

Pope Francis after a year

Thomas Reese | Mar. 14, 2014 Faith and Justice

During his first year in office, Pope Francis has been such a whirlwind of activity and surprises that it is difficult to know what to say. I have already [written extensively about him](#) [1], so I was uncertain what to write on the anniversary of his election. During the last two weeks, scores of reporters have been calling me with questions about Pope Francis, so I thought I would share with you the most common questions and my responses.

What is the most important achievement of Pope Francis?

The most important achievement of Pope Francis is that he has rebranded Catholicism and the papacy. Prior to Francis, if you asked someone on the street, "What is the Catholic church all about? What does the pope stand for?" the response would be, "They are against abortion, gay marriage and birth control." Certainly in the media, that was what was portrayed, along with clerical sexual abuse.

Today, the response would be different. "He is concerned about compassion, love, especially for the poor." He has even won over the media. As one religion reporter told me, "It's nice to be off the crime beat and back to religion." The church is making the front page for something other than criminal activity and scandal. Pope Francis has made it fun to be a religion reporter again.

He has done such a magnificent job in changing the image of the church that business schools could use him as a case study in rebranding.

Will Francis be able to reform the Vatican?

Reforming the Vatican requires changing its culture, placing people who support reform in key positions, and changing the structures, policies and procedures.

From his first day in office, he has spoken of leadership for service, not for status and power. He has preached against clericalism, careerism and the papal court. Not only has he preached it, he has modeled it. Changing the culture of the Vatican calls for a conversion of heart, of values and attitudes. Some in the Vatican have accepted this new approach; others still prefer to be princes.

Second, he has appointed people who support his vision, including a new secretary of state, a new prefect for the Congregation for Clergy, a new secretary for the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, new people in key financial positions, and new members for the Congregation for Bishops. In almost all these appointments, Francis has replaced conservative ideologues with pastoral moderates. He has also brought in outsiders such as the Council of Cardinals and management consulting firms to advise him. He will not be a captive of the Curia.

Third, in the financial area, he has continued the structural reforms begun by Pope Benedict XVI. He created a new Secretariat for the Economy with the authority to audit any office in the Vatican, even the Secretariat of State. So far, little has changed in the Roman Curia, the nonfinancial offices that help the pope govern the

church. Here, there is need for complicated prudential decisions over what issues should be handled in Rome and what should be handled at the local or national level.

What mistakes has Francis made?

Pointing out papal mistakes is way above my pay grade.

[In an earlier column](#) [2], I opined that Francis' first mistake was taking four members of the Curia and making them cardinals. There are two other areas where Francis has not hit a home run.

I think it is clear that Francis does not know how to talk to educated American women. Even when he tries to say something nice, he sticks his foot in his mouth. Why is this? I think there are three reasons.

First, Francis is a man. I don't think there is any man who knows how to speak to women today about women's issues. The smartest move is to shut up and listen.

Second, he is a Latin American male. He comes from a macho culture that is patriarchal and paternalistic, even though Argentina has a woman president and Eva Peron.

Third, he has not spent much, if any, time around academic feminists; he spent his time in the slums of Buenos Aires, listening to poor women in their homes. These women were not concerned about glass ceilings in the professions and corporations; they were concerned about whether they could feed their children. They also worried about their daughters being kidnapped and trafficked.

As a result, he spoke out for the poor and was a leader in fighting human trafficking in Argentina. In his efforts against human trafficking, he was advised by a woman international lawyer who found it very easy to work with him.

Francis appeared to recognize his limitations here when he said that the church does not have an adequate theology of women. Certainly, Pope John Paul II thought he had a very good theology of women. Francis' admission invites the whole church to start a conversation of about the role of women in the church and society. Perhaps this is more important than anything he says himself.

The second area where he needs to improve is in responding to the sex abuse crisis. He believes that Pope Benedict got it right with zero tolerance of abuse by priests. In an [interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*](#) [3], he sounded defensive in talking about how the church was much better at responding to abuse than society at large. While this may be true, for people who feel they were betrayed by bishops who simply moved priests around, such comments are like a cheating husband telling his wife that the other men in the neighborhood cheat more. The only proper response is "I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry." Regaining trust is going to take a lifetime.

[As the *National Catholic Reporter* editorialized](#) [4], he needs to meet with survivors of sexual abuse by priests. Listening to their stories will affect him as nothing else can. He also needs to take action against bishops who are not responding appropriately to abuse by priests. If a bishop in Germany can be forced to resign because of a financial scandal, why can bishops who scandalize the faithful by not protecting children remain in office? Is money more important than children?

Will Francis succeed in reforming the church?

Having lived through John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, I know that reformer popes come and go. If Francis died this year, would the cardinals elect a man who would support Francis' vision, or would they return

to the style of earlier papacies?

As I said earlier, in order to reform an institution, you need to change the culture, appoint people who support the reform to key positions, and change structures, policies and procedures.

He is preaching conversion away from clericalism to leadership as service, but is this catching on? Some sources report that seminarians do not like the new pope; they entered because they liked John Paul and Benedict. Many bishops and younger priests seem confused by him. Older priests who remember John XXIII and Vatican II are more enthusiastic.

Francis needs at least 10 years to have a significant impact on the church. This would allow him to appoint like-minded men to the College of Cardinals and to dioceses all over the world. If he only lasts five years, then any cardinal under 75 will be at the next conclave; any bishop under 70 will still be in office at the next papal transition.

Church reform also requires changes in policies. Liberals, conservatives and the media have focused on issues like women priests, gay marriage and birth control, even though Francis has encouraged them not to obsess over these issues. But he has raised the issue of Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. When questioned about arguments among the cardinals on this issue, [he responded](#) [3]:

I would have been more worried if there hadn't been an intense discussion in the Consistory, because it would have been useless. The Cardinals knew that they could say what they wanted, and they presented different points of view, which are always enriching. Open and fraternal debate makes theological and pastoral thought grow. That doesn't frighten me. What's more, I look for it.

Allowing and encouraging discussion of controversial issues in the church is a huge change in policy that will prepare the way for more changes. But he wants these changes to occur organically through the development of consensus, not by fiat from on high.

But ultimately, we must remember that although the pope plays an important role in the church, he is not the Catholic church. The conversion of heart that he is calling for must happen to us all. We must become a more compassionate and loving people with special concern for the poor.

Will the Francis reform succeed? Yes. It is inevitable. Why? Because it is the Gospel.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a senior analyst for *NCR* and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. His email address is treesesj@ncronline.org [5]. Follow him on Twitter: [@ThomasReeseSJ](https://twitter.com/ThomasReeseSJ) [6].]

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