

In just a few months, Pope Francis, elected on March 13, 2013 at age 76, has already had an immense impact on the Catholic community and beyond. His choice of the name "Francis" was a brilliant move, symbolizing his intention to follow the example of the revered 13th century saint from Assisi, who lived a simple life of poverty in service to the poor, cared for the material world as an expression of divine beauty, and sought peace between Christians and Muslims during the Crusades. Thanks to extensive media coverage, we are aware of the preference of Francis for a simple lifestyle. As cardinal-archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Jorge Bergoglio chose to live in a simple apartment, where he cooked his own meals, rather than in the cardinal's mansion and to use public transportation rather than a chauffeured limo. As Bishop of Rome, he has chosen to live in the Vatican guest house, where he shares meals with other guests, instead of the 12 room papal palace overlooking St. Peter's Square, where popes have resided since early in the 20th century. He has generally avoided using the papal limousine in moving around Rome. After his election, he picked up his luggage at the hotel where he stayed before the conclave and paid his own bill. This portrait of simplicity has spread widely, shaping the popular perception of the new pope.

The simple lifestyle chosen by Pope Francis adds credibility to his call for a church dedicated to care for the poor and marginalized. He has made the point succinctly: "I would like a church that is poor and is for the poor." As pope, his duty is "to remind the rich to help the poor, to respect them, to promote them."

On May 16th, Pope Francis gave an important prepared speech on global poverty. At the root of our problem is a new version of the biblical golden calf, "the cult of money," that reduces human beings to one of our physical needs, namely "consumption." In a consumerist culture, human beings themselves are considered "as consumer goods which can be used and thrown away." The pope recognized the growing inequality between the rich and poor: "The income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling." Adding a structural analysis, Francis claimed: "This imbalance results from ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and thus deny the right of control to states, which are themselves charged with providing for the common good." To overcome the "tyranny" of the unbridled market, we need a new person-centered ethics that recognizes the God who calls us to "full realization," that "rejects manipulation and subjection of people," and that helps "create a balanced social order that is more humane." Furthermore, the pope insisted that we need "a courageous change of attitude," on the part of political leaders, that will promote the needed "financial reform along ethical lines."

In a short period of time, Francis has done a remarkable job of highlighting the Gospel mandate to care for the poor. The pope's namesake, Francis of Assisi, is said to have advised his followers to "preach the Gospel always, and, if necessary, to use words." During his pontificate, Francis will no doubt speak more words to clarify his approach to the problem of poverty, but he will continue to preach the Gospel most powerfully by his personal example of a simple lifestyle lived in solidarity with the poor.

When Pope Francis first appeared on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square to address the great throng for the first time, he made a significant departure from tradition. Before offering the traditional "*urbi et orbi*" blessing to the city and world, he asked a "favor" of the crowd, to pray first for him. The multitude responded with a brief period of silent prayer. The moment was charged with graced energy. Millions of people across the globe shared in the moment by way of television. Many were touched emotionally, perhaps without knowing exactly why. Francis went on to speak of a common journey that he would share with the people. Here was a signal that he did not think of himself so much as a spiritual father, as did his predecessor John Paul II, but more as the servant of the servants of God. He envisions pope and people making the journey together, guided by the Spirit, in a mutually enriching relationship of prayer and service. Francis appears to be comfortable with himself, blessed with a humble confidence that enables him to learn from others and to act decisively.

Another iconic moment occurred when Pope Francis celebrated Holy Thursday Mass at a juvenile detention center on the outskirts of Rome. As part of the traditional ritual, the pope, down on his knees, washed and kissed the feet of 12 young people, including two women, one a Muslim. He then told the young people: "This is a symbol, it is a sign -- washing your feet means I am at your service," adding that Jesus teaches us to "help one another."

Later in the week, after Easter Sunday Mass, Francis toured the crowd in St. Peter's Square, stopping to embrace and kiss an 8-year-old American boy, who suffers from cerebral palsy. This touching scene, eventually seen by millions on television replays, along with his other symbolic gestures, have created a public perception of Francis as a warm, compassionate person, committed to a life of service as Bishop of Rome. In this, Francis reminds us of Pope John XXIII, a man universally loved for his endearing human qualities, openness to others, and dedication to unity, justice and peace.

In addition to his well-reported symbolic gestures, Pope Francis has already made an extremely important substantive decision to appoint eight cardinals to advise him on "the governance of the Universal Church" and on the reform of the Roman Curia. The eight cardinals, including Sean O'Malley of Boston, represent major regions of the world and various national hierarchies. Although they are scheduled to meet for the first

time as a group in October, reports indicate the pope is already consulting them individually. This radical experiment in shared governance "is the most important step in the history of the Church of the last 10 centuries and in the 50 year period of reception of Vatican II," according to the respected church historian Alberto Mellon. It is hard to predict how this group will actually function, but Francis has set the stage for a major reform by picking strong people with diverse perspectives and giving them a broad mandate beyond just reforming the Curia.

Not all Catholics are happy with Pope Francis. Traditionalist groups have expressed their displeasure with a number of his initial moves: failing to wear the traditional red velvet cape for special occasions; greeting cardinals while standing instead of sitting on a pedestal; emphasizing dialogue with Muslims; and especially washing the feet of women on Holy Thursday in violation of liturgical norms. Traditionalists have accused Francis of abandoning the style of Pope Benedict, who loved the trappings of the papacy. The group "Rorate Caeli," for example, has lamented "the official end of the reform of the reform" movement led by Benedict, who understood their concerns and lifted restrictions on the Tridentine Mass.

On the other hand, polls suggest that the vast majority of Catholics are responding favorably to the new pope. The Jesuit expert on Vatican II, John O'Malley, sees Francis as "projecting precisely" through word and gesture the image of the church envisioned by the Council. The popular author, Sister Joan Chittester, when asked if she saw any hope in the dispute between the Vatican and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, responded that she did indeed because "The church now has as its model . . . a man who is committed to the poor." Colman McCarthy, a peace activist and author who left the Church years ago, writes that Francis has started him thinking about returning, especially if he initiates further reforms. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff thinks that Pope Francis, with his experience as a pastor, will be able "to reform the Curia, decentralize the administration, and give the Church a new and credible face." Hispanics are generally proud that a Latin American is now serving as Bishop of Rome and is attending to their issues: for example, care for the poor and "unblocking" the canonization cause of the revered martyr Archbishop Oscar Romero. The New York Times has run articles praising Francis for his collegial style of governance in the spirit of Vatican II and for his appeal for "more intense dialogue with Islam," which is especially important after the rocky relationship between Pope Benedict and the Islamic community. Theologians detect signs that Francis will adopt a more modest teaching style than his predecessors John Paul and Benedict. For example, in his prepared address on global poverty, he prefaced one of his statements with the phrase "in my opinion" and another with "in my view," a modest nuance not typically used by his predecessors. Some commentators have detected examples of Ignatian spirituality in the homilies and talks of the first Jesuit pope, including an instinct for finding God in all things, the ability to maintain a contemplative spirit in the midst of demanding activities, and the use of imaginative approaches to the scriptures. Secular humanists and others have commented favorably on the decision of the pope to offer a silent blessing for a large group of journalists out of respect for those who may not be believers. A Catholic CEO, well-versed in management theory, is convinced that the collegial leadership style of Francis will inevitably, if gradually, filter through the church structure. Many ordinary people throughout the world have been impressed with the new pope's human qualities and his simple lifestyle. Catholics committed to the spirit of Vatican II have new hope that Francis will help implement the reforms of the Council. Priests who see themselves as servant leaders find affirmation in the pastoral sensibilities of the pope: for instance, his admonition to preach less about sexual sins and more on the problem of poverty and to offer a warm welcome to single mothers who bring their children for baptism. With the election of a pope who chose the name Francis, Swiss theologian Hans Kung sees the possibility of a "paradigm shift" that would include "planned and well-communicated steps to reform along the lines of the Second Vatican Council." Finally, a recent report out of Rome claims Pope Francis has "already changed the tone of the papacy, lifting morale and bringing a new sense of enthusiasm" to the church and the Vatican itself. This sampling of positive responses suggests that we are experiencing a new outpouring of the Spirit filled with blessings for the whole church.

The future of the current papacy remains essentially unknown. Francis will, no doubt, make decisions and hold positions that upset various segments of the Catholic community. There may be more discussion of his role as a Jesuit superior during the military dictatorship in Argentina and of his handling of sex abuse cases while serving as archbishop of Buenos Aires. On the other hand, the pope has already made an immense impact on the Church and its public image by virtue of his choice of name, simple lifestyle, symbolic actions and the promise of collegial governance in the spirit of Vatican II. Inspired by the example of Pope Francis, we have a new opportunity to recapture the hopeful spirit of Vatican II.