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Where will Pope Francis lead the church?

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Six months from now Catholics are likely to have lined up on one side or another of the new pope. At this point it is not possible to know whether he will become the darling of the liberals, reaffirm the greatest hopes of the traditionalists, or more likely fall somewhere in between.

But what is amazing after the first few weeks of the Francis papacy is that right now, all Catholics of every stripe can find great inspiration from his first actions. Only the most strident Catholics of any stripe could fail to be impressed with Francis' humility, simplicity and sincerity.

His washing the feet of juvenile detainees at a Holy Thursday liturgy highlights the symbols of service to the poor and those most in need.

That gesture represented a core Christian message to which all Catholics as well as many of those outside the church can respond. A few hints of dissent may have surfaced because Francis washed the feet of females and Muslims, but I'm sure if a poll were taken there would be overwhelming support for the moves this pope has taken to this point.

I find particularly significant Francis' decision to take up residence outside of the papal palace. Considering that no pope has lived anywhere else in more than a hundred years, this choice is a dramatic one. Yet I think the first reports of this decision may be missing some of the more significant aspects of the move.

What I have heard most frequently in response to this is that it represents a condemnation of how Benedict XVI lived. I think that is unfair. We are talking about two individuals with different styles and different personalities. The fact that we find this step by Francis refreshing and perhaps just what the church needs at this time is not meant to denigrate Benedict for being who he is, anymore than it should

denigrate Francis for not adhering to long-standing practices.

I also believe that this move is not just another expression of Francis' humility and simplicity. It is not just that Francis has chosen to eschew the monarchical trappings of the past as important as that may be.

What augurs a truly new papacy is the freedom that this decision gives Francis to be his own person and avoid being handled by those used to wielding power in Rome. Living apart from the papal palace will provide the new pope with an opportunity to operate independently and develop his own agenda. It will provide him access to a variety of the voices around him.

It will make it more difficult for officials in Rome to tell him what he can and cannot do. He should be able to determine for himself who his closest advisors will be and what will be the priorities of his papacy. It represents the first step in letting those around him know who will be in charge.

The evidence is clear that this pope was chosen to make significant changes in Rome and in the church. He is off to a good beginning. The journey ahead will be difficult. His ability to remain independent from the curial structures that have ruled the church for too long will be critical.

As he asked all of us during his first night as pope, he will need the prayers of all the faithful to succeed.

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