

‘Francis factor’ has power to evangelize

By Christopher Guntz

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One of the nice things lately about being a Catholic, especially one who is obviously Catholic (such as editor of a Catholic newspaper) is the number of people who remark, “I like your pope.” The comment often comes from a Catholic who has been away from the church, but sometimes comes from those of a different faith tradition. It comes up at brunches, or meetings of civic organizations or anywhere people gather. They want to know what I think about Pope Francis. Have I met him yet? No. Is he really changing church teaching on ____ (fill in the blank)? No. Is he changing the way the church looks at some things? Certainly.

Curiosity about the pope and, consequently, about the church and its teachings has great power to evangelize. Many people seem more willing to listen to what is being said and taught these days. The dynamism of Francis is being compared to that of John Paul II, who took the message of the Gospel to the world in ways that previous popes had not.

The effect of social media on the papacy is a large aspect of the response. Pope Francis’ image and quotes go out on Facebook and Twitter instantly after he has spoken. An early meme on these networks shortly after Francis started his papacy compared the last three popes: John Paul told us why the church teaches. Benedict explained why the church teaches what it teaches. Francis says, “Now go do it.”

It’s hard to quantify the “Francis factor,” a shorthand way of talking about the change in tone and pastoral attention within the church since the pope’s election a year ago. We may not necessarily see more people in the pews yet, but it will be interesting to see the numbers welcomed into the church at the Easter vigil this year and in coming years. The number of new seminarians and vocations to the religious life – and the kind of people attracted to such discernment as a result of Francis’ charism – will be another indicator.

Here in Baltimore, we have an opportunity to participate in a discussion about this phenomenon, at a symposium March 18 sponsored by the Archdiocese of Baltimore at Loyola University Maryland. Cardinal Seán O’Malley of Boston and four panelists will reflect on “The Francis Factor” and engage in a forum with questions from the

live audience and via social media.

Francis himself doesn't like the superstar status. He doesn't want to be considered a superman, but he seems willing to embrace some attention on himself if it will lead to greater dissemination of his message, which is that Jesus loves us and wants to provide his grace and mercy for all, for we are all sinners. He wants us to remember that Jesus loves the poor and vulnerable and we should, too.

"To portray the pope as a kind of superman, a type of star, strikes me as offensive," Pope Francis told an Italian daily newspaper in an interview last week. "The pope is a man who laughs, weeps, sleeps soundly and has friends like everybody else. A normal person."

And yet this "normal person," a self-declared sinner in need of God's mercy, will have a profound effect on our church and our world as we learn more about him and about the goodness of God from him. The Holy Spirit may have had a surprise for the church when the College of Cardinals elected Jorge Bergoglio as pope. We cannot just sit tight and hold on for the ride; we need to be ready to respond to the call of the Gospel here, now, anywhere, anytime.

For information about "The Francis Factor" symposium or to reserve tickets, visit tinyurl.com/cr-factor.

To read more of Gunty's columns, [click here](#).