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Pope Francis and a church that changes

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Pope Francis

The first months of any papacy are carefully scanned by many to see just what they say about how the new pope, who represents the world's some 1.2 billion Catholics, might change (or at least subtly alter) the direction of the church.

Pope Francis, of course, has already left many breadcrumbs for interpretation -- from feet washing to apparent reform of the so-called Vatican bank.

But over at the popular liturgy blog PrayTell Monday, noted liturgist Benedictine Fr. Anthony Ruff suggested the new pontiff may have offered a lens through which to view his entire papacy: a lens of complete renewal of the church.

Ruff draws on a sermon Francis gave during morning Mass at the Casa Santa Marta on Saturday, in which the pope said there are "ancient structures" in the church that need reviewing.

"In the Christian life, even in the life of the Church, there are old structures, passing structures: it is necessary to renew them!" Vatican Radio quoted Francis [1] as saying in the Mass.

"The Church always goes forward, giving space to the Holy Spirit that renews these structures, structures of the churches," Francis continued. "Don't be afraid of that! Don't be afraid of the newness of the Gospel! Don't be afraid of the newness that the Holy Spirit works in us! Don't be afraid of the renewal of structures!"

Contrast that, as Ruff does [2], with how Pope Francis' predecessor considered the possibility of change in the church.

Asking rhetorically in 2011 [3] if the church must "adapt her offices and structures to the present day," Pope Benedict XVI replied:

"Blessed Mother Teresa was once asked what in her opinion was the first thing that would have to change in the Church. Her answer was: you and I."

Ruff's conclusion:

"It seems clear that Francis stands in broad continuity with Benedict when it comes to the fundamentals of the Catholic faith. But when it comes to structural reform, I think we have a new hermeneutic at work ? call it the "New Wine, New Wineskins" hermeneutic."

For those unfamiliar with talk of hermeneutics, for years theologians and prelates have used the concept to describe the evolution of the Catholic church since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The reforms following the council, many have argued, can either been seen as a complete break from past

tradition, or just a continuation of it.

Either way you see it, Francis seems to say, more reforms are coming: "Don't be afraid of that!"

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Links:
[1] http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-the-holy-spirit-renews-our-lives
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