

Pope Francis looks to the future



Recent events suggest the Catholic Church is beginning a new era in its attitude to other Churches and faiths. Similarities with the beginning of the papacy of Pope John XXIII are inevitable. The key factor may be that Pope Francis takes a more relaxed attitude to those who are not technically of the same persuasion, emphasising, as did Pope John, values and approaches which are held in common rather than differences in doctrine. It was the 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* that set out the possibility that Catholics could work with “people of goodwill” outside the Church, until then frowned upon. That may now be part of the Catholic wallpaper, taken for granted as obvious, but it has not been translated into specific joint projects to the extent it could have been.

Benedict XVI’s ecumenical priorities were more to do with resolving issues from the Church’s own past. He put great store by the possibility of reconciliation with the Vatican II-denying Society of St Pius X, and encouraged long and tortuous conversations which seemed to be going nowhere from the start, given the non-negotiables on both sides. He reversed decades of church policy by re-authorising the celebration of the Tridentine Rite, which seemed not just a gesture towards the Lefebvrists but a reactionary move in liturgical policy generally, as did the imposition of a severely inadequate, if linguistically more accurate, translation of the Mass into English.

Pope Francis, who now celebrates his first 100 days in office, has had open and frank conversations with such as the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the new leader of the Anglican Communion and Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. Pope Francis graciously thanked members of the Church of England for their understanding of what it was that prompted Benedict to set up the Anglican ordinariate – inviting the comment that even if Anglicans understood it, Catholics still do not. Maybe it is now destined to wither on the vine. It had some value as proof that the Catholic Church would not want to impose a uniform cultural style on other Churches which wished to come into full communion with it, but that issue has not been high on the ecumenical agenda in recent years.

The extended visit to Britain of Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, seems much more emblematic of the priorities of the present Pope than of his immediate predecessor. Benedict repaired most of the damage he did to Catholic-Muslim relations with his ill-advised Regensburg address in 2006. But he remained alarmed by the dangers of religious relativism in a way that his successor is clearly not. One of Francis' first acts, washing the feet of a Muslim woman on his first Maundy Thursday service as Pope, continues to resonate.

But the hermeneutic of continuity still links the two papacies. The announcement of joint commemorations of the Reformation with the Lutheran Church in Germany will open up new possibilities under Francis, but they are the fruit of talks initiated under Benedict and with his goodwill. Nevertheless, it is clear that Catholicism is looking to the future again, not to the past. That could energise a lot of people whose faith had grown stale.

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