

Francis at the six-month mark seems a force of nature

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 13, 2013 All Things Catholic

As it's come to be understood in the 21st century, the papacy is really an impossible job. A pope is expected to be the CEO of a global religious organization, a political heavyweight, an intellectual giant, and a media rock star, not to mention a living saint. Any one of those things is a life's work; rolled together, they're a prescription for perpetual frustration.

Yet at his six-month mark, which falls today, Pope Francis is drawing better reviews on those five scores than anyone might reasonably have anticipated back on March 13, either in terms of the magnitude of the task or the background of 76-year-old Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

When he stepped onto the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square, this was immediately a pope of firsts: the first pontiff from the developing world, the first from Latin America, the first non-European in almost 1,300 years, the first Jesuit and, of course, the first to take the name Francis. The new pope charmed the world that night by humbly asking the crowd to bless him before he blessed them and by referring to himself as "bishop of Rome" rather than more exalted titles.

Since that memorable debut, Francis over and over again has demonstrated a capacity to surprise.

He plunges willy-nilly into crowds, to the delight of the masses and the horror of his security team. He speaks his mind with sometimes startling frankness, such as his famous "Who am I to judge?" line with regard to gays. He makes phone calls to people out of the blue, including ordinary folks who've written him to share some personal struggle, and involves himself daringly in the issues of the day, such as his recent full-court press against military strikes in Syria.

This week, Francis was back in the headlines twice. On Tuesday, he visited a facility in Rome run by the Jesuit Refugee Service, where he proposed that unused convents and monasteries could be converted into housing for immigrants and refugees. On Wednesday, the Italian daily *La Repubblica* splashed a letter from the pope across its front page, written to a renowned leftist and atheist journalist, assuring him that God's mercy reaches nonbelievers, too.

Make no mistake: Francis is a phenomenon, a force of nature who's raised expectations, upset predictions, created a new sense of possibility, set tongues wagging and, in some quarters, sent anxieties soaring, all in the short span of half a year.

Although he's drawn blowback, including from anti-immigrant politicians, liturgical traditionalists, a few of the more militant voices in the pro-life world, and some remnants of the Vatican's old guard, he's also basking in a level of popular acclaim and media favor the papacy hasn't seen since the peak of the John Paul years.

Six months into the Francis era, it's a good time to recap what we've seen on each of the five fronts mentioned above.

Pope as CEO

Francis was elected on a reform mandate. The cardinals who propelled this Latin American outsider to the papacy understood themselves to be voting for change -- not in teaching or discipline, but in methods of management they believed had begun to go off the rails during the late John Paul II years and that derailed completely under Benedict, producing meltdowns such as the Holocaust-denying bishop affair and the Vatican leaks scandal.

Over and over again, cardinals said they expected the new pontiff, whoever it might be, to deliver a Vatican that's more efficient, more accountable, more transparent and more collegial in the way it operates.

Perhaps the two most important management moves so far have been creating an eight-member council of cardinals from around the world to advise the pope on governance of the universal church and the Aug. 31 appointment of Italian Archbishop Pietro Parolin to serve as Secretary of State, traditionally the pope's "prime minister."

If the new council suggests a break with the past, a gesture toward collegiality and a statement that the Vatican must be at the service of the local churches, the Parolin appointment is about continuity -- if not with the eight years of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who held the job under Benedict, then with an earlier era in which seasoned Italians from the Vatican's diplomatic corps were perceived to keep the trains in Rome running on time.

Beyond that, Francis has created two commissions in addition to the council of cardinals to ponder reform: one to study the Institute for the Works of Religion, the so-called "Vatican bank," and another for the broader economic and administrative structures of the Vatican.

Although it's too early to say what these various bodies may recommend, Francis is no naïf, and he therefore realizes that their mere existence has created expectations of action.

One hugely important management challenge facing any pope is the appointment of bishops because he depends on them to implement his vision at the retail level. To date, Francis hasn't yet made many flagship picks, aside from naming his own successor in Buenos Aires, but such choices are on the horizon. Cardinal Joachim Meisner in Cologne is 79, while both Cardinal Antonio Rouco Varela in Madrid and Francis George in Chicago are 76, all beyond the normal retirement age.

Francis has clearly laid out the kind of bishop he wants. During a mid-June talk to papal nuncios, or ambassadors, whose job it is to recommend new bishops to the pope, Francis said he wants prelates "close to the people, fathers and brothers." They should be "gentle, patient and merciful; animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord, and also by outward simplicity and austerity of life," men who do not "have the psychology of 'princes.' "

In terms of style, Francis is decidedly hands-on. He works the phone by himself, collecting input from various quarters, and takes action personally rather than delegating it to aides. When he summoned a Sept. 10 meeting of Vatican department heads to take stock of his first six months, for instance, he convoked the gathering himself rather than asking the Secretariat of State to play the lead role.

As things develop, that way of doing business could be a high-risk, high-reward proposition. Taking the reins into his own hands means Francis doesn't have to worry about subordinates getting in the way of his agenda or about certain voices being filtered before they reach him. Playing his cards close to the vest also means that the usual torrent of leaks in the Vatican has dried to a trickle.

On the other hand, one role papal aides have played over the centuries is to take the blame when things go wrong. For a pope acting as his own chief of staff, such a strategy of deflection would be a tough sell.

Pope as politician

So far, Francis hasn't really broken new ground in terms of the substance of the church's social and political concerns, but he has demonstrated a flair for dramatic gestures to put those concerns front and center.

Three issues in particular have been paramount over these first six months: immigration, poverty and war.

On July 8, Francis used his first trip outside Rome to launch a strong appeal against the "globalization of indifference" for immigrants, visiting the southern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, a major point of arrival for impoverished migrants, mostly from Africa and the Middle East, who are seeking to reach Europe.

Among other things, the pope tossed a wreath of yellow and white chrysanthemums into the sea to commemorate the estimated 20,000 people who have died making the passage, imploring host societies to ensure that the arrival of migrants does not cause "new and even heavier forms of slavery and humiliation."

"Who is responsible for the blood of these brothers and sisters?" the pope asked, saying that too often, the answer is, "No one!"

While praised in some quarters, the outing drew derision in others. One immigration hardliner in Italy, for instance, pointed out that the Vatican doesn't exactly throw open its doors to anyone who wants to take refuge in the papal palace.

On July 25, during his trip to Brazil, Francis visited a notorious *favela* of Rio de Janeiro called Varginha, a stop added to the schedule at his specific request. He held up the poorest of the poor like a mirror to the global conscience, insisting that "the measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need, those who have nothing apart from their poverty."

Francis didn't skirt the political subtext. Rio de Janeiro has adopted a strategy of "pacifying" its *favelas*, and Varginha in particular has been known as the city's Gaza Strip for its bloody clashes among the various gangs vying for control as well as between the gangs and the police.

"No amount of 'peace-building' will be able to last, nor will harmony and happiness be attained in a society that ignores, pushes to the margins or excludes a part of itself," the pope said in what came off as a direct rebuke of government policy.

Most recently, Francis has presided over a full-court diplomatic press from the Vatican against the idea of Western military strikes in Syria.

He sent a sharply worded letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin ahead of the G-20 summit, asserting that a military solution would be "futile"; he called for a day of prayer and fasting on Sept. 7, personally presiding over a four-hour service in St. Peter's Square; and in his Angelus address the next day, he bluntly suggested that conflicts such as Syria may be stoked as an excuse to fuel the arms trade.

Francis has pressed the campaign against the use of force in multiple ways, even using his Twitter account to send out anti-war messages.

Pope as intellectual

Francis released an encyclical letter, *Lumen fidei*, on July 5, although by his own acknowledgment it's mostly the work of Benedict XVI. The retired pope began the text as the final piece of a triptych on the theological virtues in tandem with earlier encyclicals on love and hope as well as a charter for the Vatican's "Year of Faith."

Though spokespersons for the pope have never quite said so out loud, the most personal touch from Francis in the 90-page document probably came in an opening to the "seekers" of the post-modern world.

"To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith," it says. "Anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God."

Francis returned to that theme in a mid-September letter to Eugenio Scalfari, a renowned Italian journalist and a longstanding fixture on the political left, who's also a self-professed atheist.

Scalfari had floated some questions for Francis in a piece he published in July about *Lumen fidei*, and the pope actually responded, assuring him, among other things, that God's mercy "has no limits" and that sin for a nonbeliever wouldn't be a lack of faith in God, but rather a failure to obey one's conscience.

Popes sometimes stimulate thought as much by their example as by their own intellectual contributions, and there seem four areas where a hermeneutic of Francis' papacy might unfold.

The first is ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, especially in terms of the episcopacy and the papal office. In ways large and small, Francis has rejected many of the usual modes in which ecclesiastical VIPs exalt themselves, and some experts believe his example could have both theological and ecumenical significance.

"In the feudal era, we developed this notion of bishops as princes," said Capuchin Fr. William Henn, a veteran ecumenist who teaches at Rome's Gregorian University. "With Francis, I think other Christians can see episcopal ministry more clearly as a service to communion, and will become more open to it."

Second is Catholic social teaching, where, among other things, Francis may go down as the pope who finally healed the decades-old wound surrounding liberation theology. Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian theologian considered the father of the movement, recently co-authored a book with the Vatican's doctrinal prefect, German Archbishop Gerhard Müller, who's an old friend, and is set to meet Pope Francis personally in the coming days.

The third area where Francis could stimulate reflection is liturgical theology.

The new pope takes a more informal and somewhat "low church" approach, a trait that's already having an impact in Rome. Clergy who chafed under what they perceived as a mounting fastidiousness during the late John Paul II and Benedict years -- showing up for a papal Mass, for instance, only to be told they weren't properly dressed because they weren't sporting enough crimson and lace -- report all that ended in mid-March.

If Benedict prodded the church to recover the cosmic and spiritual depth of the liturgy, Francis may stimulate renewed emphasis on the service and communal dimensions.

Fourth, Francis may inspire new thought about the theology of the sacraments through his approach to the vexed question of divorced and remarried Catholics.

If he moves in the direction of greater flexibility, it may cause Catholic sacramental theology to steal a page from the Orthodox -- understanding the sacraments to a greater degree not just as expressions of communion in faith, but also as "medicine for the sick soul."

Pope as media figure

If you ask people who knew Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Buenos Aires for their biggest surprise watching him now as pope, they'll usually say it's his comfort on the public stage.

During his run as archbishop, Bergoglio was notoriously media-adverse, shunning the public spotlight as much as possible. Admirers styled that as humility while critics called him "boring" and "gray," but in any event, it was a settled aspect of his style.

As a result, seeing him now take the world by storm -- sending crowds in Brazil into such a frenzy that they basically hijacked his motorcade, for instance, and rushed him like teenagers at a Justin Bieber concert -- has struck even his oldest friends and family members as a revelation.

"He was close to the people here in Argentina, but today he seems even closer and better able to express his feelings, which I suppose is the Holy Spirit helping him," said Maria Elena Bergoglio, the pope's only surviving sibling, in a mid-April interview with *NCR*.

Whatever the explanation, politicians and celebrities alike probably would kill to have the pope's appeal.

In July, the Italian edition of *Vanity Fair* declared him its "Man of the Year," including snippets of praise from unlikely quarters such as Elton John, who termed the pontiff "a miracle of humility in the era of vanity."

Two points about the "Man of the Year" designation are especially striking: First, he'd only been pope for about two and a half months; and second, the year wasn't even half over. Apparently *Vanity Fair's* calculation was that no one in the rest of calendar 2013 could top Francis' debut.

Polling shows strong approval ratings. A recent survey in Italy showed Francis' popularity at 85 percent, with spillover effects for the church: The percentage of Italians saying they trust the church was up to 63 percent from 46 percent in January during the twilight of Benedict's papacy.

"There has been a worldwide change in attitudes toward the papacy since the election of Francis," said veteran Vatican watcher Marco Politi, a columnist for the Italian newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. "There has been a great outpouring of sympathy, not only among believers but also from people who are very secular or far from the church."

Lest the word "outpouring" seem like hype, recall that Francis drew a crowd in excess of 3 million to Rio de Janeiro's famed Copacabana beach in late July, shattering the previous record set by the Rolling Stones on the world's most famous stretch of sand and surf -- and Francis did it in the dead of the Brazilian winter, twice.

It remains to be seen how long Francis' celebrity will endure. John Paul II was also a rock star in his day, but that didn't prevent significant opposition from arising or scandals from breaking out that, at least in the eyes of some, mar his legacy. Six months in, however, the new pope remains a hot commodity.

Pope as inspirer-in-chief

Though popes wear many hats, from a spiritual point of view, their most important responsibility is to promote lives of holiness.

Sometimes, that involves tweaking church teaching or saying "no" to cultural trajectories that appear to veer off course, but for most ordinary people, all that is secondary to the core question they ask of any religious leader: Does this person inspire?

On the spiritual plane, Francis' signature touch so far has been a strong accent on mercy, expressed in a repeated emphasis on God's endless capacity to forgive.

In a recent essay for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Enzo Bianchi, founder of the celebrated ecumenical monastery of Bose, offered a statistical analysis of the words used most frequently by Francis since his election. He found that the single most commonly used term was "joy," more than 100 times, followed closely by "mercy," which the pope has used almost a hundred times.

Francis made mercy the heart of his first homily at the Vatican's parish church of St. Anne's on March 17, and he returned to it later that day in his first Angelus address: "For me, and I say this humbly, the strongest message of the Lord is mercy," Francis said.

That emphasis flows from a pastoral outlook developed over a lifetime, which has always emphasized the need for Christ's representatives to exude mercy and compassion.

"Only someone who has encountered mercy, who has been caressed by the tenderness of mercy, is happy and comfortable with the Lord," Bergoglio said in 2001.

"I beg the theologians who are present not to turn me in to the Inquisition; however, forcing things a bit, I dare to say that the privileged locus of the encounter is the caress of the mercy of Jesus Christ on my sin."

The importance of mercy is also expressed in the motto Francis has taken as pope: *Miserando atque eligendo*, which means, roughly, "by having mercy and by choosing."

Given this emphasis, Francis has always had a special passion for the sacrament of reconciliation. When he visited Saints Elizabeth and Zechariah Parish on the northern outskirts of Rome on May 31, for instance, he heard several confessions before saying Mass, something John Paul and Benedict didn't do on their trips to Roman parishes.

This suggests a final insight into what we've learned about Francis from his first six months.

When the end eventually comes for Francis, Vaticanologists and historians will likely focus on whether he delivered the reforms he was elected to enact, such as cleaning up the Vatican bank.

Politicians and diplomats will ask whether he shaped history, successfully moving the ball on the church's concerns and shaping the "poor church for the poor" he's declared to be his dream. Media types will look at his poll numbers and whether the new lease on life for the Catholic church his election seemed to herald actually led to something.

Those are all, in their way, perfectly legitimate yardsticks. Yet if one wonders how Francis himself might assess his success or failure, he'd likely phrase it differently: Does he leave behind a more merciful church and a more merciful world?

Whatever the answer turns out to be, Francis would probably say it's at least the right question to ask.

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