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Francis and the risk of overheated expectations

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All Things Catholic

Despite the popular impression that Pope Francis represents a strong break with the past, those who remember the early days of Benedict's papacy can't help but be struck by some obvious parallels by what we've seen over the past month.

Then, as now, people were talking about a demystification of the papacy. Benedict famously appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's Square still swearing an ordinary black sweater under his new vestments and declared himself "a simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the lord."

Shortly after his election, Benedict went by his old apartment in Rome's Piazza Leonina to pack his own belongings. The residence is on the same floor with those of three other cardinals, and as he left, the pope rang their doorbells to thank the startled religious women who act as household staff for being such good neighbors.

The gestures seemed to bespeak an ordinary person who didn't allow his new role to override his humanity.

Then, as now, the new pope also moved swiftly to ratify a desire expressed during the general congregation meetings of cardinals prior to the conclave. Today, Francis has created an advisory body of eight cardinals from around the world to foster better collaboration with local churches; eight years ago, Benedict acted on a petition to dispense with the normal waiting period to open the beatification process for John Paul II.

In both cases, the new pope understood himself to be performing a collegial act based on what the cardinals who elected him said they wanted.

In light of these and other similarities, one can't help wondering if Francis will also trip over another parallel from the early period of Benedict's papacy: the risk of overheated expectations.

Eight years ago, excitement about the new pope was most feverish in certain quarters of the Catholic right, many of whom prophesied a new era of doctrinal clarity, ecclesial discipline and a liturgical "reform of the reform."

Before long, Benedict proved too gradual and too restrained for some of those early enthusiasts. Less than a year into the papacy, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (who died in January 2009) famously gave voice to what he called "palpable uneasiness" that the pope wasn't putting any real muscle behind his doctrinal stands, allowing dissent and disobedience to go basically unchecked.

Today, the church's conservatives are not the ones most enchanted with the new pope. Indeed, some are openly alarmed.

On April 19, Italian liturgy writer Mattia Rossi published a piece in the daily *Il Foglio* suggesting that Francis' decision to convene an advisory body of cardinals represents a step toward the "demolition of the papacy" because it replaces the notion of a divinely instituted authority with a fuzzy concept of collegiality, thereby transforming the papacy, according to Rossi, from *primus super pares* to *primus inter pares*.

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For those following Italian affairs, Rossi actually calls what Francis is doing a form of "Vatican Grilloism," referring to the anti-establishment populist insurrection led by former Italian comic and blogger Beppe Grillo, which has scrambled the political scene here for months. (Rossi derisively asked if these cardinals who are supposed to reform the Curia could even find its bathrooms.)

At the other end of the Catholic spectrum, liberals may feel more simpatico with Francis than with either of his immediate predecessors, but they're inoculated from overheated expectations of any pope by their low view of hierarchs.

Moderates in the Catholic fold, however, seem almost giddy with enthusiasm, and that's where the danger of exaggerated expectations is most acute.

Advocates of defusing the culture wars over gay marriage have felt emboldened to speak out in favor of civil unions, for instance, knowing that then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio took a similar line when he was the archbishop of Buenos Aires in Argentina. Ecumenists are openly talking about hopes for a great leap forward toward Christian unity, as they believe the "new way" of exercising the papacy talked about by John Paul II in 1995's *Ut unum sint* is becoming visible under Francis.

Supporters of greater collegiality in the church are predicting that Francis will finally deliver the much-ballyhooed decentralization of power endorsed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Champions of liberation theology and the option for the poor have been thrilled by pretty much everything -- including, most recently, news that Francis has "unblocked" the path to beatification for Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador.

Similarly high expectations surround Francis' relationship with women religious, including the endgame from the Vatican's visitation of American nuns and the doctrinal congregation's investigation of the

Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Across the board, what one hears these days from moderates sympathetic to the nuns is "Give him time" -- the implied suggestion being he'll eventually make things right.

(As a footnote, word is that Francis is likely to meet with the International Union of Superiors General, the umbrella group for women's orders, when they gather in Rome in early May. It would be his first official encounter with women religious since taking office and potentially an important signal of things to come.)

Francis may well move the ball on all these fronts, and signs of change are clearly in the air.

This week, Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio, president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, floated the notion of naming a "moderator of the Curia" who could support and coordinate the work of the Vatican's various departments, trying to curb their tendency to duplicate efforts and work at cross-purposes. Some like the idea, though others wonder what the difference would be from the functions traditionally performed by the *sostituto*, or "substitute," in the Secretariat of State.

Whatever comes of Coccopalmerio's proposal, it's telling that veteran insiders seem to be trying to get ahead of the reform curve rather than resisting it.

Yet it's an open question whether Francis will move fast enough and far enough to satisfy the moderates most elated by his election and who have already projected a fairly elaborate set of hopes and dreams onto his embryonic pontificate.

The truth is, in some ways it's surprising wariness hasn't already set in.

In his very first homily, in the Mass celebrated with the cardinals in the Sistine Chapel the day after his election, Francis quoted the French novelist Léon Bloy: "Anyone who does not pray to the Lord prays to the devil." Had someone been so inclined, that line could have been seen as spectacularly insensitive to non-Christians. If it had been a pope who came into office carrying the baggage of being "God's Rottweiler" rather than a man who was already drawing rave reviews for humility and simplicity, it's not difficult to imagine the contretemps that would have ensued.

On Tuesday, Francis celebrated Mass in the Pauline Chapel for his name day, the feast of St. George, and included this line: "It is not possible to find Jesus outside the church." Once again, it's easy to imagine how that would have played had it been Benedict.

In reality, it's unlikely that on most matters of faith and morals Francis will represent any real departure from either John Paul II or Benedict XVI, and sooner or later he'll likely draw the same mixed reactions, even if the most intense disappointment in his case comes from another quarter.

Capuchin Fr. William Henn hinted at this danger April 19 during a roundtable on Francis at the one-month mark sponsored by Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University. Henn had been asked to say a few words about reaction in the United States and offered the view that the new pope's humility plays well with the egalitarian instincts of Americans.

Henn then added a note of caution: "Naturally, his doctrine on different questions will be faithful to the official teaching of the Catholic church in recent years, and that won't be well accepted by the press and certain sectors of society, or even by some groups within the church itself."

Needless to say, that's hardly a caution that applies only to the States.

When the one-year mark of Francis' papacy rolls around, it will be interesting to see if a Neuhaus arises among the moderates, asking where the early promise has gone. If so, it may be time for Francis to go see Benedict again, to talk about which they find more frustrating: the barbs of their critics or the enthusiasm of their friends.

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