

How to measure the Francis effect

Thomas Reese | Mar. 6, 2014 NCR Today

Bill D'Antonio is well known to the readers of the *National Catholic Reporter* as the sociologist behind the *NCR* survey of American Catholics. He is author of *American Catholics in Transition*, and *Religion, Politics, and Polarization: How Religion/Political Conflict is Changing Congress and American Democracy*. As a result, he is the perfect man to give us a reflection of the recent Pew study on the American response to Pope Francis. Here are his thoughts:

The focus of the Pew Research Report is the traditional one, namely church attendance, and praying.

But is that the message that Francis has been trying to promote? I don't see Francis spending much time and energy on trying to talk more people into regular Mass attendance, or force structural changes (women and married priests), or normative changes (birth control, same sex marriage, etc).

Rather, I see him saying, let's not get tied up in the rules and structures right now. Let's focus on Jesus's message, and the message was not 'be sure to get to the Synagogue every Friday.' How many times do we find that message in the four gospels? No, he has priests out on the streets at night not to bring in the poor for mass, but to literally be Eucharist for those found in the streets and alleys and other places where those who might be in need of the message of love and caring are found.

Francis has already begun to make changes where he has full authority, and these changes may lead to the kind of change brought about by the actions taken by Pius XII and which we identified as one of his most important actions as pope over a 20 year period. In 1946 he appointed 32 cardinals from outside Europe, and then in 1953 another 24; these new appointments became crucial perhaps in the election of John XXIII, and certainly in the struggle for control of Vatican II, and the bishops who reflected a different worldview than the one held by Cardinals Otaviani and Cicognani. Again, recall the impact of the appointments of John Paul II during his 27 years.

Mass attendance will only count for Pope Francis to the extent the people in attendance go forth to live the Gospel, and among other things that means helping to promote a policy of subsidiarity directed to problems only at the local level, or to a subsidiarity that builds on the local level efforts and moves beyond that to a program of solidarity designed to tackle social problems that cannot be resolved at local levels in the way our society is currently structured.

In short, if you are a US citizen and take Francis seriously, you will have to take a close look at the policies and programs of the two political parties and decide which one more closely meets the message Francis is putting forth. It is no surprise to me why my Jewish and Protestant friends like Francis.

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