

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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RIO REPEATED

The Pope is at it again. I am reluctant to write about Francis so often but he gives me no choice. He is dominating Catholic news so completely that other topics must get in line behind him.

His dazzling trip to Brazil exploded with thrilled slum-dwellers mobbing him with their gratitude and hope, with millions packing the white beaches of Copacabana in Rio with a spirit that out yells Carnival, with youth from around the world energized by a Pope four times their age. But perhaps most amazing, and with the greatest consequences, were his frank and challenging speeches to the Bishops. Essentially he told them to get out of their mansions and chancery offices and identify personally with the poor. We have over-intellectualized our faith, he said, and missed the simplicity of the love, forgiveness and mercy of God. Get on with that core gospel testimony. And live it, as you say it!

Whew! Who saw that coming a year ago? Delightfully refreshing, right?

But let's be real. The Church is a gigantic ship that has lumbered along a cumbersome course for at least forty years and is incapable of changing directions quickly without a mutiny of some of the crew. They figured they were headed for a pleasant resort port in the Caribbean but now the new captain wants to steer towards the slums of Rio de Janeiro, San Diego, Barcelona, London and all points in between. There will be grumbling and rumbling among the crew.

Another reality: the Church has been experienced most personally on the local, parish level. A Pope with a new direction does not change the personality, history, convictions, style, preferences, work habits or motivations of a pastor. That kind of transformation takes time, willingness, and effort.

For some pastors, Pope Francis is welcomed with a huge "it's about time someone speaks to my heart and truly represents me." For other pastors, the response is: "what's he talking about? He's too radical and doesn't make practical sense."

Which leads to the question: what qualities do we want in a pastor during the era of Pope Francis? To repeat Rio across the world takes pastors who are willing and capable of leading in the way Francis leads.

Some of the pastoral qualities needed to follow Francis may be the same traits needed in any era but the abrupt change inaugurated by our new Pope adds a unique twist. Here are some of those qualities:

- **Kindness:** in the final analysis, kindness/compassion is essential for a pastor. Kindness and pastor are not synonymous, as many of us can attest to. But genuine kindness/care for the people in the parish covers a lot of other possible deficiencies. This kind of kindness does not know arrogance, dominating power, egoism, or privilege. This kindness transcends intellectual capability, liturgical precision, hierarchical position, or influential friends. Kindness translates into authentic service. It is critical for any effective pastor, especially a Francis pastor.
- **Leadership:** pastors are public persons who lead parishes. Their effectiveness and style of leadership varies greatly, depending on their native ability, personality development, training, and motivation. Their leadership is most evident when they celebrate Eucharist and especially when they preach. Some pastors are so poor at celebrating and preaching that, frankly, I wonder why they became priests in the first place. To lead a parish a pastor must, along with the liturgical role, know how to form a faith community, motivate people to serve others, and educate parishioners on the importance and relevance of faith. They perform these tasks well or poorly, but they cannot escape these responsibilities.
- **Holy:** genuine pastors must be personally holy. If they are kind leaders but not holy, they are missing a key requirement for their role. Holiness, of course, is complex, comes in many styles and includes doubts, dryness, and distractions. But some elements of holiness must be there. Pastors must believe most of what they preach. They must pray, putting themselves in the quiet presence of the God they profess. They must make time for their spiritual and emotional growth. And they must connect their spiritual life with their ministerial life and the needs of their parish. It is not asking too much of a pastor to strive to be holy and to share some of that journey with his parishioners.

Our two previous Popes emphasized adherence to Catholic doctrine. Francis leads us to Rio.

Will our bishops and pastors also lead us to Rio?