

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 27, 2013 at 4:11pm

Why is Pope Francis familiar and Benedict hard to remember?

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Why is it that, although Pope Francis only entered our lives a season ago and Pope Benedict XVI spent eight long -- and I mean long -- years as our Holy Father, does Francis seem like someone we have known a long time while we may say of Benedict what the Irish say of Johnny, that we hardly knew ye?

Is it because it strikes a bell when Francis is compared favorably with the beloved Pope John XXIII in *The Tablet* by John Borelli of Georgetown University? Francis has, he notes, "the same preferences ... does not stand on ceremony ... prefers a simple style of liturgy" and "pleased his electors by forming a new collegial body of eight cardinals to assist with major deliberations." In this restoration of collegiality, in Borelli's judgment, "he will most remind us of Pope John."

The whole world feels that it knows Francis, not so much because he follows Francis of Assisi but because he is always himself. We have seen him pay his own hotel bill and heard that Francis called Buenos Aires for a pair of ordinary black shoes, like John XXIII, who preferred stout peasant shoes to the traditional papal footwear. All this in sharp and telling contrast from Benedict's preferential option for red shoes from Prada.

Pope Francis reminds us of Pope John XXIII because both men share the same lack of self-consciousness and neither needs to keep his guard up through the use of psychological defenses such as rationalization, projection or intellectualization.

John and Francis resemble each other most in their being too healthy to be anything but themselves. By its very nature, that quality cannot be faked; that is why people feel, as they did about John XXIII, that there is no protocol or pretense that keeps them from being in a real and easy relationship with Francis.

Almost overnight, Francis began to restore the trustworthiness and credibility of the scandal that rocked Catholic church just by being himself and speaking and acting with the spontaneity that, whether he is refusing to condemn atheists or speaking of the faith less as a heavy backpack of regulations than as a love story, makes people stop and listen to what he says. They observe what he does as, in a gesture that panicked far-right conservative Catholics but spoke of true religion to the world, he washed the feet of both men and women at the Holy Thursday liturgy.

He also washed the feet of a Muslim woman, speaking more of his understanding and tolerance of Islam than the learned (but often misunderstood) theologically dense addresses of Benedict XVI. Francis seems familiar because he is so accessible and walks among us as if he has always been there. Benedict, beloved by those who studied under him, never seemed at ease once he became pope and, if admirable, remained officially remote from most Catholics.

The fundamental reason Francis seems familiar lies in his being a priest of the Second Vatican Council, imbued with its spirit and living by and preaching its theological and pastoral richness. That is also why he is so readily associated with Pope John XXIII, who convened Vatican II to help the church serve human needs rather than just supervise the imperfect behavior of believers.

Francis seems familiar because Catholics have already known him in the Vatican II priests who have been their pastors and sacramental ministers over the years since that council brought new life to an old church. Catholics have known him in the bishops and priests who brought the spirit of the council to their dioceses and parishes. Every Catholic can list the Vatican II priests who have helped them and their families get through the spiritual challenges of life.

That, alas, was not Benedict's strong suit, as he was determined to diminish the influence of that council that he insisted had been misunderstood and misinterpreted. For Francis, Vatican II's spirit seems second nature, as it was and remains in the Vatican II priests now often under siege by Benedict's efforts to reform the reform of Vatican II.

Francis seems familiar because you have known him already in the many good priests who have remained faithful to the church and its people even when the sex abuse scandal cast its shadow unfairly across their lives. Francis seems as if he has always been in your life in the ministry of the Vatican II priests and bishops. Francis seems to be defined by the "spirit of Vatican II," a phrase that Benedict's self-righteous reformers of the reform condemn as close to heretical.

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Francis has been your pastor, your confessor, the good priest who was with you during the hard trials of your lives. That is why we feel we have known him a long time and, despite his catalog of virtues, Benedict fades into the past he loves a little more every day.

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