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Francis in Brazil and a new scandal in Rome

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All Things Catholic
World Youth Day 2013

Rome — Let's be clear: Francis' first overseas trip July 22-29 to Brazil for World Youth Day almost certainly will be perceived as a runaway hit. He'll likely draw large and enthusiastic crowds, his freewheeling and warm style should play as well on the road as it does in Rome, and his palpable concern for the poor should strike deep chords in a society where social justice is an *idée fixe*.

Moreover, amid a summer of discontent, Brazilians seem hungry for a good story to tell about themselves. When the final word is in, the dominant headline will probably be something like: "Francis brings peace and wins hearts."

That said, every papal trip is a journey into the unknown, and Francis faces some real risks on this outing, a few immediate and short-term, others longer-term and harder to evaluate amid the euphoria.

In terms of security and crowd control, officials in Brazil have announced they're categorizing the events on the pope's itinerary as "green," "orange" or "red," corresponding to the threat level they believe each poses. Stealing a page from their playbook, we'll lay out here several question marks facing Francis in Brazil in ascending levels of seriousness.

Beyond the imagery and feel-good storylines, how well the new pontiff navigates these risks will go a long way toward shaping the substantive success or failure of the outing.

'Green' risks: blowback and protest

Brazil's streets have been churning recently, and a principal cause is the perception that the government is spending buckets of money on splashy events such as the World Cup and the Olympics while public

services such as education, health care and transportation languish.

In theory, Brazilians could see World Youth Day as another case in point and take out their frustrations on the pope. There are at least three compelling reasons, however, why that seems fairly unlikely.

First, there's a basic dynamic on virtually every papal trip, no matter who the pontiff is. Potential storm clouds, such as resentment over cost and mixed public reaction to the pope's message, dominate the coverage in the run-up. Once he lands, things go better than expected, and by the end, the trip is styled a success -- in part, of course, because it's being measured against the expectations of disaster the media helped create.

So far, there's no reason to think things won't play out that way this time, too.

Second, Francis arrives with high levels of popularity as well as perceptions that his heart is in the right place vis-à-vis the concerns that have driven Brazilian protestors into the streets. He also benefits from the buzz of being history's first Latin American pope making his triumphal homecoming.

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In some ways, Francis has already achieved the kind of iconic moral status that surrounds someone like Nelson Mandela, and few movements dedicated to the pursuit of justice of any stripe would want to end up on his bad side.

Instead, the antagonists in Brazil's internal tensions seem to be competing with each other to see who can show more deference and respect.

The mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Paes, recently asked protestors not to take out their grievances on the pope because he's not to blame for "the sins of Brazilian politicians." In fact, Paes said, maybe Francis would forgive them if they make a good confession. Leaders of the uprisings, for their part, told reporters they have no intention of embarrassing Francis because their resentments aren't directed at him.

The activists who propelled people into the streets in June have announced they'll stage protests July 26 and 27 in Rio under the banner of, "Pope, look how we're treated!" The assumption is that Francis is such a moral beacon that airing the failures of the country's political class before his eyes might shame them into reform.

That may not bode well for politicians, but it doesn't seem to augur any massive antipapal blowback.

Third, there's no comparison in terms of the amount of public money being invested in events such as the World Cup and the Olympics and the weeklong World Youth Day.

Reportedly, the Brazilian government is shoveling \$13 billion into the World Cup, with much of that outlay going to install luxury sky boxes at soccer stadiums. By way of contrast, the various levels of government are contributing just \$60 million for WYD in security and transport subsidies. Once Brazilians realize the disparity, they'll probably be much less likely to lump the papal trip in with the other objects of their pique.

'Orange' risks: security and manipulation

Whenever a major world leader appears in public, including the pope, there's always an outside risk of

violence. While there's no reason to think it's more likely in Brazil than elsewhere, there's also no reason to think it's less likely, either.

If something does happen, however, it won't be because the Brazilian security blanket wasn't sufficiently thick.

The defense ministry has announced a boost in the number of military personnel on duty to 10,266, from an initial deployment of 8,500. Meanwhile, officials in Rio de Janeiro have vowed to stage "the biggest police operation in the city's history," assigning 12,000 regular officers and 1,700 members of an elite security unit to the pope's protection.

Adding it up, that's 24,000 soldiers, police and security experts. Vatican officials have expressed "total confidence" in the security preparations, and that massive deployment is probably part of the reason why.

Another risk, and one that's harder to put people in the field to prevent, is that Francis' words and deeds could be exploited by various actors -- politicians, activists, pundits and media outlets -- to bolster one side or the other in the country's internal battles.

At the moment, much of the political drama in Brazil is focused on the future of the country's first female president, Dilma Rousseff. Not so long ago, her re-election in October 2014 seemed a foregone conclusion, but now some believe she's been sufficiently weakened that things may be more wide open, not only for a challenger from the center-right opposition, but potentially even from within her own center-left Workers' Party. A poll released Tuesday found Rousseff's approval rating at 49 percent, down from 73 percent in June, before the protests began.

As a result, Brazilians will be closely watching what happens during Francis' trip to see if it seems to tilt the playing field in somebody's favor.

I asked a veteran Brazilian journalist what the reaction will be if, for instance, Francis says something generic about poverty during his first encounter with Rousseff on Monday afternoon. Without having to think about it, here's what he rattled off:

- Brazilian media: "Pope presses Rousseff to do more for the poor"
- Protestors: "The pope supports us!"
- Political opposition: "Pope backs need for a change"
- Rousseff's faction: "Pope endorses our program"

In the end, there may be little Francis can do to short-circuit this sort of spin other than by avoiding partisan gestures or language. At the end of the trip, however, there is still a risk that it may come off as a political gift for somebody -- with the potential to embitter and antagonize the perceived loser.

'Red' risks: mission and ecumenism

Probably the most serious risk Francis faces is that his trip will be a short-term triumph, but without the long-term consequences he'd undoubtedly wish it to have.

Brazil is a good bellwether for broader trends affecting the church across the continent. To get a sense of what they are, here's the headline from a new study of Brazil released by the Pew Forum on Thursday: "Brazil's Changing Religious Landscape: Roman Catholics in Decline, Protestants on the Rise."

As the Pew study notes, Brazil is the largest Catholic country in the world, with an estimated Catholic

population of 123 million. Catholicism has been the country's dominant, and for a long time basically only, religious tradition since the era of Portuguese colonization in the 16th century.

Yet the Catholic share of the population has been dropping dramatically in recent decades, and over the last 10 years, the overall number of Catholics began to decline as well. A quarter-century ago, more than 90 percent of Brazil was Catholic; a decade ago, it was 74 percent; and today, it's 65 percent.

It doesn't require a great leap of imagination to envision a situation not too far down the line in which Catholics in Brazil represent a statistical minority.

The big winners in this transition have been Protestants, mainly evangelicals and Pentecostals, who now number 42 million, or 22 percent of the population. Gainers also include Brazilians with no religious affiliation, who in the West we would probably call "secularists." They now include 15 million people, more than 8 percent of the national total.

The Pew study finds that immigration and demographics don't account for the rise of Pentecostalism in Brazil, among other things because less than 1 percent of the population is foreign-born. The main factor, according to the study, is "religious switching" -- and although they're too polite to say so out loud, what they mean is defections from the Catholic church.

Perhaps most relevant for the future, the Pew data suggest Catholicism is having an especially hard time among the young and among city-dwellers -- in other words, among precisely the demographic cohorts destined to set the tone in Brazil. Here's one fascinating tidbit: According to the Pew study, only 46 percent of the population of Rio de Janeiro, the city Francis will be visiting next week, actually identifies as Catholic.

These trends pose two clear challenges.

First is the ecumenical situation. Brazil is transitioning from a religiously homogenous society to an eclectic mix of different affiliations, which means Catholic leaders have some catching up to do in terms of dialogue and outreach. Relations among evangelicals, Pentecostals and Catholics in Brazil are a mixed bag; some get along quite well and perceive common cause in regards to the increasing tug of secularism, while others are stuck in confessional rivalries.

In the mid-1990s, for instance, Bishop Sergio von Helde of Brazil's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in Latin America, went on TV on the Feast of Our Lady of Aparecida, the national patroness of Brazil, and kicked an icon of the Madonna, declaring, "This is no saint!" Uproar ensued in which outraged Catholics attacked Pentecostal churches and von Helde was convicted of public disrespect for a religious symbol and sentenced to two years in jail.

To illustrate that such tensions have not entirely dissipated, consider that there are three major Brazilian TV networks with correspondents aboard the papal plane for Francis' trip. Yet the country's second-largest network, Record, owned by an evangelical/Pentecostal billionaire named Edir Macedo Bezerra, is not represented.

In the official program for the papal visit, there's no meeting planned between Francis and leaders of other Christian denominations, although Benedict XVI held exactly such an ecumenical session when he visited in 2007. Especially given that omission, it's uncertain whether the trip will generate any new ecumenical momentum.

On the missionary front, both during his 15 years as the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and since

becoming pope, Francis has repeatedly articulated his vision of a more evangelical church -- a church that, to use the pope's language, gets "out of the sacristy and into the streets."

That was the heart of the vision for Catholicism in Latin America expressed in the 2007 document adopted by the continent's bishops meeting in Aparecida, Brazil, the famed Marian shrine that Francis will visit July 24.

If there's any place on the Catholic map where a more missionary version of Catholicism is in order, it's arguably Brazil. Therein lies the genuine drama of the trip: Can Francis translate his personal popularity into a lasting burst of missionary energy?

If so, perhaps sober historians, not just excitable journalists and pundits, will declare his first Latin American homecoming a success. If not, then the trip may end up seeming a feel-good exercise with mixed results.

More problems within the Vatican bank

A nasty war of words erupted Friday in Rome in the wake of an explosive piece in the newsmagazine *L'Espresso*, charging that a cleric hand-picked by Pope Francis to reform the Vatican bank was involved in fairly brazen gay affairs while serving as a papal diplomat more than a decade ago.

So far, the pope appears to be standing by his man, with a senior Vatican official saying Friday morning on background that Francis "has listened to everyone and has confidence" in Msgr. Battista Ricca, the cleric named in the piece.

On the record, Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi on Friday branded the story "not credible."

The Ricca story broke the same day Francis announced a new pontifical commission dealing with the Vatican's economic and administrative structures. The aim, according to a legal document with which Francis created the body, is to draft reforms promoting "simplification and rationalization" and "more careful planning of economic activities," as well as to "favor transparency" and "ever greater prudence in the area of finances." The eight-member commission is composed almost entirely of laypeople, led by Joseph F.X. Zahra of Malta, an economist and businessman who has also served as a board member of the Vatican-based Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation and on the International Audit Committee of the Holy See and the Vatican State.

While waiting for the dust to settle on how accurate the specific claims against Ricca may be, two preliminary observations suggest themselves.

First, it confirms how much the Institute for the Works of Religion, popularly known as the Vatican bank, has become a primary acid test and battleground for the larger question of Vatican reform.

In the last 14 months:

- One bank president has been fired for alleged incompetence and erratic behavior while insisting he was trying to promote transparency;
- His successor, tapped by Benedict XVI as one of his last acts, faced a mini-tempest at the beginning because of his ties to a German firm that manufactures warships;
- The bank's top two managers resigned while facing an Italian probe into alleged money-laundering; and

- A new commission was created to investigate the bank at roughly the same time a former Vatican accountant was charged, among other things, with illicit use of his bank accounts.
- Now, the bank prelate finds himself in the eye of the storm.

It's almost enough to make one think the Vatican bank ought to come with a skull-and-crossbones label, like a pack of cigarettes. "Warning: Working at this place may be dangerous to your health."

Second, the Ricca affair also illustrates how Francis himself is still viewed positively by almost everyone because the one thing everyone appears to agree on is that Francis is not to blame.

Friday's story by veteran journalist Sandro Magister claims that Ricca, now 57, had a live-in lover when he served as a papal diplomat in Uruguay in the late 1990s and early 2000s, that he cruised gay bars and once got beaten up, and that another time he brought a young man back to the papal embassy and ended up trapped in an elevator with him overnight before being freed by the local fire department.

It should be noted there's no suggestion in the story that Ricca was guilty of criminal conduct or sexual abuse and no suggestion he ever faced civil charges.

Battista later returned to Rome and ended up as the director of the Casa Santa Marta, the residence on Vatican grounds where Francis now lives, earning the pope's trust and being tapped to become his "prelate," or delegate, at the bank. (Technically, the prelate is appointed by a body of cardinals that supervises the bank, but it's widely believed they acted on Francis' wishes.)

Magister insisted Francis did not know this chapter of Battista's past before naming him on June 15, suggesting Ricca's Vatican file had been sanitized by elements of a purported "gay lobby."

After the Vatican called the story "not credible," *L'Espresso* fired back with a strongly worded response confirming the report "point by point," insisting it was based on "primary sources," and calling the Vatican's denial "improbable and improvident."

In sotto voce fashion, two competing narratives quickly emerged in and around the Vatican to account for the situation.

For Magister and those who accept his analysis, a decadelong effort to conceal Battista's past is proof positive there's a shadowy network of people with secrets to keep in the Vatican, including some in senior positions, who protect and shelter their own and who thereby allow corruption to fester.

That's what's usually meant by the term "gay lobby," though most Italians don't understand it to refer just to secrets about sex, but also other skeletons in the closet such as financial improprieties or political maneuverings.

For this group, the occult influence of the "gay lobby" is proof of the need for precisely the house-cleaning Francis has started to launch, and most express confidence he'll do the right thing.

Defenders of Ricca insist there's another side to Ricca's story not given in Magister's piece but known to Francis. They say Ricca is a genuine reformer and dredging up a seamy chapter of his past from more than a decade ago may be a smear campaign by elements of a Vatican old guard that doesn't want its power and privilege to slip away.

Even if he is gay and perhaps struggled at one point with celibacy, they say, what does that have to do with his ability to implement reform in a bank?

These voices, too, generally say the situation confirms how much Francis is needed and insist he'll make the right call.

All of which may illustrate that because of his personal popularity and because his papacy is still young and capable of seeming all things to all people, Francis remains largely untouchable and above reproach.

What the Ricca story also shows, however, is that the same thing can't be said for those around him.

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