

Focus on Mission, Stay True to the Cross, Pope Tells Cardinals

Pope Francis on Friday urged leaders of a **Roman Catholic Church** riven by scandal and crisis never to give in to discouragement, bitterness or pessimism but to keep focused on their mission.

Since his election on Wednesday as the first non-European pope in nearly 1,300 years, Francis has signaled a sharp change of style from his predecessor, Benedict, and has laid out a clear moral path for the Church, which is beset by scandals, intrigue and strife.

“Let us never give in to the pessimism, to that bitterness, that the devil places before us every day. Let us not give in to pessimism and discouragement,” he told the cardinals who chose him.

The **Vatican** on Friday strongly denied accusations by some critics in Argentina that Francis stayed silent during systematic human rights abuses by the former military dictatorship in his home country.

Spokesman Father Federico Lombardi told reporters the accusations “must be clearly and firmly denied.”

Critics of Jorge Bergoglio, the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires, allege he failed to protect priests who challenged the dictatorship earlier in his career, during the 1976-1983 “dirty war,” and that he has said too little about the complicity of the Church during military rule.

Setting out a clear and forceful moral tone in the early days of his papacy, Francis on Thursday told the cardinals they must stick to the faith’s gospel roots and shun modern temptations, otherwise the Church risked becoming just another

charitable group without its divine mission.

Francis has given clear signs already that he will bring a new broom to the crisis-hit papacy, favoring **humility** and simplicity over pomp and grandeur.

Off the Cuff

On Friday he spoke to the cardinals in Italian from a prepared text, but often added off-the-cuff comments in what has already become the hallmark of a style in sharp contrast to the stiffer, more formal Benedict.

Francis called the princes of the church “brother cardinals” instead of “lord cardinals” as Benedict did. Lombardi said Francis was still taking his meals with other prelates in the Vatican residence where the cardinals stayed during the conclave. “He just sits down at any table where there is a free spot, with a great sense of ease.”

Another notable difference from the formal Benedict is the new pope’s outgoing nature and sense of humor.

On Friday, he hugged cardinals, slapped them on the back, broke into animated laughter and blessed religious objects one cardinal pulled out of a plastic shopping bag.

In the afternoon, he slipped out of the Vatican for the second straight day, this time to visit a fellow Argentine, 90-year-old Cardinal Jorg Mejia, who had suffered a heart attack.

On Thursday morning, the day after his election, he left quietly to pray at a Rome basilica and to pay his bill at a residence where he had been staying before the conclave.

Earlier, in the Sistine Chapel, in another sign of humility, Francis stopped cardinals who tried to kneel before him.

But his message was serious. The role of Church elders, including himself, was to set an example and pass on faith and values to younger people without being distracted by the temptations of wordliness.

"We are in old age. Old age is the seat of wisdom," he said, speaking slowly. "Like good wine that becomes better with age, let us pass on to young people the wisdom of life," he said.

Tribute to Benedict

He made a point of paying tribute to Benedict, who shocked the Church last month by becoming the first pontiff in some 600 years to resign instead of ruling for life, saying he had "lit a flame in the depths of our hearts" with his courage and example.

Morale among the faithful has been hit by a widespread child sex abuse scandal involving Catholic priests and in-fighting in the Church government or Curia, which many prelates believe needs radical reform.

Francis is seen as having a common touch and the communication skills that the aloof Benedict lacked.

Whereas Benedict delivered his first homily in Latin, laying out his broad vision for the Church, Francis adopted the tone of parish priest, focusing on **faith**.

"When we walk without the cross, when we build without the cross and when we proclaim Christ without the cross, we are not disciples of the Lord. We are worldly," he told the massed ranks of cardinals clad in gold-colored vestments.

"We may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, all of this, but we are not disciples of the Lord (if we don't follow Jesus)," he added, speaking slowly in Italian.

The new pope signaled immediately his intentions for the papacy when he adopted the name of St. Francis of Assisi, who gave up a life of privilege in the 12th century to follow a vocation of poverty.

He urged Argentines not to make costly trips to Rome for his inauguration next week but to give money to the poor instead.

No Vatican watchers had expected the conservative Argentinian to get the nod, and some of the background to the surprise vote has already trickled out, confirming that cardinals wanted a pastoral figure to revitalize the global Church, but also someone who would get the dysfunctional Vatican bureaucracy in order.

French Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard told reporters: “We were looking for a pope who was spiritual, a **shepherd**. I think with Cardinal Bergoglio, we have this kind of person. He is also a man of great intellectual character who I believe is also a man of governance.”

After more than a millennium of European leadership, the cardinals who chose Francis looked to Latin America, where 42 percent of the world’s Catholics live. The continent is more focused on poverty and the rise of evangelical churches than questions of materialism, rising secularism and priestly sexual abuse, which dominate in the West.

Francis’ inaugural Mass will be held on Tuesday, with many world leaders expected to attend.

Editing by Barry Moody and Giles Elgood.

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