

The Non-Revolution

Are you ready for a crazy statistic? Pope Francis, who just completed his first year as pope, had a favorability rating of 79 percent midway through his reign. Surprisingly, Pope Benedict XVI about halfway through his reign in April 2008 had a favorability rating of 83 percent. It's shocking that the pope demonized and held to be unpopular by almost everyone in the media had a higher approval rating at one point than the pope celebrated daily in the news.

Least, I seem dishonest. Benedict's average for his entire reign was around 74 percent and Francis's average over the entire year was 83 percent. Pope John Paul II was higher than both, averaging in the low 90s.

I am the last person to argue that approval ratings matter in religion, but I find these statistics useful because they complicate the standard narrative of the past year. Benedict was backwards looking and thus unpopular, and Francis is forward looking and therefore popular. That's just not true.

This blog is not intended as an attack on Francis or a defensive of Benedict. Quite the opposite. My target is the imagined tension between the two popes, and the prevalent view that change is the key to success in the church.



Pope Francis greets people as he arrives for Mass at the parish of Santa Maria dell'Orazione on the outskirts of Rome March 16. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Undeniably, the current pope has made a huge impact in his first year. I have often used him as a source of inspiration for many blogs, and according to recent surveys, the majority of Catholics think the church is heading in the right direction and Catholics are more excited. The "Francis Effect" however has not materialized into concrete changes in practice. There has been no noticeable change in the number of Americans that claim to be Catholic or in church attendance, and less Catholics have reportedly gone to confession in the last year.

What is the pope's role in the renewal of the church? I think he said it best in a recent interview: "I don't like the ideological interpretations, a certain 'mythology of Pope Francis'.?If I'm not wrong, Sigmund Freud said that in every idealization there is an aggression. Depicting the Pope to be a sort of superman, a type of star, seems offensive to me. The Pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps calmly and has friends like everyone. A normal person."

Catholics are often accused of worshiping saints and the pope. To many, they seem like our versions of celebrities or stars, but there is the huge difference. Celebrities are an end in themselves. The pope finds it offensive that he has been made an end

unto himself; rather, he can lead us to the true end, the One who has already saved us.

As a historian, I believe the success of the church was not due to the leadership of great members of the clergy, but almost, in spite of them. In the above quote, the pope is highlighting that people looking for a pope-superman that will save the church might be disappointed. You'll find a normal person.

Moreover, the beauty of the church is its timelessness in the face of change. Different popes come and go but the church remains the same. Every pope has a different personality. Some have been holy men and others have been great sinners. It's the doctrines that remain constant which ground the church and keep its identity intact, which leads us back to the statistic I cited at the beginning of the article.

Don't let popular columnists and pundits frame the narrative: Catholics want a revolution, the pope is leading a revolution, and therefore, he is popular and viewed as a superman or star. This does not correspond to the approval ratings of John Paul or Benedict, who were not revolutionary minded.

Instead, the narrative should read: Catholics want to encounter Jesus through the church, John Paul, Benedict, and Francis all accomplished this in a variety of ways (but with different styles), and that's why they are loved by the faithful.