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Expert says Francis can and will deliver Vatican reform

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Buenos Aires, Argentina ? For all those curious as to whether Pope Francis can deliver the reform of the Roman Curia that was so much in the air during the pre-conclave period, the right person to ask would probably be someone who knows the Vatican from the inside out, and who also watched then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio work in Argentina.

Is that's the profile, few people fit it better than Fr. Pedro Brunori, a priest of Opus Dei who currently works as a hospital and university chaplain outside Buenos Aires, and who previously put in eight years in Rome as director of the Vatican Information Service.

Brunori sat down April 2 for an interview with NCR. (It was above and beyond the call of duty, given that April 2 is a national holiday in Argentina commemorating the fallen in the 1982 Falklands War, known here as the *Guerra de las Malvinas*.)

According to Brunori, Francis is well positioned to deliver a reform of the Vatican bureaucracy for four reasons:

- He's got a good eye for talent, and is able to delegate responsibility without surrendering ultimate accountability for making decisions.
- He doesn't just appoint 'yes men,' but people who often have different ideas from his own, as long as they've got the right skills set to do the job.
- He makes sure that aides have direct personal communication with the boss, even picking up the phone and calling them directly to talk through important matters.
- His personality is such that a palpable simplification of structures and procedures will happen almost automatically.

Brunori, 62, was born in Buenos Aires. In addition to Francis' profile as a governor, he discussed the future pope's relationship with liberation theology, his attitude toward the laity, his preference for handling things quietly rather than making a lot of noise, and the transformation that seems to have come over Bergoglio as pope — from an archbishop known in Argentina for being a bit stiff and reserved on the public stage, to the smiling and charismatic "pastor of the world."

Brunori also expressed the view that over time, the greatest resistance to Francis inside the church is likely to come from the right rather than the left. Some conservatives, he said, may "misunderstand" the pope's penchant for simplification as stripping away some of the essentials of the faith.

The interview with Brunori took place in Italian. The following is an NCR translation of extracts from the conversation.

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What was Cardinal Bergoglio's attitude toward liberation theology?

He always saw the people who live in the slums from a different point of view. His interest wasn't in resolving structural problems with the economy, but helping these people address the concrete problems of their lives. It was a pastoral perspective. He wasn't trying to promote a particular theology, but to help people grow in their personal dignity. For example, when he visited an Opus Dei school in a poor area of Buenos Aires, his interest was in how the church can promote human development through education. That school also helps people develop in the faith by getting married in the church, participating in the sacraments, and so on, and he saw that as promoting their development too. He wanted to enhance the human level of these people, of their families.

One can certainly understand the great injustices that gave rise to liberation theology, but sometimes it was missing the dimension of personal charity, of concern for the concrete person in front of you. That's the sense in which I think the pope tried to orient the pastoral work in the slums of Buenos Aires. His idea was the every single one of those people ought to interest the church, equally. He actually walked in these places. I remember one time he was in the slums and one of the priests who works there said to him, joking, "They know you better than me!" He was always read to serve, because he had a great commitment to pastoral work.

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What do you think Pope Francis can contribute to the church today?

He's always talked a lot about the danger of a self-referential church. It's real, and the church has to get out into the streets. In Latin America we've seen a great growth of the sects, and it's often because they offer people a kind of welcome that we just don't provide. We have to open up. That's the great impulse I think Francis can give to the church.

What were his other primary concerns as archbishop?

One great emphasis was to discover the importance of the laity. He spoke about the importance of the laity a great deal, though without confusing laity with priests. He didn't want to "clericalize" the laity. His primary interest wasn't in having more lay ministers of communion, or things like that. He wanted everyone in their proper place, doing the things that pertained to their area. I worked in Buenos Aires for

twelve years, and I saw [Bergoglio] in a variety of settings ? not just liturgical ceremonies, but working meetings and so on, and this was something he talked about all the time.

What else can you say about his leadership style?

I've always been struck by his preference for silence. When he was here, he didn't talk very much. He doesn't like to spread things around. He didn't really talk much with journalists, almost never. He's very respectful of persons, so when something happened he dealt with the people involved directly. He doesn't see the church as a business firm, and he doesn't see concrete human situations as marketing opportunities. He tended to be a silent leader, very respectful of others. When he had to make decisions, he would do it, but in a quiet way that respected the others involved in the situation.

Does he have a good eye for talent?

He knows how to delegate, which is linked to a tremendous capacity to choose the right people for the job. He chooses people who are often very different among themselves, but they're the right people for the tasks he entrusts to them. Once he puts them into their roles, he delegates pretty much everything to them. He makes the ultimate decisions, but it's these others who prepare them. He says "yes" because he trusts them. He gives them some broad direction, knowing full well what kind of people they are, and they move in the direction he's set.

Can you give an example of his willingness to delegate?

For the most part, he doesn't sign the letters in which decisions are communicated. I can say that in the years since I've been back, in various situations ? marriage cases, situations involving priests, and so on ? I've almost never seen a letter with his signature. The people he's put into positions sign them. He assumes the responsibility, but does it by delegating to others.

He has the same style in other areas. When it comes to confirmations, for example, he can't possibly do them all, so he delegates amply ? not just to his auxiliary bishops and vicars, but other worthy priests who can do it very well. He always does it with his eyes open, because he's a very good supervisor. He pays attention, but he also trusts the people to whom he delegates responsibility.

What kind of people does he appoint to key jobs?

These are people with different ideas, different ways of seeing reality, but they're the right people for the role he gives them. Some of them don't actually think the same way he does about many things. For instance, in some ways he'd like to return to the origins of Christianity, getting rid of many things that have developed over time. Some of the people who worked for him here don't think like that, they believe these historical developments still have value. He's not bothered by that, because they're the right people for the work he needs them to do.

Is he also capable of getting rid of people if they don't work out?

Yes, but with such silence and delicacy that almost no one realizes it. He's like John Paul II in that way. He never eliminated people in full public view, and usually very few even realized something was happening. I remember that when I was working in the Vatican, there was someone who had done something seriously wrong. [John Paul] called him in and said, "You've made a serious mistake," and he took the appropriate measures. But do you know how long that person stayed in the job? Two more years! The idea was to take time to prepare a quiet exit. Bergoglio is like that.

How does he avoid becoming isolated?

The people who work for him feel like they're in a close personal relationship with him. For instance, when his aides sent him a note about some problem or decision that had to be made, they were told to put their phone number on the document. Quite often, he'd pick up the phone and call them. It happened all the time, so much so that after a while nobody was surprised by it. He had a very direct style of doing things, without intermediaries.

Would you expect him to have more direct contact with the heads of dicasteries?

Yes, totally.

Everyone says the Roman Curia needs reform. Do you believe Francis will be a reforming pope?

Yes, certainly. With the humility and simplicity with which he carries himself, almost by themselves many of the structures surrounding the papacy will fall. His way of carrying himself simply won't permit an overly complex, byzantine way of doing business. These structures will fall away, by necessity ? they can't help but collapse with this pope.

These may seem like small things, but they add up. For instance, the other day an Italian friend of mine had the chance to greet the pope. He had met him for the first time as a cardinal and called him "Your Eminence." Bergoglio had replied, "No, call me Giorgio." This time, my friend said to him, "Your Holiness, what do you want me to call you now?" He said, "What do you suppose Peter called John? I'm sure he called him John." This simplicity has to have internal consequences [in the curia], at many levels. The structures as they presently exist won't endure if he continues to be himself.

In the pre-conclave period, cardinals said they wanted three basic reforms in the curia: greater transparency, greater accountability, and greater efficiency. Do you think Francis will deliver reform in that sense?

That's a hard question, but I believe so. However, he won't want to set off earthquakes. He's never wanted to distract the attention of the faithful or put obstacles in the path of the normal pastoral life of the church. None of the measures he'll take will get in the way of delivering good pastoral care to the faithful. He'll take the necessary steps, or he'll delegate them to the right people, but he won't cause tumult.

Although Bergoglio never worked in the Vatican, he has been a member of various offices ? the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Congregation for the Clergy, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Pontifical Council for the Family, and the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. Is that an advantage?

That's no small thing. As you know, quite often the members of these offices don't actually come to meetings, and when they do come, they don't really participate. He came, and he participated. When he became a cardinal, he never focused on the honor of the office, but he took it very seriously in the sense of being a member of the "senate" of the church. He wanted to assist the church with his experience, and he came to the meetings to do precisely that. He's got the kind of perception that it didn't take him long to see what was really going on. He got a sense of things almost immediately.

When you see the former Cardinal Bergoglio now as Pope Francis, what strikes you about him?

One thing is that in public settings in Argentina he could often come off as a bit dry, reserved, even a little rigid, but you can see him now ? it's almost like he's a different person. He seems ten years younger! It's as if he's received a force that he didn't have before, something almost supernatural.

What's something you know about Bergoglio that most people don't?

Very quietly, he always tries to respond when other churches need something from him. For instance, he's sent priests from Buenos Aires to various parts of Argentina because they didn't have enough ? he's sent priests to Patagonia, to Luján, and to the north, for example in Salta. One of them in the north is very well known, because there are mountain regions where to move up and down usually means taking a donkey and eating up the better part of two days. This priest became famous for taking a hand glider! One time he crashed on a rock and took a nasty injury to his leg. He's also a priest of Buenos Aires. [Bergoglio] also sent economic help, especially to the northwest of Argentina, to the poorest areas. He's got a real concern for others, but he never publicizes it.

More than once, someone would call him up and say, "I'm sick, I need a priest to say Mass for me." He'd tell them not to worry, I'll take care of it, and he'd go to say the Mass himself. Sometimes he'd bring another priest, while he heard confessions. For him, confession is about the mercy of God. There are a lot of parishes in Buenos Aires, and they sometimes don't have enough priests to hear confessions. Quite often, he would go and do it himself, while a priest celebrated the Mass. He would also go to hear confessions in the slums.

Did you ever see that need to maintain pastoral contact get in the way of his administrative responsibilities?

No, because his capacity to delegate freed him up. I believe he'll do the same thing as pope, although he'll follow everything closely. His eyes don't miss anything, and he realizes very quickly what's going on. He's very perspicacious.

Are you worried for him now that he's pope?

For him, no. I am a little worried that some people may misunderstand him. When you strip away some things from the church, which has to be done, some people may think you're stripping away things that come from the Lord and that shouldn't be removed. That's what worries me. For example, he does tend to simplify the liturgy, but always maintaining what's essential. I worry that somebody might think he's undercutting something fundamental. That could happen, and not just with the liturgy.

When he talks about the primacy of charity, for instance, that's beautiful because it's true, but somebody might get him wrong. They might think he's talking about the primacy of charity instead of the primacy of the magisterium, which he's not. That's the risk. He's not telling lies, he's trying to say things that will help bring people together. Someone, however, could misunderstand him.

You think it's more likely this pope will run into resistance from the right rather than the left?

Yes, clearly. I worry that they may think his stripping away means eliminating something of the essence of the church.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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