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Study finds massive 'Francis effect' in Italy

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today
Pope Francis

One of Italy's best known sociologists of religion says more than half the country's pastors report an increase in attendance at Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation that they attribute to a "Francis effect," and that "hundreds of thousands" of Italians have returned to the practice of the faith because of the new pope.

"It's a massive, and even spectacular result," said Massimo Introvigne, one he believes cannot be attributed to a passing "media honeymoon."

Introvigne is the director of an international network for the study of new religious movements called CESNUR and a frequent commentator on religious affairs in Europe. He's also author of a new book called *Il segreto di Papa Francesco* ("The Secret of Pope Francis"), recently published by the Italian publishing house Sugarco.

Introvigne writes that he carried out an initial national survey one month after the March 13 election of Pope Francis, interviewing pastors throughout the country who reported significant increases in turnout for Mass and demand for confession.

He said he repeated the survey six months later to determine if those results were attributable to what he called "religious effervescence," or if they seemed to represent something more lasting.

Introvigne identified a sample of 250 diocesan clergy and religious order priests throughout the country, and found that 50.8 percent, slightly more than half, still reported above-normal Mass attendance and requests for the sacrament of reconciliation.

?The relevant point,? he writes in the book, ?is that at a distance of six months from the first survey and seven months from the beginning of the pontificate, the phenomenon of the ?Francis effect? gives no sign of reflux, but instead is consolidating itself.?

This ?Francis effect,? he says, ?is not disappearing with the passage of time, but enduring.?

Based on these results, Introvigne offers an estimate of the number of those enticed by the new pope back into the active practice of the faith.

?Since we?re dealing with half of the parishes and church communities on a national scale,? he writes, ?we have to be talking about hundreds of thousands of people in Italy that have come closer to the church by welcoming the invitations of Pope Francis.?

The ?secret? referred to in the book?s title, according to Introvigne, is that Francis is not attractive simply because of his gestures and arresting language, but because he?s presenting a ?rich magisterium? synthesizing key aspects of the Christian message.

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In the book, Introvigne argues that Francis? vision came into focus during his years in Argentina, where he articulated the idea of a church that reaches out to the ?existential peripheries?. Introvigne also contends that rather than representing a break with his predecessor, Francis actually is building on Benedict?s legacy by providing compelling answers to questions of meaning and values that what Benedict once described as a ?dictatorship of relativism? would dismiss as irrelevant.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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