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With sainthood decree, Francis stokes John XXIII comparisons

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NCR Today
Pope Francis

News Friday that Pope Francis has unexpectedly approved sainthood for his predecessor John XXIII, the pope who sparked wide changes in the church in the 1960's, may again stoke comparisons the two pontiffs, who are both noted for a certain jovial, reform-minded style.

Days after Francis' March election as Bishop of Rome, some noted church historians were already asking if he'd act as John XXIII, a beloved figure among some U.S. Catholics for his decision to open a 1962-65 worldwide meeting of bishops to consider nearly all aspects of the faith.

"This is like being back in the '60s and John XXIII," Sr. Janice Farnham, a member of the Religious of Jesus and Mary and a retired professor of church history at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, told *NCR* in April.

"For some of us, we never thought we were going to get back here again. It's quite fascinating and attractive."

Francis himself also stoked such comparisons. In April, the new pope reportedly called John XXIII's secretary on the phone, saying "I see him with the eyes of my heart."

Francis, according to a report in the Vatican's semi-official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, called the former secretary at the late pope's summer home to personally thank the secretary for a letter he had sent to Francis suggesting an official celebration of the 50th anniversary this June of John's 1963 death.

Pope John, who was elected to the papacy in 1958 at age 77, was responsible for calling the Second Vatican Council, a 1962-65 meeting of the world's bishops.

Many consider the discussions of the council to have led directly to the church's reforms in the 1960's and 70's, including the use of vernacular during the liturgy and openness to the modern world.

Francis approved sainthood for John XXIII Friday morning. At the same time, he also approved sainthood for his more immediate predecessor John Paul II, who was known more for mixing global travels with enforcement of church doctrine.

Already, Francis has undertaken some church reforms, most notably concerning the so-called Vatican Bank. What remains unknown is if his reforms will match those of John.

Bigger indications might come in October, when Francis meets for the first time with a global group of eight cardinals he's convened to look into reforming church governance.

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