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A season of hype swirls in Rome

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Rome — By now it's conventional wisdom that Francis is launching a sweeping reform of the Vatican. So settled has that conviction become that the Italian newsmagazine *L'Espresso* published a cover story this week with a picture of the pope under the headline, "Will he pull it off?"

Apparently, there was no perceived need to explain what the "it" refers to -- everybody, it seems, knows that this pope is trying to clean house.

The difficulty with grand narratives, however, is they become the prism through which absolutely everything is seen, making it difficult to distinguish real indices of reform from casual gestures or from decisions that actually express continuity rather than change. These days, if Francis simply opens his mail, somebody's likely to tout it as an awesome hallmark of innovation.

On the Vatican beat, in other words, we're in the grip of a season of hype.

Three recent storylines illustrate the dynamic.

First, on Thursday, Pope Francis issued a *motu proprio*, meaning a writ under his own authority, implementing a new legal code for the Vatican City State. The code includes sanctions for a range of crimes not previously mentioned specifically, such as the sexual abuse of minors, money laundering, and the theft and publication of confidential documents.

The changes take effect Sept. 1 and apply not just to residents of the 108-acre City State but also papal personnel around the world, such as the Vatican's diplomatic staff.

In some quarters, the overhaul was styled as a dramatic bid to get control of the scandals that have

plagued the church in recent years. The difficulty with this way of seeing things, however, is that it overstates the new pope's imprint.

In truth, the vast majority of the changes simply ratify ad hoc laws already promulgated in response to specific situations or incorporate obligations the Vatican had already undertaken by signing on to international conventions. The underlying policy decisions were taken some time back -- in every case that counts, including the provisions on sexual abuse and money laundering, the decisions actually came under Benedict XVI.

As journalist and Vatican-watcher Gian Guido Vecchi observed in *Corriere della Sera*, had this code been issued by Benedict rather than Francis, it's highly probable its content would have been identical.

The new code is evidence of reform, in other words, just not one that began life March 13.

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On a more symbolic level, a visit by the pontiff to the Vatican garage on Thursday generated a good deal of buzz, particularly since he'd told a group of seminarians and religious a few days before that it "hurts my heart when I see a priest with the latest model car."

In some quarters the visit was trumpeted as the prelude to a fire sale, with the new pope determined to get rid of all vestiges of papal privilege. More than one Italian commentator hauled out the old saw that the license plate on Vatican limos, which reads "SCV" for the Vatican City State, actually stands for "*se Cristo vedesse*," meaning "if only Christ could see!"

(For the record, the Vatican car park actually has two sections. One, the "Noble Garage," contains the 10 vehicles reserved for the pope, including two or three Mercedes S-class sedans with the "SCV-1" license plate that Francis has never used. On those occasions when he's moved by car, he's taken a simpler Ford Focus. The other section is the "Garage of State," containing roughly 50 vehicles used by other Vatican personnel.)

In truth, there was less to the visit than met the eye.

First, new popes routinely make the rounds of Vatican facilities and personnel to introduce themselves and to formally take the reins. The visit by Francis to the garage had already been planned, and officials say it was not designed to herald the beginning of the end of the papal fleet. While there, Francis did not designate any vehicles for liquidation.

Second, as veteran Vatican writer Luigi Accattoli observed, even getting rid of every vehicle in the collection wouldn't really generate any savings, since these cars are donated to the Holy See by their manufacturers obviously hoping for the PR benefits of seeing the pope tool around in one of their products.

If anything, junking the papal fleet might inflict more belt-tightening on the Mercedes corporation than on the Vatican.

No doubt, Francis prefers modest means of transportation, and it's tough to imagine that cardinals and other princes of the church will be so brazen as to take elegant limousines in contrast to the pope's example. A certain simplification is therefore underway, but just dropping by the garage isn't in itself the stuff of high drama.

Third, bloggers recently went to town with the "scoop" that there will be no bed for Pope Francis aboard the papal plane carrying him to Rio de Janeiro next week for World Youth Day, spinning it as another act of self-denial. (One report suggested that Francis had ordered the Secretariat of State to make sure there wasn't a bed.) That narrative metastasized for a day or so until Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, felt obliged to respond.

"There was never any letter from the Secretariat of State to Alitalia about the preparation of the plane," Lombardi said.

"The question of having a bed on board never came up, because today the seats are very comfortable and allow for a good rest, so there's no reason to think about another set-up."

"Pope Benedict also never had any bed in recent years, for example on his flights to and from Africa," Lombardi added.

For the record, there is no such thing as the "papal plane" in the sense of a jet belonging to the pope and in exclusive use by the Vatican, like Air Force One in the United States. Instead, when the pope travels, he normally takes Alitalia on the outbound leg and the national carrier of whatever country he's visiting coming back, in both cases using a normal passenger jet assigned by the company for that day.

The only real perk for the pope is that he gets to sit in the first row of business class, usually by himself, but other than that it's pretty much the same experience as anyone else making an intercontinental flight. Francis seems content with that arrangement, but it hardly started with him.

For sure, there are real indications of change under Francis -- the appointment of eight cardinals from around the world to make church governance more collegial, for instance, and the creation of a commission to investigate the Vatican bank along with the resignations of its senior leadership. No doubt, there's more to come.

In the meantime, however, these three examples suggest a dose of caution: Just because there's a revolution going on doesn't mean absolutely everything that happens is revolutionary.

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