

Francis' Humility and Emphasis on the Poor Strike a New Tone at the Vatican



VATICAN CITY — He has criticized the “cult of money” and greed he sees driving the world financial system, reflecting his affinity for liberation theology. He has left Vatican officials struggling to keep up with his off-the-cuff remarks and impromptu forays into the crowds of tens of thousands that fill St. Peter’s Square during his audiences. He has delighted souvenir vendors near the Vatican by increasing tourist traffic.

Pope Francis, the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, has been in office for only two months, but already he has changed the tone of the papacy, lifting morale and bringing a new sense of enthusiasm to the Roman Catholic Church and to the Vatican itself, Vatican officials and the faithful say.

“It’s very positive. There’s a change of air, a sense of energy,” said one Vatican official, speaking with traditional anonymity. “Some people would use the term honeymoon, but there’s no indication that it will let up.”

Beyond appointing eight cardinals as outside advisers, Francis has not yet begun making concrete changes or set forth an ambitious policy agenda in a Vatican hierarchy that was gripped by scandal during the papacy of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. Benedict, who resigned on Feb. 28, is now living in a monastery inside the Vatican.

But Francis’ emphasis on attention to the poor, and a style that is more akin to that of a parish priest, albeit one with one billion parishioners, is already transforming perceptions. He has chosen to live not in the papal apartments but rather in the Casa Santa Marta residence inside the Vatican, where he eats dinner in the company of lower-ranking priests and visitors.

“There are differences, but differences of style, not content,” said Giovanni Maria Vian, editor in chief of the Vatican newspaper, L’Osservatore Romano, comparing Francis with Benedict.

In his speeches, “his style is simple and direct. It’s not elaborately constructed and complex,” said the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi.

He has repeatedly returned to the euro crisis and the suffering it has caused in Greece and the Catholic countries of Southern Europe.

“If investments in the banks fail, ‘Oh, it’s a tragedy,’ ” he said, speaking extemporaneously for more than 40 minutes at a Pentecost vigil last weekend, after a private audience with the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, the architect of Europe’s austerity policies. “But if people die of hunger or don’t have food or health, nothing happens. This is our crisis today.”

In a recent speech to diplomats accredited to the Holy See, Francis also spoke of the need for more ethics in finance.

“The financial crisis which we are experiencing makes us forget that its ultimate origin is to be found in a profound human crisis,” he said, adding: “We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal.”

Father Lombardi said that the pope had called him before that speech. “He said, ‘Pay attention, this is important. I want people to understand it’s important,’ ” he said.

Francis’ speeches clearly draw on the themes of liberation theology, a movement that seeks to use the teachings of the Gospel to help free people from poverty and that has been particularly strong in his native Latin America. In the 1980s, Benedict, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the head of the Vatican’s doctrinal office, led a campaign to rein in the movement, which he saw as too closely tied to some Marxist political elements.

Francis studied with an Argentine Jesuit priest who was a proponent of liberation theology, and Father Lombardi acknowledged the echoes. “But what is clear is that he was always against the strains of liberation theology that had an ideological Marxist element,” he said.

While Benedict generally delivered only carefully prepared speeches and rarely used the first person, Francis has a more conversational tone, with frequent mentions of his own personal and family history. In his Pentecost remarks last weekend, he cited biblical verses, but he also said with a smile that he sometimes dozed off while praying and recalled how he had been inspired to enter the priesthood by the simple faith of his mother and grandmother.

Francis improvises so often that Vatican communications officials have trouble keeping up with him. “We’re all learning,” Father Lombardi said.

Vatican Radio often rushes to provide transcripts, including of the homilies the pope delivers at Mass each morning in a chapel frequented by employees of Vatican City State. He arrives early and prays with the parishioners before putting on his vestments. Afterward, “he greets everyone personally,” Father Lombardi said.

The faithful love it. “I feel like I am a new Catholic since he became pope,” said Attilio Cortiga, 59, a public employee from the southern Italian region of Campania, who got up at 1 a.m. to travel to Francis’ weekly audience on Wednesday. “I came because I feel he is very close to us ordinary people. His words touch anybody’s heart.”

Vatican watchers say that Francis has been drawing above-average crowds, even for the early months of a new papacy.

“The economy has picked up again here,” said Marco Mesceni, 60, a third-generation vendor of papal memorabilia outside St. Peter’s Square. “It was so hard to sell anything under Benedict. This pope attracts huge crowds, and they all want to bring back home something with his smiling face on it.”

Francis has also been enjoying far better press than Benedict ever did. “He does not suffer from the prejudices that unfortunately Benedict immediately had against him,” said Mr. Vian, the newspaper editor. He argued that many of Benedict’s missteps, with other faiths and more progressive Catholics, and the scandals that plagued his papacy, came as much from perceptions of the pope as from reality.

The new pope has done things that might well have caused more controversy on his predecessor’s watch. On May 12, Francis celebrated a Mass at St. Peter’s to canonize two Latin Americans and 800 people who were killed in Otranto, in the southern Italian region of Puglia, in 1480 after they refused to convert to Islam at the hands of Ottoman Turkish invaders. The 800 were sainted as Christian martyrs, which does not require evidence of two miracles.

“If Benedict had done that, maybe the polemics would have mounted,” Mr. Vian said, alluding to the previous pope’s strained rapport with the Muslim world. It was, in fact, Benedict who ordered the canonization of the 800, but the announcement drew little attention — it came in the same speech when he shocked the world by saying he would retire.

The previous pope, a theologian, often warned of the “risks” facing the church, and reminded Catholics of the ways “that we’re on the wrong path,” Father Lombardi said. That was important, he said, but sometimes a change of emphasis is good. “To be told repeatedly about how God’s love and mercy can transform the hearts of people, there was a need for that,” he added.

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