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Francis' first weeks maintain church sameness while offering some new views

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

When Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected pope last month, I posted this entry the next day on my "Faith Matters" blog, suggesting it would be good to let a bit of time pass before we draw firm conclusions about what kind of pontiff Francis will be.

It was such good advice I took it myself and only now am willing to think aloud in public about the changes we've already seen, and the changes that may come.

It is, of course, still way too early to imagine how history will view his papacy, but it's not too soon to talk about what's still the same in the Catholic church and what, less than a month after Bergoglio was chosen, is new. My list won't be "cannot be" exhaustive. Beyond that, it will reflect my outsider, Protestant view.

- **Same:** Jesus still is Lord. **New:** There's more emphasis on that good news coming from the top office in the Catholic church.
- **Same:** The hierarchical structure still is in place. **New:** There's a new focus on the centrality of the laity as opposed to the few who wear vestments.
- **Same:** The church still holds the same positions on hot-button issues, such as abortion, ordination of women and rejection of homosexuality. **New:** Most of those issues seem to have been nudged closer to the back burner while important social teachings about poverty and inclusiveness are more in the public eye.
- **Same:** There are more than 260 people considered former popes. **New:** One of them is still alive.

Let's unpack those a bit.

It's easy to lose sight of the fact that the universal church continues to proclaim the ancient confession of faith, "Jesus is Lord," in the midst of all the razzly-dazzly press coverage about Pope Benedict XVI's resignation and Francis' election.

But it's precisely on this point that Christians around the world can gather together. This is our common ground, our home base. All the rest is style and footnotes.

I sense that this new pope grasps the foundational and connectional nature of this confession and may use it as a key for better ecumenical relations as well as "and this, too, is important" for clearer, more appreciative interfaith relations.

In interfaith dialogue, after all, it's only when each side clearly lays out its exclusivist theological claims "every religion has them" that any deep understanding and mutual respect can be achieved.

Next, this pope's willingness to think first of the people in the pews and only then the people in the Curia is a hopeful sign that also may have wonderful benefits for ecumenical relations "especially if Francis is willing to let ecumenical dialogue and experiences bubble up from the people and not be mandated or handed down from the bishops.

Third, the world is profoundly weary of religious authorities "of any stripe" issuing narrow position statements on divisive social issues. If Francis can manage to tone down the rhetoric on such matters and, instead, get everyone to pay attention to people in need, even Protestants may be willing to kiss his ring.

Finally, nothing became B-16 in office like his leaving of it. It was a great gift not just to the Catholic church but to all organizations led by people who think of themselves as indispensable. It's simply baffling to much of the world that the leader of the primary branch of the world's largest religion is chosen by an appointed body of mostly elderly men and that it's been assumed the pope, whoever it is, will die in office.

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Breaking that pattern gives Francis, at age 76, freedom to devote his body, mind, heart, soul and spirit to this job and not fear the church will fall apart if he, too, quits before the angels come to get him.

I just pray the church and I are both this hopeful a year from now.

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