

Four new echoes in 'Francis revolution'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 13, 2014 NCR Today

By now, the broad outlines of the Francis revolution seem reasonably clear -- a church more focused on mercy than on judgment, a political stance closer to the center, and a pastoral emphasis on the peripheries and the poor.

Over the second weekend in January, four new echoes in that revolution sounded in Rome. Taken together, these developments suggest not only that Francis is pressing ahead, but that his example is emboldening others.

New cardinals

Francis announced 19 new cardinals Sunday, including 16 under 80 and therefore eligible to vote for the next pope. The immediate takeaway was the broad global distribution in this crop, with just four new Vatican cardinals and only two others from Europe among the electors.

The other new voting-age cardinals include four Latin Americans, two Asians, two Africans and one from the Caribbean.

Upon closer examination, there's also a clear option for the periphery among Francis' picks.

For instance, Bishop Chibly Langlois will become the first cardinal from Haiti, by most measures one of the poorest countries in the world. The appointment breaks an unwritten Vatican rule that if the Caribbean was to have a cardinal, the red hat should go to one of the region's three Catholic powerhouses -- Cuba, Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic.

Moreover, Langlois' diocese of Les Cayes is not one of the two archdioceses in Haiti, so Langlois represents an option for the periphery even within his own nation.

In addition, one of the three "honorary" cardinals named by Francis, meaning men already over 80, was another Caribbean bishop, retired Archbishop Kevin Edward Felix of Castries.

The same point applies to the new cardinal from the Philippines, Archbishop Orlando B. Quevedo, whose Cotabato archdiocese traditionally has not been considered a major see on a par with Manila or Cebu. In Italy, Francis bypassed the traditional red hat sees of Venice and Turin in order to lift up Archbishop Gualtiero Bassetti of Perugia.

(That choice was taken not only as an option for traditionally neglected locales but also for political moderates, given that the current archbishops of both Venice and Turin are generally seen as members of the conservative wing of the Italian church.)

The Feb. 22 event in which Francis creates these new cardinals thus shapes up as the "Consistory of the Periphery."

Baptisms

On the same day he announced the new princes of the church, Francis also baptized 32 children in the Sistine Chapel.

The pope made headlines by telling the mothers present they shouldn't be embarrassed if they needed to breastfeed their infants, but the more substantive newsflash was that among those baptized by Francis was a little girl, Giulia, whose parents were married only civilly and thus not in the church.

According to *La Stampa*, this was the first time a child from an "irregular" marriage was baptized in a public papal Mass. The parents, Ivan Scardia and Nicoletta Franco, told reporters they had been at a General Audience on Sept. 25 and asked the pope if he would baptize their second child, and he accepted.

To be sure, there's no bar against baptizing such children. Canon 868 states only that for a baptism to be licitly performed, there has to be a founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion.

More generally, church law states that the faithful have a right to the sacraments and there has to be a good reason to withhold them.

That said, it's easy to imagine that under other circumstances, there would have been resistance to the idea of the pope himself performing such a baptism in a public setting based on concern that it might blur church teaching on marriage.

The choice by Francis to forge ahead was utterly consistent with his practice as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio criticized priests who declined to baptize the children of unwed mothers in 2012.

"These are the hypocrites of today," Bergoglio said, "the ones who clericalize the church, who keep the people of God from salvation.

In effect, the pope's baptism Sunday profiles as another gesture intended to underline the priority of mercy.

An archbishop behind bars?

Late last week, new agencies around the world carried a story to the effect that the Vatican had refused a Polish request to extradite Archbishop Jozef Wesolowski, the former papal ambassador to the Dominican Republic removed in August in the wake of sex abuse allegations both there and in Poland.

That report brought a denial from the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, who said on Saturday that there has been no extradition request and that the Vatican is ready to collaborate with inquests both in Poland and in the Dominican Republic.

Lombardi added that the 65-year-old Wesolowski is facing a canonical investigation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which could lead to his laicization as a priest and bishop.

The revolutionary element was what else Lombardi said: Wesolowski is also facing a criminal investigation by the Vatican's own criminal court.

Back in July, Francis issued a ruling that extended the jurisdiction of the Vatican's criminal court in sex abuses cases to papal diplomats, and Wesolowski thus shapes up as the first real test of that ruling.

In theory, Wesolowski could follow the path blazed by Paolo Gabriele, the erstwhile papal butler who was charged with being the mole at the heart of the Vatican leaks affair under Benedict XVI. Gabriele was subjected to a Vatican criminal trial, convicted, and sentenced to jail.

The main difference is that while Benedict pardoned Gabriele, it's unlikely Francis would do the same for Wesolowski should he be convicted.

While it's too early to say how this process may play out, should it end in Francis putting an archbishop behind bars, it would be seen by most observers as a clear signal that this pope means business on the sex abuse front.

A funeral for a homeless man

In late December, a 63-year-old homeless man named Alessandro died during a particularly cold night in Rome, on a street near the Vatican. In itself there was nothing unusual about it in that the streets around the Vatican attract a high population of homeless, and every year, a few pass away during the winter cold.

What followed, however, amounts to another index of the "Francis effect."

Students at the Urban College, a residence for seminarians from the developing world located on the Janiculum Hill across from the Vatican (and next door to the North American College, where seminarians from the United States reside), heard of Alessandro's death and decided they wanted to do something.

They asked authorities at the university for permission to celebrate a funeral, and the idea landed on the desk of Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the Vatican's missionary department, which oversees the Urban College. Filoni signed on, and the Vatican official responsible for the pope's personal charitable projects, Polish Archbishop Konrad Krajewski, agreed to celebrate the funeral Mass.

On Friday, Filoni, Krajewski, 200 students, and a score of Alessandro's homeless friends in and around the Vatican filed into the chapel at the Urban College to mourn his loss.

Krajewski downplayed his presence: "I'm a bishop of the streets," he said. "It's normal that I would do this."

Still, the press by the students at the Urban College to organize a last gesture of tenderness for a man basically forgotten during life is one indication that the "Francis effect" is reaching down into the next generation of priests and future church leaders.

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