

## **CHURCH CHAT**

**BY**

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### **TRICKLEDOWN PAPACY**

It's been about a month since Francis was elected Bishop of Rome, his preferred title as I understand it. That is not enough time to see what kind of Pope he will be; he, and we, need some years to get a genuine sense of how he will lead the Church. And he needs to live long enough.

It is the right amount of time, however, for a first impression. And he has made an impression.

Many people have already noted his refreshing style: simplicity, apparently authentic humility, extraordinary service to the poor, liturgical flexibility, an international advisory council rather than a curia committee, and a glimpse at a Papacy that has different priorities than what we've seen for many decades. We'll see. We'll see.

There are a few things that I have noticed among my friends and in the articles I have read about the impact of Francis on us common folk. There is a renewed vitality, a hopeful interest, an instantaneous expectation that we may have a different experience of Church in our future. There is simultaneous relief from the heavy handed authoritarianism, doctrine-focused leadership of the past 40 years.

Whether this relief is justified remains to be seen, but this is the first time in decades I sensed the possibility of real change. Francis' initial impact seems to have accomplished something that our two previous Popes were never able to generate: a new kind of hope. John Paul II created a following and some fervor but it was always couched in his staunch and very personal stance against communism. Benedict XVI produced a collective yawn.

And each of these Popes created a trickledown effect on the Church. Their priorities became Church priorities. Millions of imitators, clergy and lay, mimicked the Pope's interests. Some of them strove to align themselves with the prevailing trend and to curry favor with the Pope and/or his most loyal cardinals, bishops, priests and laity. Pleasing and obeying not only the Pope but his legion of sycophants became the standard for these Catholic insiders.

Popes are able to generate this lockstep reaction because the current Church is so hierarchical, structured, and dominated from the top that the whole cumbersome system can rather easily follow the leader. Like a medieval king. Or China. Or North Korea.

Things trickle down because there are clear channels for trickling. For example, Latin masses are resurrected because the Pope encourages them.

By contrast, I do not believe in trickle-down economics because economic societies are too complex for the trickle to get anywhere. It gets siphoned off to people at the top before it can trickle to people at the bottom. But Church structure is so tight, with enough cardinals, bishops and priests to implement the preferences of the guy at the top, that it can produce imitative effects throughout the system.

If Francis' style prevails, it will be fascinating to see if and how his preferences travel through the structure. Will there be less ermine, fewer capa magnas, more modest clerical housing, more personal service to the poor, greater demonstrated humility among the follow-the-leader cardinals, bishops, priests and laity? (The nuns, by the way, are already there.) My guess is that many of those guys (and they are guys) are struggling with this issue right now. How do they please their new boss and keep their current lifestyle?

For me, at this early stage, the most exciting possibility surrounding Francis is a de-emphasis on the dominating, overpowering focus on doctrine. What we believe is not as important as what we do. I suspect that Francis believes that principle too. If he does, and follows through with policies and actions that reflect that emphasis, we are headed for a Church that embraces the vision and teachings of Vatican II. Doctrine is important but not nearly as important as service to others, creation of faith community, and outreach to the modern world.

For many years, I felt like I was blowin' in the wind (thank you, Bob Dylan) about Church priorities. I'm not naïve enough to think that one month of Francis will reverse the wind, or make a substantial difference in the long run.

But I do think the wind has died down noticeably.