

GUEST ESSAY

Pope Francis Has Put His Stamp on the Cardinals. Or Has He?

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When Pope Francis anoints 21 new princes of the Roman Catholic Church on Saturday, he will seem to have consolidated his grip on the powerful College of Cardinals — and on the direction of the church, possibly for decades to come.

With that consistory, as the ceremony is called, the Argentine pontiff will have appointed 99 of the 137 churchmen who are eligible to elect his successor — at least as long as they remain under 80 years old, the maximum voting age per church rules. A candidate needs only two-thirds of the vote to win.

As a result, many observers say Francis has shaped the college to elect a “new Bergoglio,” to use the pope’s family name: a socially liberal Latin American cleric who would keep the leadership of roughly 1.3 billion Catholics on a path of inclusiveness, doctrinal openness and non-Western leadership.

But that is a hazardous prediction. History shows the Catholic Church follows strange dynamics when it is called to select the successor of St. Peter inside the Sistine Chapel.

The next conclave could well be shaped by growing dissatisfactions among the cardinals with the Francis papacy — over his management of the Vatican, his approach to global politics and doctrinal measures, to name a few of the grievances church leaders have aired since Francis' election in 2013.

Francis himself was a beneficiary of the church's unpredictable dynamics. When his conservative predecessor, Benedict XVI, resigned in an extremely rare and traumatic move, the accepted wisdom among outside observers at the time was that Benedict's protégé, Cardinal Angelo Scola, who was then the archbishop of Milan, would succeed him.

But things took a different turn. In the 2013 conclave, the unspoken slogan became "Not an Italian pope," given the maneuvers and scandals in the Vatican bureaucracy that may have contributed to Benedict's resignation. At the same time, a feeling had taken hold in the conclave that the future of Catholicism lay in South America, home to a young, growing and ambitious community of Catholics ready to lead the church and evangelize a secularized West.

That year, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio became the first non-European pope in nearly 13 centuries, and the first Jesuit ever. (He also helped himself with a powerful speech before the election to his fellow electors about the need for the church's renewal.) His papacy began with a fresh sense of reform, a focus on the poor and a more open doctrinal approach. He brought a novel sense of humility to the role, paying his own hotel bill after the conclave and eschewing the apostolic palace for a more modest residence in the Vatican. He has compared the church to a "field hospital" for the suffering.

In Francis' mind, while the West remains influential, it is destined to decline for demographic, geopolitical and cultural reasons. So he has continued to favor the "periphery" of the church, choosing cardinals from remote dioceses with few Catholics, while leaving dioceses with millions of followers without cardinals at their helms.

The cardinals Francis will appoint this week reflect that view of the world. After Sept. 30, the churchmen leading Catholics in Juba in South Sudan, Tabora in Tanzania, Cape Town in South Africa and Penang in Malaysia will have cardinal red hats, while the archbishops of Paris, Los Angeles, Venice and Milan — cities all but guaranteed to have a cardinal in the past — will continue without them. The pope's top theological adviser, Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernández of La Plata, Argentina, will become a cardinal, along with two other Argentines. Francis will also add another Jesuit, Bishop Stephen Chow Sau-yan of Hong Kong, to the cardinals' ranks, another sign that Jesuits are emerging more and more as his trusted advisers and members of his inner circle.

Over the course of his papacy, Francis has reduced the proportion of voting European cardinals to 39 percent from 52 percent and North Americans to 10 percent from 12 percent. He has raised the proportion of Asians to 18 percent from 9 percent, Latin Americans to 18 percent from 16 percent and Africans to 13 percent from 9 percent.

But while Francis remains a broadly popular figure more than 10 years into his papacy, for many church leaders and followers, the shine has worn off. He has marginalized official bureaucracies with his “kitchen cabinet” of informal advisers. His peace efforts regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, admiring comments about imperial Russia in off-the-cuff remarks and expression of good will toward China have also made many in the church uncomfortable.

Conservatives, especially in the United States, have become increasingly aggressive in opposing Francis' supposed progressive doctrinal agenda. Latin American religious elites have not met expectations, despite becoming the leading force of this pontificate for the positions of power they have gained.

Francis' embrace of liberal social values has confronted Catholics with different ways to read the teachings of the church: on the acceptance of gays and married priests, and extending the concept of “nonnegotiable” values from a ban on abortion and euthanasia to required action by church leaders on social matters, such as migration and helping the poor. Francis doesn't give a strong response to the different messages. He tends to welcome diversity.

Nevertheless, the next conclave will determine whether the pope's reform agenda has gone too far. This time the sentiment among the cardinals — even those he has appointed — may be “Not a Latin American pope, nor a Jesuit one,” people close to the pontiff say.

The church's distancing itself from being centered in the West was inevitable: Eurocentrism is an outdated concept. But the image of the Catholic Church as a sort of moral arm of non-Western nations would be equally divisive. It's a problem the princes of the church will have to figure out.

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