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A very Franciscan Christmas after all

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All Things Catholic

After you've been in the Vaticanology business for a while, it's hard to be surprised by the occasionally tone-deaf questions people ask. During a Christmas Eve broadcast just before the pope's vigil Mass, however, I was briefly at a loss when asked how I expected Francis to "shake up" Christmas.

On the surface of it, the notion that any pope would consciously upend one of the most sacred periods on the church's calendar seemed so silly it was tough to know how to respond.

I choked down the temptation to reply "next question" — especially since the last guy to use that phrase in Rome, Polish Archbishop Konrad Krajewski, who's in charge of the pope's personal charitable activity, inadvertently created an urban legend about Francis roaming the streets at night incognito.

Instead, I muttered something about how the difference probably wouldn't be in substance, but in the fact that Francis' popularity ensured people would be paying attention. Given perceptions of Francis as a maverick, it wasn't quite the answer the host wanted, but it was the best I could do at the time.

Upon reflection, the reply now seems inadequate.

For sure, Francis did not redact the basic Christmas message, nor did he significantly depart from the script that previous popes have followed. Yet there was nonetheless a distinctive Francis imprint on Christmas 2013, which can be expressed in terms of how it reflected three emerging pillars of his papacy.

I've written before that those three pillars are:

- Leadership as Service
- The Social Gospel

- Mercy

Leadership as Service

In his brief speech to the Roman Curia on Dec. 21, Francis stressed the importance of a spirit of service in the Vatican, saying that without it, the place becomes no more than a ponderous bureaucratic customs house.

He charged Vatican officials with striving to ensure that their work is animated by dedication to service, especially to local churches around the world, rather than constantly inspecting and questioning others.

Later that afternoon, Francis provided a new visual of what a spirit of service looks like by spending almost three hours visiting sick children and their families at Rome's Bambino Gesù hospital.

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It's worth observing that the vigil Mass Christmas Eve lasted a little over an hour and a half, while the *Urbi et Orbi* address on Christmas Day, to the city and to the world, took under an hour. Francis devoted more time to the Bambino Gesù outing, therefore, than to any other single activity on his calendar during the Christmas season.

While photographers and TV cameras were permitted to get images of the pope arriving and departing, the rest of the visit was off-limits, so coverage was largely dominated by young patients and their families talking about what the pope's presence meant to them. In the end that actually made the story more powerful, transporting it out of the realm of a mere photo-op.

There was another glimpse of the pope's special fondness for children at the end of the vigil Mass, when a group of youngsters, representing the five continents and had given him the Christ child for the nativity set, were presented to him. Francis delayed the closing procession for a few moments while he chatted with the kids and embraced them.

Fundamentally, what Francis seems to want to accomplish is to recalibrate public impressions of leadership in the Catholic church. When people see the insignia of office in the church, such as Roman collars and pectoral crosses, he wants them to associate those symbols with service rather than power.

Much of his first nine months has been about setting that tone, and it ran through his approach to the Christmas season.

The Social Gospel

During his Sunday Angelus address on Dec. 22, Francis spotted a cluster of Italy's pitchfork protestors, upset with unemployment and cuts in social services, holding a banner in St. Peter's Square that read, "The poor can't wait!"

Francis pointed to the sign and exclaimed, "That's beautiful!", launching into an extemporaneous riff on homelessness and how it attacks family life, while also urging the protestors to remain non-violent.

In his homily at the Christmas Mass, Francis laid out the spiritual basis for the social gospel. He stressed the special "vulnerability" implied in God's choice to be born into a poor family. He also noted that the first to receive the message of Christ's birth were the shepherds, "because they were among the last, the outcast."

As popes generally do, Francis used the *Urbi et Orbi* address to highlight a number of global hotspots, beginning with Syria and radiating out to the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Nigeria, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and Iraq. His remarks came before the church bombings in Baghdad that killed at least 38 people Christmas Day, which offered further grisly proof of the special threats facing the dwindling Christian population there.

While Americans may not quite have caught it, Italians saw an especially politically pointed moment in the speech when Francis referred to Lampedusa.

That's the Italian island in the southern Mediterranean that serves as a major point of arrival for impoverished migrants from Africa and the Middle East seeking to reach Europe, where tens of thousands have died trying to make the crossing. It's been on the front pages again lately because of a major scandal involving revelations of degrading treatment at a detention center on Lampedusa.

Francis made his first trip outside Rome to Lampedusa on July 8, and it's been a significant preoccupation for the pontiff ever since.

"Grant that migrants in search of a dignified life may find acceptance and assistance," Francis said. "May tragedies like those we have witnessed this year, with so many deaths at Lampedusa, never occur again!"

Here's one indication that Francis' influence extends beyond mere rhetoric: A group of Moroccan and Tunisian immigrants warehoused in a Roman detention center, who had dramatically sown their mouths shut to launch a hunger strike, suspended their protest on Christmas Day when a priest promised to carry a letter to the pope. Although most of them aren't Catholic, they wrote in the letter that they believe Francis will "make sure we're heard."

The priest who brokered the deal, Fr. Emanuele Giannone, director of a local Caritas operation, said that Francis may actually have saved lives, given that the hunger strike, combined with a vow by the migrants to sleep outside in freezing temperatures, had put their health at risk.

The *Urbi et Orbi* speech also found Francis at his most impassioned, the one moment during the Christmas events when he seemed to set aside the sobriety and reverence he generally displayed in order to drive home his points.

Mercy

Francis in many ways is the "Pope of Mercy," seeing it at the core spiritual principle of his life and his papacy. The idea of mercy is in his papal motto, and it's in his favorite catchphrase: "The Lord never tires of forgiving!"

When Francis recently directed cardinals and other senior Vatican officials to spend time hearing confessions at a nearby Roman church, it was a reflection of how much value he attaches to the church's

premier rite of mercy.

That emphasis on mercy shone through again during Christmas. His reflections on the season began, at least informally, with a lengthy interview with *La Stampa* in mid-December, in which he once again called on the church never to be afraid to stress the "tenderness" of God.

He returned to the point Christmas Eve, when the only time he departed from his prepared text was at the very end. Francis added another reference to how the birth of Christ reveals the immense mercy of God, and added a version of his signature phrase: "The Lord always forgives us!"

During the *Urbi et Orbi* address, Francis came back to the same idea.

"Let us allow our hearts to be touched," he said. "Let us allow ourselves to be warmed by the tenderness of God. We need his caress."

From a spiritual point of view, one could read everything Francis is doing as pope, from the nitty-gritty details of restructuring the Vatican bank up to loftier matters such as policy on divorced and remarried Catholics, as an effort to ensure that the Catholic church is genuinely a community of mercy.

For sure, Francis is no naïf. He knows that ministers of the Christian gospel must express both God's judgment and God's mercy on a fallen world — one without the other is an over-simplification.

His calculus, however, seems to be that the world has heard the church's judgment quite clearly, and now it's time for the world to hear, and to experience, its mercy. That's probably what Francis meant when he said back in July that the present time is a *kairos*, meaning a privileged moment, for mercy.

For those with eyes to see, in other words, 2013 turned out to be highly "Franciscan" Christmas after all.

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