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Awaiting the surprises of a merciful God, like Francis asks

by Thomas C. Fox

Perspective

My first take on Pope Francis was that he is masterful in the use of symbols. More recently, I'm asking myself if his core strength is a simplicity and transparency so attuned with the Gospels they shine through him, preached almost without words.

Most *NCR* readers I've spoken with seem to take one of two approaches to this young pontificate, both encouraging, one more guarded.

The first group speaks with optimism, but with considerable restraint. Yes, this group says, the symbols are right, but where's the substance? They await Francis' response to abuse of church authority, including the episcopal cover-up of clergy sex abuse. They also want to know more about how Francis will deal with church teachings on sexual morality. They are holding their breath, hoping Francis will strike a different chord on gays and women.

The second group lives less guardedly, at times almost in euphoria. They point to Francis' fresh focus on the Gospels, his emphasis on simplicity, mercy, service and outreach to the poor. They say Francis has the tone right and has turned the church outward, making a long-overdue correction. They see him as a spring rain after a long drought.

Both approaches have a certain validity. Those most hurt by clerical actions in decades past seem most guarded. They cannot afford the taste of unguarded optimism, so deep are the wounds. Meanwhile, I admit to delight each time Francis breaks precedent, each time he steps over an old line.

I rather suspect most of you have delighted in the Francis anecdotes. He has sparked new and renewed interest in the church. A family member sent me an email today, citing Francis, saying she had returned to Sunday Mass after several years of lapse.

"The real turning point," she wrote, "was that Pope Francis has changed the image of our church from a self-absorbed, egotistic, judgmental, male-dominant hierarchy surrounded by gold and wealth, to a Christ-like, simple church of all people. This is a church I can believe in."

A little history helps. If you are near or over 65 you can remember the pre-Vatican II church. It takes being over 50 to remember the energy of those early post-conciliar years. If you are under 50, you have mainly known the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, both reactive to the changes that took place during the Second Vatican Council.

Leading up to the conclave, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis, struck a chord with his fellow cardinals when he spoke to them about a prevailing and dispiriting institutional self-absorption and "theological narcissism." That self-absorption grew as the stepchild of popes who felt the urgency to protect sound doctrine in the wake of what they viewed as excessive renewal.

If the pontificates of John Paul and Benedict were in some ways reactions to the actions set off by the council, then Francis' pontificate is, with little doubt, a reaction to those reactions. Francis is reforming the church by dissolving the center, with its monarchical trappings, while sending his people out into the world, especially to the "peripheries." That's where his priests can learn to "smell like sheep." This is Vatican II come to life with a new scent, the scent of sheep.

Important questions have to be answered. How collegial is Francis' vision? Does it include the laity? How will his seeming appreciation for conscience affect the way he works with Catholic theologians or women religious? What happens with outreach to the poor when it bumps into issues of injustice? What about injustices within the church? Will he open governance to the left-out half of the human race?

Francis has told us to be ready for the surprises of a merciful God. We eagerly wait.

Meanwhile, just as the election of Francis brings us to a new moment in church history, it also brings us to a new moment in *NCR* history. *NCR* grew out of the energy of Vatican II. We have attempted to stay faithful to the council's idealism and openness. We intend to report this new pontificate as openly as we can as professional journalists.

Moreover, just as the future of our church's journey is challenged and uncertain, *NCR*'s journey similarly faces its own challenges and uncertainties.

Today, *NCR* circulation is steady at around 35,000 annual subscriptions and even growing. Most of our revenue comes from our print subscriptions and advertising. Our website readership (NCRonline.org) has grown steadily over the last few years, and of this we are very pleased. We average some 50,000 page views daily, and in recent weeks more than 75,000. All evidence points to even higher Web traffic as we transition into the ever-growing digital journalism world.

The problem is that *NCR*, along with most other media outlets, has yet to find a sustainable business model in this digital world. This is why fundraising has become so important and why I spend much of my time reaching out to you, our readers. In the process I have learned *NCR* is much more than a media outlet. It has grown into a vision of church, into a community of deeply committed believers who feel the

work of the church is in the world.

So I end this with an appeal. You can help us build *NCR*; you can support independent, professional Catholic journalism: by continuing to pass the word about *NCR*'s unique role in journalism and in the church, by taking out a gift subscription for someone whose interest in the faith has been recently rekindled, by placing *NCR* in your estate plan, and by contributing to our annual Friends of *NCR* campaign or during this year's fundraising Webathon April 21-27. Please help us to continue our mission. Help us to build for the years ahead. Help us to pass this vision of church and its work in the world to the next generation.

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