

Plenty of substance on top of style

By Christopher Gunty

Much has been made about the differences in style between Pope Francis and his papal predecessors. Before going out onto the balcony to be introduced, he eschewed the red mozzetta, a ceremonial cape worn by pontiffs. He also has opted not to wear the red shoes traditionally worn by popes for the last couple of centuries, choosing instead to continue wearing a pair of black shoes that friends recently bought him before the conclave, as his old shoes were so worn.

The day after his election, he visited the Basilica of St. Mary Major to pray before an icon of the Blessed Mother and the child Jesus, and on the way back to the Vatican, he stopped by the pensione where he stayed before the conclave to collect his belongings and pay his bill. The significance of these gestures is profound.

There are numerous images of Mary within St. Peter's Basilica and the Vatican, including Michelangelo's Pietà. But the "Salus Populi Romani" (Protectress of the Roman People) at St. Mary Major is particularly beloved by the Roman people. Francis was not only giving thanks to the Mother of God, but also reinforcing that as the Bishop of Rome, he will have a special concern for the people of his diocese.

At the Domus Internationalis Paulus VI, a hotel and residence for clergy, he greeted workers and settled his tab. As the image of the pope at the domus' front desk in his white "house cassock" made the Internet, one caption noted that the pope's file might be hard to locate, because he "checked in under a different name."

He delivered his first few homilies as Pope Francis, including his inauguration Mass, from the ambo, without his mitre. Any bishop can deliver a homily while seated, and popes have traditionally done so. Bishops traditionally also wear their mitre, a symbol of their office, and sometimes also hold their crozier while preaching, to indicate the full teaching authority of their office. It seemed that Francis, speaking without notes at times, was reflecting as a humble pastor to his people.

After a dinner with the cardinal electors the evening of his election, the new pope declined the waiting papal limousine and instead rode a bus with the cardinals back to the Vatican where they stayed during the conclave.

He has opted, for now at least, to keep the simple silver pectoral cross he used as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. Pope Francis greeted members of the parish that serves Vatican workers and people in the crowd just outside the Vatican gates after Sunday Mass March 17. He wished a casual greeting to those gathered for his first Angelus blessing in St. Peter's Square.

He has not changed the substance of church teaching. If anything, he is re-emphasizing the core of the church, in that it calls us to deepen our relationship with the Lord. After praying his first Sunday Angelus as pope, he expounded on the mercy of God.

"God's face is that of a merciful father who is always patient," Pope Francis said. "The Lord never tires of forgiving. We are the ones who tire of asking forgiveness."

In style, it appears that Francis will be more like John Paul II: energetic, connecting to people easily. If his style brings about any changes in substance, it may well be in the way that the church responds to people, especially the poor and marginalized. The foundation of church teaching about the sanctity and dignity of each person will not - cannot - change, but the way that message spreads may change.

It was said that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was ready to retire when his friend, John Paul II, passed away. Instead he was elected pope, and was perhaps better than many expected, because he was no longer the doctrinal watchdog, but pastor of a billion souls.

By all accounts, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was also looking forward to retirement until he was elected pope. Maybe it's better to elect someone to such a powerful position who does not want the job. Pope Francis, just a few years younger than Benedict was at his election, may be just the pope we need at this time.

The changes Pope Francis already seems to be making - whether in style or in substance - may be the breath of fresh air the church needs, to "open wide the doors to Christ," as Blessed John Paul II said in the homily at the beginning of his pontificate.

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