

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 30, 2013 at 6:00am

Pope's birthday a turning point in reform campaign

by John L. Allen Jr.

Rome — Officially speaking, the Vatican doesn't do much to mark a pope's birthday. Celebrations are reserved for his saint's name day and the anniversary of his election, reflecting a preference to focus on the office rather than the man.

Unofficially, however, Francis marked the period around his 77th birthday Dec. 17 with a series of striking gestures and decisions that, taken together, represent a further turning point in his reform campaign.

Within the space of just four days, the pope reached out to the world with yet another blockbuster interview, laid the basis for a new generation of moderate "Francis bishops," saw a reform commission he erected in July hire two global consulting firms to reorganize the Vatican's PR operation and to beef up its accounting procedures, and also provided a new visual for his vision of a "poor church for the poor" by inviting three homeless men, as well as their dog, to join him for a birthday breakfast.

Given the Vatican's typically somnambulant pace at Christmastime, the frenzy offers a further index of the "Francis effect." This is a pope, it would seem, who just doesn't have an off switch.

The sequence began Dec. 15 with a lengthy interview with Francis by veteran Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli in *La Stampa*. Among other things, the pope responded to recent criticism of his document *Evangeliu Gaudium* by conservative American pundit Rush Limbaugh, who described its criticism of economic injustice as "Marxist."

"The Marxist ideology is wrong," Francis replied. "But I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people, so I don't feel offended."

He went on to repeat his criticism of "trickle-down" economics.

"The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefiting the poor," Francis said. "What happens instead is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger, but nothing ever comes out for the poor."

The interview also represented reform in another sense, in terms of providing accurate information about the pope's intentions. Heretofore, speculation about what the pope might do on a given issue could go on almost indefinitely, because it was virtually impossible to get a firm yes or no from the pontiff himself.

In this case, however, Francis responded to a direct question about whether he would appoint female cardinals, saying he didn't know where that idea came from and asserting that anyone hoping for it "suffers a little bit from clericalism."

As a result, the shelf life of that hypothesis is now finished.

On the vexed issue of Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics, Francis dropped a hint that no decision will be made soon, saying the issue will be examined during the Synod of Bishops on the family that will meet both in October 2014 and again in 2015 -- suggesting that resolution of the issue may be at least two years away.

Some of the pope's strongest language came on anti-Christian violence in various parts of the world, among other things arguing that the common experience of persecution among various denominations creates an "ecumenism of blood." The pope spoke approvingly of a priest in Germany who wanted to beatify a Catholic and a Lutheran together, both of whom had been executed under the Nazis.

This was the pope's fourth high-profile Q-and-A session, following his July 28 press conference aboard the papal plane returning from Brazil, his September interview with *Civiltà Cattolica* and other Jesuit publications, and an October sit-down with Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari, a leftist and nonbeliever. A high level of accessibility to the media seems to be one of the hallmarks of his papacy.

Congregation shake-up

Just 24 hours later, Francis delivered another bombshell, in the form of a shake-up at the Vatican's all-important Congregation for Bishops, the office that's responsible for recommending bishops' appointments to the pope.

Francis confirmed Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, 69, as prefect of the congregation, who was named to the job in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI. While that arguably represented a choice for continuity, Francis also moved the goalposts significantly within the congregation by naming new members and removing old ones.

For Americans, the most striking move was to tap Washington, D.C., Cardinal Donald Wuerl, 73, as a new member of the Congregation for Bishops and to remove Cardinal Raymond Burke, 65, president of the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's highest court. Given Wuerl's reputation as a moderate and Burke's as a hard-liner vis-à-vis the culture wars, the combination seemed a clear indication of the pope's preference for more centrist leadership. The pope also did not confirm as a member of the Congregation for Bishops Cardinal Justin Rigali, 78, who stepped down as the archbishop of Philadelphia in 2011.

The same trend ran through the other appointments to the congregation, 30 in all, including 12 new members and confirmations for 18 current members. In general, Francis appears to prefer ideological moderates with the broad support of their fellow bishops and a commitment to the social Gospel.

From Mexico, Francis turned to Cardinal Francisco Robles Ortega of Guadalajara, who comes from a working-class family in Jalisco and has good relationships with progressive sectors of the Mexican church.

From Colombia, Francis tapped Cardinal Rubén Salazar Gómez, who has occasionally come under fire for alleged waffling on the church's moral teachings. In 2011, he drew criticism for voicing qualified support for the de-penalization of drugs, and in 2012, the Vatican's Secretariat of State compelled him to amend comments implying acceptance of the de-penalization of abortion in three cases anticipated by Colombian law, including rape, incest and threats to the life of the mother.

From the United Kingdom, Francis elevated Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, generally seen as a doctrinal and political moderate who has been criticized for his allegedly lukewarm support for the old Latin Mass and the new structure created under Benedict to welcome former Anglicans into the Catholic church.

Francis also tapped two Vatican officials he inherited from Benedict, including Brazilian Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Bráz de Aviz has occasionally come under fire for allegedly being too soft, including in the Vatican's ongoing examination of American nuns.

If understanding the sufferings of ordinary people is one hallmark of a "Francis bishop," Bráz de Aviz certainly qualifies. As a young priest, he was once on his way to a village to say Mass when he stumbled upon an armored car robbery. He was shot during the crossfire, with bullets perforating his lungs and intestines and one eye. Although surgeons were able to save his eye, he still carries fragments of the bullets in his body.

On the other hand, Francis also maintained a degree of balance by confirming several champions of a more conservative outlook for the Congregation for Bishops, such as Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, who's also a member of the pope's "G8" Council of Cardinals, as well as Spanish Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments and known around Rome as the "little Ratzinger" -- not only because of his diminutive size, but also his affinity for Benedict's doctrinal views.

All told, the overhaul arguably represents one of the more important reform moves by Francis, given that it shapes the criteria by which more than 5,000 Catholic bishops around the world will be chosen.

Hiring consultants

On Dec. 19, the Vatican announced that a commission created by Francis in July to study its economic and administrative structures had hired two global consulting firms to study a reorganization of the Vatican's communications operation and to ensure that its accounting practices are in line with international standards.

McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm founded in the United States, will handle the communications study, while KPMG, one of the world's "big four" auditing firms, will tackle the accounting practices. The Vatican said the contracts had been awarded after a "competitive bidding

process," but did not specify how much is being paid for their services.

The fractured nature of Vatican communications has long been a source of consternation, with responsibility for public relations spread among the Holy See Press Office; the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*; Vatican Radio; the Vatican Television Center; the Pontifical Council for Social Communications; and even the Vatican publishing house.

In June 2012, the Vatican also created a new position of senior communications adviser within the Secretariat of State, tapping veteran American journalist Greg Burke for the role.

Each of these departments operates on its own, which many observers believe contributes not only to unnecessary duplication of resources but also occasionally mixed messages.

On the financial front, both the Institute for the Works of Religion, usually called the Vatican bank, and the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (APSA), which handles the Vatican's property and investments, are currently engaged in reviews of client information. Those projects have also been entrusted to an outside consultant, the regulatory compliance firm Promontory Financial Group.

Both of those departments will also likely be subjected to an on-site inspection by the Financial Information Authority, the new watchdog unit created under Benedict and headed by Swiss anti-money-laundering expert René Brülhart.

In an *NCR* interview Dec. 18, Brülhart said that an inspection of the bank will happen in "early 2014," and that a final decision hasn't been made with regard to APSA but that some sort of review is "probable."

Presumably, one function of the KPMG review will be to ensure that the same standards are applied to other departments of the Vatican, especially those that handle significant amounts of money, such as the government of the Vatican City State and "Peter's Pence," an annual global collection to support papal activities.

Vatican finances loom as a critical acid test of Francis' commitment to reform, in part because of a series of scandals that have rocked the institution both before and after his election.

An Italian investigation into allegedly suspect transactions at the Vatican bank is ongoing and the bank's top two day-to-day officials stepped down in July, though officials deny any wrongdoing. Last year, the Italian central bank also forced a shutdown of credit card services in the Vatican related to concerns about controls over money laundering, forcing the Vatican to negotiate a new agreement with a Swiss provider not subject to European Union rules.

In June, meanwhile, Msgr. Nunzio Scarano, a former accountant at APSA, was arrested in a \$30 million cash-smuggling scheme. Italian media reports indicate that in interrogations subsequent to his arrest, Scarano claimed that APSA operates as a sort of "parallel bank," allowing certain lay Italian VIPs to put money into their investment funds, in part to avoid paying taxes on the income.

Scarano also charged that APSA officials routinely accept gifts from banks looking to capture part of the Vatican's assets, including "trips, cruises, five-star hotels, massages, etc."

In his *NCR* interview, Brülhart denied that he has run into any resistance to reform from a Vatican old guard.

"I think there's a lot of backing for the work we're doing," he said.

Finally, Francis once again displayed his special affection for the poor by inviting three homeless men to share a birthday breakfast with him Dec. 17. The three men brought their dog, Marley -- explaining to the pontiff that the dog is named for the reggae icon Bob Marley.

The men were from the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Poland, and are among the large numbers of homeless people who pass their nights in the area around St. Peter's Square sleeping in cardboard boxes. They were invited to join the pope to celebrate his birthday by Polish Archbishop Konrad Krajewski, known around Rome as "Don Corrado," who's responsible for Francis' personal charitable initiatives.

"Francis told us that we should never give up, that we have to have hope," one of the guests said afterward. "He's a good man."

Both substantively and symbolically, in other words, Francis' birthday was a whirlwind.

Taken together, the unseasonal rush of activity seemed another confirmation of Francis' unflagging energy, as well as a sign that impressions of change on his watch may well amount to more than mere rhetoric.

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