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What Would Emily Post Do?

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Pope Francis has bluntly confronted the last major vestige of Old World Catholicism -- how the hierarchy conducts itself. While the behavior of the church in America has generally shed remnants of triumphalism that typified the church's European swagger, many bishops still exhibit the kind of aristocratic bearing that most American religious leaders could never get away with. For lack of a better word, it's a strain of clericalism that irritates none other than the pope.

In taking the issue head on, Francis is paying homage to the Vatican II call for universal holiness that recognizes no superiority. He's also picking the scab of a wound that has long festered among Catholics who regard the wearing of medieval vestments and privileged lifestyles as inimical to the faith they hold. He is also opening a conflict over styles and prerogatives that is already causing conflict.

Whether or not the pope revamps any teachings, he's likely to affect the future of style and basic etiquette among church leaders, some of whom continue to reign like royalty of the past, relishing the the pomp and privilege with which they have surrounded themselves from a diminishing supply of those resources in the post Vatican II church.

Francis has put himself front and center in the debate over how the ordained manhood of the church ought to act. In so doing, he has pegged the papacy down a couple of notches closer to the people of God and sharply criticized those who would remain on their perches. His boldness risks cult of personality and too much focus on himself, In any event, he surely knows he has invited scrutiny of himself and his office as a relative equal, exposing himself to brickbats that previous popes have been insulated from. Public criticism from hierarchical figures such as Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia and lay heavyweights on the Catholic right would have been unthinkable in the past, save for those who expected to have the boom lowered upon them.

The pope has shown the way he thinks bishops ought to behave by simplifying his life and spoken out against what he sees as imperious practices of bishops who live lavishly and carry out their responsibilities as regional potentates.

Some observers think that trimming these prideful sails is the pope's order of business that will, if successful, pave the way for a hierarchy close to the people who may begin to reflect the "sense of the faithful" more responsibly in amending church teaching. Such an outcome seems far off -- indeed seems unlikely or perhaps awaits another pope -- but at the moment a squabble about finery in the broad sense of the term is shaping up and the pope himself has encouraged it. He seeks to dismantle those hallmarks of European heritage that the Europeans have mostly abandoned and thrown his lot in with something much closer to egalitarianism of the New World.

It all hinges on sincerity of purpose. As a public relations reform, it offers next to nothing. Francis himself seems to represent the essential change of heart.

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