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Editorial: With canonization approvals and encyclical, Francis' pontificate has begun

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

Pope Francis' approving the canonization of Popes John XXIII and John Paul II July 5 has been called a brilliant move to unify the church. The appeal of John Paul II was so intense that no one was surprised that some began to call him John Paul the Great after his death in 2005. Others -- particularly those who faulted him as too authoritarian and for mishandling the clergy sex abuse crisis -- resented his fast track to sainthood. Many in this latter group also were galled that the cause of the Good Pope John had been stalled by powerful figures who accused him of sacrificing tradition and opening a door to chaos.

Francis' decision signals an end to this unsightly squabble. *NCR's* John L. Allen Jr. says, "Francis is speaking ... to rival camps within the Catholic fold who see John XXIII and John Paul II as their heroes -- meaning liberals and conservatives, respectively. The message seems to be, 'You both belong here.' "

It is that, but it is also more. Francis is no political naif and he proved that in spades July 5.

Francis announced the canonizations the same day he released his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, or "The Light of Faith." He described it as the work of "four hands," meaning that although it bears his stamp, the bulk of it is from his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. By dealing with the encyclical and canonizations on the same day, Francis has signaled decisively the end of the 34-year reign of Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger.

Therein lies the brilliance of Francis' actions July 5.

With his last thoughts as pope officially promulgated, the emeritus pope can now completely retire. At the same time, the evangelists of orthodoxy have what they so keenly desire: sainthood. Once John Paul is

given a feast day in the Roman calendar, they will have nothing more to ask for; they can develop their cult with statues and devotions.

Meanwhile, Francis can get back to the business at hand. From the first day of his papacy, Francis has tried to refocus the church from looking inward to looking outward with a promise of renewal. As important as the announcements Francis made July 5 was the homily he preached in the chapel of Casa Santa Marta July 6.

"In the life of the church, there are old structures, passing structures: It is necessary to renew them!" he said. The early disciples' struggle with allowing gentiles to become full members of the church, he described as "a first renewal of the structures. ... The church always goes forward, giving space to the Holy Spirit that renews these structures. ... Don't be afraid of that!"

The pontificate of Francis has begun.

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