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Pope Francis is unsettling -- and dividing -- the Catholic right

by David Gibson by Religion News Service

For more than three decades, the Vatican of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI operated on a version of the conservative maxim, "No enemies to the right."

While left-wing theologians were silenced and liberal-to-moderate bishops were shunted aside, liturgical traditionalists and cultural conservatives were diligently courted and given direct access to the apostolic palace.

But in a few short months, Pope Francis has upended that dynamic, alienating many on the Catholic right by refusing to play favorites and ignoring their preferred agenda items even as he stressed the kind of social justice issues that are near and dear to progressives.

"I've personally found many aspects of this papacy to be annoying, and struggled against that feeling from the beginning. I'm hardly alone in this," Jeffrey Tucker, editor of the *New Liturgical Movement* blog, wrote as Francis basked in the glow of media coverage of his recent trip to Brazil.

"Every day and in every way we are being told how glorious it is that the bad old days are gone and the new good days are here," he wrote.

Tucker and other traditionalists who are dedicated to high church rituals have been especially miffed at Francis' simple -- they might say simplistic -- style since the moment the former Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was introduced to the world as the new pope in March.

"How can I love a Pope who doesn't even want to be Pope?" Katrina Fernandez, a conservative blogger, wrote in a column about her disillusionment.

Since Francis' election, the anxiety on the right has only mounted as he has continued to model a radically different pontificate: preaching about the evils of the globalized economy while repeatedly reminding his followers to care for the poor and marginalized.

Indeed, he barely mentioned abortion directly or even gay rights until he was asked about gay priests during an impromptu press conference on the flight back from Brazil and, in a line heard round the world, he said, "Who am I to judge?"

Catholics on "the right wing of the church," Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput said on the eve of the Brazil trip, "have not been really happy about (Francis') election." Chaput, a vocal conservative in the U.S. hierarchy, told the *National Catholic Reporter* that Francis "will have to care for them, too, so it will be interesting to see how all this works out in the long run."

In fact, the risks for Francis in disappointing Catholic conservatives are high given their disproportionate presence in the pews and in the upper echelons of the church.

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"They have loyally supported the church with donations and activism and can be expected to oppose any change in direction of the sort Francis has signaled," Michael D'Antonio, author of a book on the clergy abuse scandals, wrote in a *Foreign Policy* magazine essay that asked, "Is Francis too radical for his flock?"

"But this constituency cannot sustain the church in the long term," D'Antonio said, "and the church now needs a figure able to bridge the gap between its rightward movement and the reality that Westerners are leaving the church in droves. That problem requires a wily pope with the skill and charisma to pull off the high-wire balancing act of unifying these two disparate impulses."

Not everyone on the right, however, is willing to concede that their influence may be on the wane or even that Francis is really any different than Benedict.

Instead, many are advancing detailed arguments that they say show Francis doesn't actually mean what the media and public think he means, adding that the pope's honeymoon will get a cold shower when liberals see Francis is just as orthodox as his predecessors.

Some even think, as writer Elizabeth Scalia explained in the conservative journal *First Things*, that Francis may be manipulating journalists in order to insinuate traditional Catholic teaching into mainstream press reports.

"Unlike Pope Benedict XVI, who was already despised by the press as Cardinal [Joseph] Ratzinger, Francis is the surprising, not-quite-known entity with whom the press is still unfamiliar and thus only marginally prepared to counter," said Scalia, who compared the pope's tactics to those of the ancient Chinese military manual, "The Art of War."

Others, like EWTN's Raymond Arroyo in the *National Catholic Register*, are recycling a narrative from the latter days of Benedict's troubled papacy and pointing the finger of blame at Francis' aides, saying that "as much as they distance the pontiff from his people, handlers can protect the pope from this sort of

misinterpretation."

But other Catholic conservatives say these read more like excuses than explanations. The handwriting is on the wall, they say -- which might not be such a bad thing for a Catholic right so accustomed to preferential treatment that it often identified the pope with the church itself.

"To the extent that conservative Catholics in the United States find themselves actively disagreeing with Pope Francis's emphases ... it might help cure them/us of the recurring Catholic temptation toward papolatry," wrote New York *Times* columnist Ross Douthat.

"The papal office has been occupied by many more incompetents than geniuses," he concluded, "and there's a reason why so few occupants of the chair of Peter show up in the litany of the saints."

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