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Benedict and Francis: How much difference is there?

by Alessandro Speciale by Religion News Service

Pope Francis

Vatican City — As a millennia-old institution, the Vatican is accustomed to change at a glacial pace. But in the eyes of many outside the church -- and even of some within it -- the arrival of Pope Francis on the throne of St. Peter seems to have started nothing short of a revolution.

Even Francis himself, in his speech to Rome's diocese Monday, said Christians not only can, but should, be "revolutionaries."

Now, 100 days into his pontificate, a debate is brewing in Rome over whether Francis has set a distinctly different course from his predecessor, or whether the visible differences in style and personality between Francis and Benedict XVI mask a deeper theological and ideological continuity.

One thing's for sure. All of the hand-wringing about the novelty and potential difficulty of having two popes living just yards apart has all but disappeared.

So far, Benedict XVI has maintained his promise to live "hidden from the world" in retirement, while Francis quickly demonstrated there's little risk of him being overshadowed by his predecessor.

A change in style and substance

Those who see a significant break between the two popes point to what Francis has said, how he's said it and, more importantly, what he hasn't said. Under the new pope, the issues that dominated Benedict's papacy have been downplayed, sidelined or hardly mentioned at all.

Celebrating a "Gospel of Life" Mass in St. Peter's square on Sunday, the Argentine pope defined the church's mission to protect life in a different way from what his two predecessors would have done.

"The Living God sets us free. Let us say 'Yes' to love and not selfishness. Let us say 'Yes' to life and not death. Let us say 'Yes' to freedom and not enslavement to the many idols of our time," he said. Not mentioned were words like "abortion" or "unborn," and neither were alluded to.

Luigi Accattoli, a veteran Vatican analyst with Italy's *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, sees a "new way of being pope" in the former Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio: "Francis doesn't lash out against laws that violate 'non-negotiable values,' " as the Vatican usually classifies issues like the protection of life or marriage.

As French bishops organized mass rallies against a law that legalized gay marriage, Francis skirted any mention of it, even during a recent meeting with French lawmakers.

What's more, Francis has embraced a much more low-brow view of the papacy, shunning Benedict's red slippers, ermine capes and papal apartments for a simpler lifestyle that finds him sleeping in a Vatican guesthouse and wearing simple black shoes beneath his white papal cassock.

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Carrying on his predecessor's work

Yet those who recognize a continuity between Benedict and Francis say such signals are negligible.

Francis has announced that his first encyclical will be, in fact, written "with four hands," meaning together with his predecessor. Benedict had almost finished the text ahead of his resignation, and the new pope said he will be happy to complete it.

Moreover, according to Vatican commentator Sandro Magister, Francis' focus on poverty in the church follows a course set out by Benedict in a major speech during his 2011 visit to Germany.

"Once liberated from material and political burdens and privileges, the church can reach out more effectively and in a truly Christian way to the whole world, she can be truly open to the world," Benedict said at the time.

An old friend and confidante of the German pope recently reported that Benedict said that "from the theological point of view," he and Francis "are perfectly in agreement." That opinion is shared even by some liberals within the church, who often said media portrayals of Benedict as a dour conservative missed the core of his teachings.

"Perhaps there is less discontinuity between these two popes than the press would have us believe. Much of what Francis is doing can be seen as an attempt to put flesh and blood on a theology which Benedict had already at least in part articulated," said Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, a former head of the Dominicans, in a recent interview with the "Pray Tell" website.

Indeed, a popular Internet meme places Francis as the logical conclusion to his two predecessors in articulating Christian faith. John Paul II crystallized the essence of hope, Benedict encapsulated faith, and now Francis throws the spotlight on charity.

'He is not a liberal Catholic'

John Thavis, a former Rome bureau chief for Catholic News Service and a frequent Vatican commentator,

said "there is tremendous continuity between popes," which he says makes "even slight differences stand out."

Both Francis and Benedict, of course, want the same thing: to lead people to "understand and accept" the church's teachings, even when pronouncements on abortion or gay marriage run against popular culture, he said. But they go about it in a very different way.

"Benedict tended to view these issues in culture war terms, as part of a political effort to keep the church's voice out of public affairs. Francis, so far at least, is framing it more in terms of the human conscience battling the powerful pull of selfishness," Thavis said.

For Massimo Faggioli, a church historian at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., today's global Catholic church is like a large cargo ship. "To change course, it requires plenty of time and strength," he said, "and at the beginning people don't notice because a pope must act gradually and slowly."

One reason some Catholics may not want to admit -- or see -- much change on the throne is that they're afraid any admission of change will lead to even louder requests for change or reform on issues like married priests, homosexuality or divorce.

"It'd be an illusion to expect radical change from Francis," Faggioli said. "He is not a liberal Catholic, but a 'social' Catholic, with the old and the new mixed in a much more complex way than in a straightforward 'progressive vs. conservative' polarity."

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