

The Origins of Francis' Style

Ken Briggs | Jul. 31, 2013 NCR Today

Obviously no pope appears in a vacuum. He comes with the baggage of predecessors and the whirlwinds of recent history. In that mix of forces he brings whatever priorities that are more nearly his own.

The question is what kind of mix Francis has woven into his style.

Francis arrived in the midst of the greatest church and secular upheaval since Leo XIII inherited reactionary theology and labor revolution. Francis' was likewise pressed on two fronts; the scandals and disgrace within the church and monstrous human suffering in that wider world where the church claimed more adherents than any other religion.

Whether his papal design is mostly his own or the product of a damage control initiative laid down by the conclave is far from clear. Probably both. It would take nothing away from his integrity to suppose that he listened to others and gave a refreshing nod to the conciliar spirit.

If he is agreeably carrying out an agenda largely designed by others, it would make sense as an attempt to stop the bleeding from a PR standpoint. He has the understated quality that softens and humanizes a brittle, overbearing image of the church. He has the common touch that counteracts a church often seen as out of touch. So the pope as medium/messenger is an uncanny foil to the arrogance and self-centeredness which widely characterizes the men of the hierarchy.

Has he accepted a goodwill ambassador role, willing to fudge issues such as the church's policy toward homosexuals and women for the sake of a workable harmony which he believes to be the greater need at the moment? As a crisis strategy it could work, given the eagerness of many church liberals to interpret vague intimations of reform as cause enough to drop their grievances regarding such matters as the status of gays and women. Francis' gregariousness and warm heartedness has appeared to stem the rising clamor against the Vatican's still existent to regain control over American nuns, for example, while the cause for which Roy Bourgeois gave up his ordination has virtually vanished from the church scene. Is that because benevolent subjects extend a benefit of the doubt to the newcomer -- or because a public relations ploy has indeed shifted attention by promising that a good natured Mother Church will take care of everything.

As a creature of history like all the popes, Francis can be assumed to reflect the preferences and limitations of his own past. Does his current posture as pope comport with his emphases during his years in Argentina? It wouldn't appear that he had been a standard bearer for social justice, though he expressed compassion for the poor, nor did he distinguish himself as an opponent of the dictatorial regime which reigned terror on his fellow Argentinians. The research on these matters continues and the final word may reverse some of these impressions, but the initial impression isn't of a prelate who would come out the papal chute as a passionate foe of injustice.

Perhaps that's not the kind of social justice he means, but if not, whose version might have replaced his own earlier tendency to act behind the scenes? Is what he stresses now about attacking social ills his own choice? Or

what would it be if not?

As a spiritual director, his pastoral approach seems consistent, though the extent to which he took measures against those who ran afoul of actual church teachings may still be unknown.

It's impossible to gauge how much popes -- or anyone -- speak their own minds as compared to adopting themes and strategies to calm critics and make political coalitions. Francis' agenda seems crystal clear, whether it's essentially his own or a consensus by a committee. Are his efforts to show simplicity and spontaneity to some degree calculated or spur of the moment responses? It may not matter, but it might if it turned out to be the self-conscious actions to fulfill a plan that didn't represent his true nature. Like anyone else, of course, that nature may be growing and changing on the job.

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