NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Debunking three 'urban legends' about Pope Francis

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Pope Francis

In the early days of a papacy, absolutely everything the new pope says or does is subject to endless interpretation as a hint of things to come. At times, the frenzy produces a few instant "urban legends," meaning words or deeds attributed to the new pope that never actually happened, or that are subjected to so much over-interpretation that they become essentially unrecognizable.

During his first ten days in office, the "Francis phenomenon" has given rise to at least three such urban legends worth debunking here, lest they take on a life of their own.

"The carnival is over"

Italian Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli has been the first to use the phrase "urban legend" to describe one report that made the rounds immediately after the new pope's debut on March 13. The story goes that when the papal Master of Ceremonies, Monsignor Guido Marini, started to place the *mozzetta* on Francis, he responded: "You put it on! The carnival is over."

The *mozzetta* is a shoulder-length cape of red velvet trimmed with white fur. Francis' unwillingness to put it on, combined with the alleged brush-off of Marini, was seized upon as a sign not only of a simpler personal style, but a rejection of the liturgical neo-traditionalism some associate with the papacy of Benedict XVI.

In light of the alleged quip, many have been predicting that Marini may be sent packing quickly back to his hometown of Genoa, in favor of a master of ceremonies less enamored of "smells and bells."

The only problem, Tornielli reports, is that Francis never said any such thing.

"Francis simply said to Marini as he was putting the *mozzetta* on, 'I prefer not to,'" Tornielli writes. "There was no joke about the carnival, and no humiliation for the obedient master of ceremonies."

No doubt, Francis will have his own touches in terms of how he dresses and how he celebrates the liturgy, and there's already alarm in some traditionalist quarters. One report immediately after his election, for instance, suggested that implementation in Buenos Aires of Benedict's 2007 document authorizing wider celebration of the old Latin Mass was half-hearted.

Those debates, however, will unfold quickly enough on their own, without the help of false reports about the carnival being over.

Law's exile

On March 14, the day after his election, Pope Francis made a visit to Rome's basilica of St. Mary Major to pay homage to the Virgin Mary. As it happens, the basilica is also home to an apartment belonging to Cardinal Bernard Law, who offered the new pope a brief greeting upon his arrival.

Law, of course, resigned in Boston amid protests over his handling of the child sexual abuse scandal in 2002, and then served as Archpriest of St. Mary Major until his retirement in 2011 when he turned 80.

The Italian newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* reported that when Francis saw Law that morning, he brusquely ordered him to stop appearing in public at the basilica. The report also said that the new pope, "as his first act of purification," is preparing to dispatch the 81-year-old Law to a cloistered monastery.

Once again, it would be a dramatic insight into the new pope if true ? and, once again, that insight turned out to be built on sand.

Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who was acting as an assistant Vatican spokesperson during the papal transition, told NCR on March 16 that those reports were "completely and totally false." Both Rosica and Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said that same thing over and over again to other media outlets, and as of this writing Law still maintains his residence at St. Mary Major.

Francis obviously will face mounting pressure to pick up where Benedict XVI left off in terms of confronting the church's abuse crisis, but rational evaluations ought to be based on what he actually says and does, as opposed to false expectations created by misleading reports.

The Jeep hype

In tick-tocks provided to media organizations before the March 19 inaugural Mass for Pope Francis, the Vatican had consistently said he would move through the crowd at the beginning of the ceremony in the "Popemobile," which for most people conjures up images of an enclosed white vehicle with bullet-proof glass.

Thus when Pope Francis appeared instead in an open-air jeep, it was taken as another of his grand surprises, fueling talk of him as the "unpredictable pope." It was also styled as another indication of his desire to be close to the people, often set in contrast to the supposedly reserved and distant personality of Benedict XVI.

In this case, however, there was less "there" there than breathless media commentary suggested.

In truth, in Vatican argot the term "Popemobile" actually refers to a variety of different conveyances, including an open-air jeep often used to move through St. Peter's Square and other public settings when the weather is decent.

Benedict XVI used the open-air jeep routinely throughout his papacy, as illustrated by the picture above from his Mass on Oct. 11, 2012, marking the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

That occasion, by the way, came well after a 2007 incident in which a German man lunged over a security barrier in the square to try to board the pope's jeep, and had to be wrestled to the ground by Vatican security personnel.

While Francis does have a more pastoral and less professorial air, his presence in that jeep was hardly the revolution some observers made it out to be ? especially since it was quite often Benedict's preferred way of making the rounds as well.

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