopes for what the 21st century Church should embody: love for the poor expressed in terms of social justice; simplicity of lifestyle; care for other earth beings and the environment, "friendly" and mutually empowering relations with women, and freedom of (S)pirit!

If the name Francis also refers to St. Francis Xavier, I hope that this time, our new Pope would have the stamina to travel to Asia where the Church has also been growing rapidly!

Gary Macy, professor of theology and church historian at Santa Clara University:

As an historian, I would point out that the Cardinals are signaling that they want a fairly clean break from the status quo. They have chosen a Jesuit and someone who is not an insider, although certainly involved in the Curia.

He is not an Italian or even a European, although he studied in Germany. Most significantly, he chose a new name, one never used by a Pope before. He is not identifying with any past Pontiff, but with surely one of the most popular saints both within and outside Christianity.

Whether the new pope chose his name for Francis of Assisi or Francis Xavier, it is Brother Sun that people will most often recall when they hear that name. The Little Brother was known for his humility, poverty, his love of nature and even his good relations with Islam.

This demonstrates that the new Pope wants to associate himself, even if indirectly, with those traits. All these things indicate a break with the past.

The new pope, however, is theologically conservative on most issues. This makes perfect sense. A conservative group of Cardinals are not likely to elect a progressive even if there was one in the College to be found.

In sum, I would suggest the Cardinals wanted someone morally beyond reproach, humble, interested in the social justice for the poor and perhaps willing to shake up the Curia. They did not, however, want someone who would stray from the theological path set by the former popes. This election was probably as much of a surprise as the College was capable of making.

Jesuit Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, who leads the order's Eastern Africa province and is a moral theologian at Nairobi's Hekima College:

Perhaps for the first time in modern times, the global outlook of the church is reflected at the highest level of the church. There are gifts from all parts of the church that we need to honor, harness, and use for the mission of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. ...

I want to believe that considering the humble and down-to-earth background of Pope Francis I the church is in capable hands -- not just the pope's alone, but the hands of the entire people of God across the globe.

Francis's first gesture of asking the people to pray to God for him may signal the beginning of a more authentic and humble recognition of the priesthood of the people of God and the responsibility we all bear for the church of God in the world.

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