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Election of Pope Francis raises alarm for some Latin Mass fans

by Brian Roewe

Pope Francis

The simplicity dotting the first days of Pope Francis' tenure gave many Catholics seeking a more humble church reason for optimism. For others, they represented cause for concern, specifically among those who celebrate the traditional Latin Mass.

Francis' decision to omit the papal *mozzetta*, or cape, from his clerical attire as he first appeared to the crowd in St. Peter's Square launched a frenzy of worry for the fate of the Latin Mass among forums and comment sections of conservative Catholic blogs and websites:

"This is one of the worst possible men to be elected pope if you are a trad[itionalist]. This is totally depressing! Last one out of the Church please turn off the lava lamp."

"Abito piano? No mozzetta[?] Not even John Paul II appeared for his first Urbi et Orbi without proper dress."

"He referred to himself several times as the mere 'Bishop of Rome.' He only put the stole on for the blessing, and took it off afterward. I'm stunned."

"I'm just sick over this. Traditionalists have nowhere to go. I really fear for the health of the Catholic Church."

These comments and others flooded an initial post March 13 announcing Francis as pope at the traditionalist blog Rorate-Caeli. Its authors held similar apprehensions, and later that evening posted the

opinions of a journalist in Buenos Aires, Argentina, sharing their alarm.

"Of all the unthinkable candidates, Jorge Mario Bergoglio is perhaps the worst. Not because he openly professes doctrines against the faith and morals, but because, judging from his work as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, faith and morals seem to have been irrelevant to him," said Marcelo González, calling Francis "a sworn enemy of the Traditional Mass," while rebuking his interreligious relations, lack of curial experience and his perceived soft stances on abortion and gay marriage.

But Rorate-Caeli wasn't the only site fearing the traditional liturgy's future.

Michael Brendan Dougherty, a national correspondent for *The American Conservative*, alleged March 13 at Slate.com that Francis had blocked adoption of *Summorum Pontificum* (Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 apostolic letter regarding use of 1962 form of the Latin Mass) in the Buenos Aires archdiocese and had not implemented the new missal translations.

The heightened scrutiny of Francis' liturgical style is a product of too much focus placed on the pope in recent years, said Adam DeVille, an associate professor of theology at the University of St. Francis in Fort Wayne, Ind.

"Yes, he's the bishop of Rome, yes, he's got a special place in the church ? but people need to wean themselves off looking to him constantly and assuming that everything he does we have to do, and everything he doesn't do, we can't do," DeVille told *NCR*.

Some sites sought to temper the heated response, including the Catholic Answers forum, which posted rules for users when talking about the new pope. Among them: "[No] bashing the Holy Father" or "speaking about his papacy in a negative way, without giving the man a chance."

Others followed suit in policing comments, including the traditionalist blog "What Does the Prayer Really Say?"

"I ask for respect and decorum when concerns or disagreements are expressed. If it turns out that our new Pope starts us down a path you or I don't like, then we will discuss those matters as they come along. But ? *how long* has he been Pope?" the author Fr. John Zuhlsdorf wrote March 14.

A poll on the site soliciting readers' first impressions of Francis (on a 1-10 scale) showed that, as of March 18, more than half of respondents approve of their new pope, rating him an 8 or above.

Fellow Catholic blogger Taylor Marshall at "Canterbury Tales" expressed embarrassment with the vitriolic response among traditionalists and urged them to "take a deep breath!" and give Francis time and prayers.

"If you're really worried, don't log on to a blog combox. Fast on bread and water, pray the Rosary more, go to confession more regularly, give alms to the poor," Marshall recommended, adding, "It's really not our place to sift through what might be the future errors of a Pope that we don't yet know."

At Patheos.com, Fr. Dwight Longenecker, an Anglican priest-turned-Catholic, also encouraged perspective. Francis' own preferences for a simpler Mass likely reflects more informal worship common in Argentina and the region, he said, not a desire to eliminate the Latin Mass.

DeVile agreed, telling *NCR* he did not interpret Francis' style as a signal he intended to reverse *Summorum Pontificum*, or make other dramatic liturgical changes.

"I strongly suspect his approach is live and let live. If people want to do Latin and lace, great, go for it. People don't, they want to do something else, that's great, too. He does not strike me as a person who wants to micromanage everybody's life," he said.

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