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Editorial: Francis' election full of symbols, signs of new era

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Pope Francis
Editorial

The symbols from the start were breathtaking. For a community whose narrative is woven deeply with symbols great and small, those advanced by Pope Francis since he stepped onto the balcony above St. Peter's Square in a simple white cassock became more awe-inspiring as the days wore on.

The little things began to pile up: He led us in prayers that we all know, the Our Father and the Hail Mary. He bowed and asked the crowd to silently pray for him before he conferred his blessing. He shunned any other trappings of office, save the white cassock and simple cross, on first stepping out as the new pope. He retrieved a sense of movement and adventure when he asked us to join him in a journey. He spoke movingly of a merciful God. He rode in a minivan with his brother cardinals rather than in the papal limousine. On his first full day as pope, he met with schoolchildren, picked up his bags at a hotel where he had stayed prior to the conclave, and paid his own bill.

In a video that has gone viral, we learned how he chose his name. In the final moments of the conclave, Brazilian Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, archbishop emeritus of São Paulo, a Franciscan and endorser of liberation theology, upon realizing Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio would become pope, embraced him and said: "Don't forget the poor."

The name Francis was an audacious choice. The plea from Hummes begged a reset of the church's priorities.

It was a plea the new pope understands at a personal level. In Buenos Aires, Argentina, he refused the cardinal's mansion and private car and driver. He lived in a small apartment and rode the bus to work. The photos of him washing and kissing the feet of patients in an AIDS hospice are arresting, as is the one of him with members of other faiths in a joint prayer ceremony.

When some of his priests refused to baptize children of single parents, he excoriated them for practicing a form of "rigorous and hypocritical neoclericalism." He was the only Catholic cleric to praise the life of a former bishop who had left the priesthood to marry.

Two days after his election, he sent out a two-line message that appeared routine. It was, on the contrary, an earthquake rattling the old order. He told current Curia officials, required by law to resign at the end of a papacy, that they would continue in place temporarily. Breaking with the tradition of automatically reinstating everyone to fill out full terms, he notified the Vatican bureaucrats that he would "reserve a certain period for reflection, prayer and dialogue before [making] any definitive nomination or confirmation."

The statement is the first clear indication that intimations of change evident in the symbols of the first hours of his papacy were taking a more concrete form. Business as usual was ending.

That same day he greeted members of the international media, a mix of nationalities, religions and inclinations about the church. His easy style was on view once again as he gracefully departed from a prepared text and then returned to it. He ended by giving his blessing, a not unusual gesture for a pope, but this new pope offered it with a stunning act of generosity. He gave it silently, he explained, out of respect for the consciences of those present who were not Catholic, were of other faiths or of no belief.

Early indications are that things are going to be different. The heavy encrustations of royal paraphernalia and palace behavior are beginning to fall away. Francis, if first impressions prove correct, seems more inclined to embrace than wag a finger in rebuke.

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For the past 34 years, the church has been run essentially by two men: Karol Wojtyla, who became Pope John Paul II, and Joseph Ratzinger, who served as a kind of first lieutenant to John Paul for most of 25 years and then served nearly eight years as Pope Benedict XVI.

The church owes an enormous debt of gratitude to the two men for their distinctive and substantial intellectual offerings and for leading the church into more profound interfaith relations. Those achievements, of course, have been amply documented and heralded, sometimes to the exclusion of any mention of the serious ills within the church that also characterized their tenures.

It became evident that the church's troubles had grown to such proportions that they could no longer be ignored, not even by the gathered cardinals. This interregnum and conclave were quite different in tone and content from the last precisely because subjects that were swept aside in the tide of sentiment accompanying John Paul's death came roaring back to shore. Curial corruption and infighting had been documented and were no longer a matter of mere speculation. Figures like the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado and his order, the Legion of Christ, still seen eight years ago as unfairly under siege, were now, beyond dispute, a world-class fraud and a failed project respectively.

John Paul II's notions of heroic priesthood lay in tatters, his episcopal appointments too often a collection of hot-blooded and imprudent ideologues who love to parade around in yards of silk and fine lace. Eight years ago the gathered cardinals would have smirked at talk of a church in crisis; this year they spoke of it themselves.

The 34 years of Wojtyla and Ratzinger comprised a three-and-a-half-decade attempt to rein in the impulses of the Second Vatican Council. The first 15 post-conciliar years were alive with a rich, if at times messy and excessive, enthusiasm for the possibilities of this Christian community called Catholic. Wojtyla and Ratzinger set out to re-square the corners and redraw the lines. What once was so outward-looking became inward and withdrawn, in Francis' term, "self-referential." Both popes spent an inordinate amount of time and energy going after those who raised inconvenient questions or explored areas of theology that didn't fit their prescriptions of church. All the while, the real sins against the community were being committed by priests and hidden for years, under elaborate schemes and at unconscionable cost, by the community's bishops.

Francis will, very soon, have the opportunity to show how serious he is about re-establishing integrity and sound judgment within the church with appointments to major sees, such as in this country the Chicago archdiocese, and with appointments to the Curia. Our hope is that his humility and sense of service and concern for the poor will guide his choices. Without such qualities, his wish that the church look beyond itself will remain unrealized.

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One sign of the new era into which Francis was elected -- an age in which the palace culture can no longer contain the old secrets and in which the deferential treatment enjoyed by past regimes has diminished thanks to the church's own scandals -- was the immediate emergence of old charges that Bergoglio, as provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina, had been complicit in the government's kidnapping of two other Jesuits during Argentina's Dirty War. As reporting in these pages and elsewhere makes clear, the circumstances were, at best, murky and deserve closer scrutiny. What seems clear is that while he might have done more to confront a brutal regime, he was neither a collaborator nor someone who rejected the entirety of liberation theology. Among his supporters is peace Nobelist Oscar Arias Esquivel of Costa Rica, who flatly said Bergoglio was no collaborator. He has also received generous support from liberation theologian and former priest Leonardo Boff.

At least as troubling are reports out of Argentina about former Cardinal Bergoglio's handling of clergy sex abuse. A March 18 story in *The Washington Post* highlights the case of a once popular priest, Fr. Julio Grassi, who was convicted in 2009 of sexually abusing a minor. The most disturbing charges against Bergoglio are that he refused to meet with victims and that he commissioned a report that has helped Grassi stay out of prison to this point. *The Washington Post* notes, however, that no evidence exists that Bergoglio ever covered up abuse cases. "Several prominent rights groups in Argentina say the archbishop went out of his way in recent years to stand with secular organizations against crimes such as sex trafficking and child prostitution." In more recent years, he also reportedly acted more aggressively against priests accused of sex abuse and "instructed bishops to immediately report all abuse allegations to police."

The Dirty War in Argentina was part of the pope's past. The sex abuse crisis is something that most bishops can expect to deal with, even in those parts of the world where it hasn't yet surfaced as a major issue. No one expects a perfect pope, but integrity doesn't require perfection. Catholics have lived through 30 years of deceit, dissembling and self-serving excuses from their bishops on this subject. It is time to simply tell the truth. No more "mistakes were made" evasions. It is difficult to imagine the degree of trust and honor Catholics would invest in a pope who honestly recounted what happened, the errors he may have made, what he learned from those incidents and how he will face such problems as pope.

Francis may be realizing what is thickly in the air: Catholics really want to like and believe in their leaders. As has been demonstrated, it doesn't take much. Catholics are not so much in search of world-class theology or grand international gestures as they are of authentic holiness and personal integrity. A few days of a leader speaking compassion and acting in a way that suggests he understands everyday Catholics and their struggles has moved a great deal of the world in Francis's direction.

Bergoglio attracted attention when he urged his peers to look beyond Rome, to see the church's mission as one of humility, dignity and justice and to hold the poor of the world as the church's core concern. His invitation was to join him on a journey, not a forced march. If the journey's primary focus is on the poor, our bet is that he will have an enormous and newly energized following. If his papacy is one grounded in humility, dignity and justice, we presume that all the rest, including the list of contentious issues, will make for rich conversation -- and maybe even conversion -- along the way.

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