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Cardinal, panelists: Pope Francis' celebrity should turn eyes to Jesus

by Maria Wiering by Catholic News Service

Baltimore — "Like Pope Francis? You'll love Jesus."

It was a well-circulated *Washington Post* headline in December, but it could have been the tagline for the "Francis Factor" event held Tuesday at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore. As a cardinal, archbishop and four Catholic expert panelists shared insights from Pope Francis' first year, they repeatedly shifted the attention away from the pope and onto the Son of God.

Pope Francis would have done no less.

"The pope is a true companion of Jesus," said Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston in the evening's keynote address. Speaking to an audience of some 2,800 in Loyola's Reitz Arena, O'Malley said the pope is enticing people to take a new look at the church.

In an interview published in English by *America* magazine in September, the pope called the church "a field hospital after battle."

"The field hospital imagery is more compelling than that of a museum or a concert hall," the cardinal said. "Sometimes we lose our enthusiasm for mission because we forget that the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters."

The Baltimore archdiocese hosted the "Francis Factor" as part of its 225th anniversary celebration. The evening included an introduction from Baltimore Archbishop William Lori, the address from O'Malley, and by remarks followed by a question-and-answer session from four panelists.

The panelists were Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, founding chief executive officer of the Canadian Catholic network Salt and Light Television; Jesuit Fr. Matt Malone, editor-in-chief of *America* magazine; Helen Alvare, professor of law at George Mason University School of Law in Arlington, Va., and a consultant for the Pontifical Council of the Laity; and Kerry Robinson, executive director of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management.

Baltimore's Catholic Charities, Catholic Review Media and the Catholic Community Foundation of the archdiocese of Baltimore also supported the two-hour event.

Wearing his brown Franciscan habit, O'Malley, a Capuchin, framed his remarks with the connection between St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis of Assisi. Ignatius read about St. Francis, and the friar's example of self-denial and heroism played an important role in Ignatius' conversion and founding of the Jesuit order.

Pope Francis can be understood not as a Jesuit who leans Franciscan, but as a fully Ignatian Jesuit, O'Malley said.

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He pointed to the pope washing the feet of young people, including young women, in a detention center on Holy Thursday. Catholics used to experiencing a stylized foot-washing ritual were surprised to see the pope in such a humble role before the youths.

"Pope Francis replicated the surprise and the shock of the apostles, even as he dismayed those who prefer the stylized liturgy in a basilica," said O'Malley, a member of the Council of Cardinals, which advises the pope on major initiatives. "The Holy Father was jostling our imagination because we've grown so complacent that we can no longer see beyond the familiar customs to glimpse a challenging truth."

All of the evening's speakers expounded on Pope Francis' love for the poor and his call for mercy.

Malone said some Catholics run the risk of "being religious, but not spiritual" and viewing truth as an idea, not the person Jesus.

"The Holy Father isn't saying that the rules are wrong, only that they're not the essence of our faith. Relationship is the essence of our faith," he said. "The rules only exist to safeguard relationships. The Catechism of the (Catholic) Church expresses the tradition of the church and its pilgrim journey to the fullness of life and love. In other words, it is not a penal code."

Alvare focused on Pope Francis' call for women to assume a greater presence in the church. For a blueprint of how that might look, she said, one only has to look to Pope Francis. His relational and familial approaches reflect "women's capacity to put other people at the center of the universe," she said.

"It is the Marian face of the church, and the world's over-the-top reaction to it is a striking indication of the need for it," she said.

She cautioned that there might be a temptation within the church to admire and value the contributions of women in theory, but not in fact.

"It will take more than goodwill to grasp and promote a Marian church and the gifts that women provide in it and for it," she said. "One needs women not only on the front lines, but in the back office and also the executive suite. Obviously, not in the spirit of careerism, but in the same spirit of servant leadership that Pope Francis is inviting."

Robinson also spoke of Pope Francis' call for women's leadership, which should arise "not for the sake of women, but for the sake of the church." She suggested Catholics reflect on the role of St. Clare, who formed a women's religious community to participate in St. Francis' work.

Rosica said people can get hung up on the externals of Pope Francis' ministry -- driving a Ford Focus, wearing simpler garments, making a jam sandwich for a member of the Swiss Guard protecting his apartment -- and miss the heart of the message.

"Everything he's doing now is not just imitation of his patron saint ... it's a reflection of someone else: the child of Bethlehem who would grow up to become a man of the cross," the priest said.

He added: "Francis is giving the world a very powerful glimpse into the heart and the mind of God."

The most important achievement of Pope Francis' first year, which celebrated its anniversary March 13, is that he has "re-branded Catholicism and the papacy," Rosica said.

During the evening's question-and-answer session, a Loyola student who implied he is gay said he was raised Catholic but felt pushed out of the church. Pope Francis made him feel like he might have a place in the church again.

"My concern is that words can only go so far," he said. "Without actual change in doctrine or canon law, how will that filter down to the bishops and the priests that actually impact people's lives?"

Malone confirmed that Pope Francis does not intend to change the church's doctrine, but said not to discount the power of his shift in tone.

"Certainly since the Second Vatican Council, the church has taught, among other things about human sexuality, that gay and lesbian people ought to be accepted with compassion, sensitivity and respect," he said. "What this pope has done, which I think is so important, is that he has said that is not only a part of the church's teaching, that is the most important part of the church's teaching about gays."

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