

The Pope's 100-Day Report Card

Michael Mickler
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Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio) was elected 266th pope of the Catholic Church on March 13, 2013. As the leader of 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide, he has completed his first 100 days in office. Unlike American presidents, there's no expectation of this period being a benchmark of his early success. Nor did Francis come into the pontificate with a ready-made plan of action. In fact, he admitted to being "disorganized."

Still, he inherited a church at a crossroads, if not in crisis. Exposure of "backbiting, corruption and cronyism" inside the Vatican, the so-called "Vatileaks," hastened the previous pontiff's departure. Following Francis' election, Erin McClam of NBC News wrote that he had "a to-do list as long as his cassock." She suggested he faced seven major challenges: cleaning house at the Vatican; leading the church out of the sex abuse scandal; getting along with other faiths; winning the West; should women be priests and priests marry; modernization; and persecution.

How has he done?

Cleaning house at the Vatican

Francis has taken a number of symbolic steps to change the Vatican's culture, beginning with his name. When greeting the masses following his election, he kept his simple cross instead of a golden one; he did not use the special Mercedes car, but a bus where he sat in the second row, joining the cardinals; he stays in the cardinal guest house rather than the pompous papal apartment; he has foregone the papal drapery in favor of a simple white cassock; and he will not summer at Castel Gandolfo, the favored retreat of his predecessor, but remain in Rome.

The question, as one observer noted, is whether Francis' "symbolism has begun seeping into substance." Indications are that it has.

A month after his election, he appointed a committee of eight cardinals from around the world to assist him in revising the rules for running the Roman Curia, or church hierarchy. He subsequently stated his intention of addressing the Vatican's "gay lobby" which came into prominence along with allegations of blackmail. He also took his first step toward reforming the Vatican bank by appointing a trusted cleric to oversee its management.

His most "eagerly watched" appointment is yet to come: that of the Vatican secretary of state, who runs the day-to-day administration of the Holy See. Appointing a non-Italian reformer would be a watershed moment in Vatican administration.

Grade: B+

Leading the church out of the sex abuse scandal

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) noted Francis was not on its list of “the worst choices for pope.” There was no evidence of his complicity or cover-up of abuses. Still, he was among many of the world’s Catholic bishops — fully 25% — who failed to meet a deadline for establishing policies to deal with complaints and priests who were accused, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Three weeks into his pontificate, Francis I told the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the church’s chief enforcement agency, to “act decisively with regard to cases of sexual abuse.” SNAP officials dismissed this as “empty rhetoric,” once again, “a top Catholic official asking another top Catholic official to take action about pedophile priests and complicit bishops ... Big deal.”

It is clear that Francis I will need to do much more (discipline offenders, reveal histories) to establish his credentials as a leader capable of combating the scourge of predatory priests.

Grade: C

Getting along with other faiths

Francis is credited with having a “deep capacity for dialogue with other religions” based on his interfaith activity in Buenos Aires. To this point in his pontificate, he has not disappointed.

The Eastern Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople attended his installation for the first time since Catholicism and Orthodoxy split in 1054. Numerous Muslims attended his inaugural mass and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, who had broken off relations with the Vatican previously, sent congratulations. For his part, Francis urged Vatican ambassadors to “intensify dialogue with Islam” and included Muslims and orthodox among those whose feet he kissed and washed on Holy Thursday, prior to Easter.

Francis said that the title “pontiff” means “builder of bridges,” and in a May 22 homily that sent Vatican spokesmen backtracking, he claimed Christ had redeemed everyone, including atheists.

Grade: A

Winning the West

Francis inherited the mantle from John Paul II and Benedict XVI of reaching out to alienated Catholics in Europe and North America. But his “new evangelism” differs from the doctrine-promotion of his predecessor according to Trinity College professor Mark Silk in that it emphasizes “moral example over catechetical word.”

In his first blessing from the Vatican balcony, Francis spoke of the “evangelization” of Rome but subsequently insisted that the church is called “to go to the peripheries.” Vatican officials acknowledged a “Francis effect” or “Francis bump” with requests for tickets to the weekly general audiences in St. Peter’s Square consistently numbering between 50,000 and 70,000. They also note increases in confessional and mass attendance.

Despite discordant notes (see below), Francis has struck an evangelical chord that resonates with “distant Christians.”

Grade: A-

Should women be priests? And should priests marry?

Francis evidences no discernible differences on the role of women in the church from his immediate predecessors. The key is whether he is willing to engage on the issue. Thus far, the signs are not encouraging.

In April, he upheld Benedict XVI’s rebuke of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) which represents some 80 percent of the United States’ approximately 57,000 sisters. He also approved a plan to place the group under the control of three U.S. bishops.

Rumor has it that Francis will be “handing women a record number of positions in the Holy See” and in an unprecedented gesture, two women were included among those whose feet he kissed and washed on Maudy Thursday. Still, he has given no indication of a readiness to hear discordant voices with respect to gender.

Francis has shown more flexibility on the matter of priestly celibacy. In his work, *On Heaven and Earth* (2010), he stated, “hypothetically, western Catholicism could revise the theme of celibacy” since “it’s a question of discipline, not of faith. It could change.”

Grade: C+

Modernization

Survey data suggests Catholics in the United States want the church to move in a liberal direction. A New York Times/CBS News poll of Catholics at the time of Francis' election found that six in 10 support gay marriage, and seven in 10 want the church to allow birth control. Three-quarters supported abortion in at least some circumstances.

On the other hand, the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life found that after the "addressing the sex abuse scandal," U.S. Catholics listed "standing up for traditional moral values" as their second highest priority for the new pope. Among Catholics who said they attend Mass at least once a week, standing up for traditional moral values was the top priority.

Francis, in the tradition of John Paul II, has so far balanced a progressive stance on social and political issues (environmentalism, peace, the 'culture of waste') with adherence to traditional family and moral values.

Grade: B

Persecution

The extent to which Pope Francis will champion the plight of persecuted Christians who number in the millions according to rights groups is as yet unclear.

He has addressed the topic in sermons but thus far counseled prayer and perseverance. In May, Francis canonized some 800 Italians killed in the 15th century, most of them beheaded, for refusing to convert to Islam. However, as reported by Reuters, the Vatican was at pains "not to allow the first canonizations of Francis' two-month-old papacy to be interpreted as anti-Islamic, saying the deaths of the 'Otranto Martyrs' must be understood in their historical context."

It remains to be seen how Francis will balance the competing demands of diplomacy and advocacy.

Grade: Incomplete

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