

The Challenge of Change

Martha Ciampi (January 07, 2016)



Back in 1992 Rome-based correspondent David Willey published his book *God's Politician*, reflecting his 50 trips worldwide with Pope John Paul II. Another of his books, *Italians*, was the result of his 10-part BBC series on fascinating individuals from all over Italy. Now his latest book, *The Promise of Francis*, about Pope Francis, has just been published by Simon & Schuster. Here is our exclusive interview with David Willey about his experience of covering the Vatican for the BBC for forty years.

Looking back, how has the Roman Catholic Church changed over time, in your decades of experience close to the Vatican?

Technologically I've witnessed change, from the pope's antique white telephone to today's Twitter. Better communications have helped to broaden the horizons of the universal church. But they have also revealed some unpleasant facts, such as the worldwide tragic evidence of clerical abuse and its decades of cover-up.

At first glance the title of your latest book, *The Promise of Francis*, seems fairly obvious, but, now that he has been in office for 32 months, can we begin to speak of "broken promises"? In other words, in your opinion how effective has Pope Francis been so far?

The papal honeymoon, the period of euphoria, the sense of relief felt by Catholics following Cardinal



Bergoglio's surprise election in March 2013, is definitely over.

But the complex and numerous problems facing the Catholic Church remain largely unresolved. The main obstacle is Francis' relatively short window of opportunity to reform the clunky, centuries-old mechanism of church government, the Roman Curia, the oldest government in the world.

He was already 76 years old when he was chosen by his fellow cardinals to succeed Pope Benedict, the first pope in modern times to abdicate.

He has insisted on a new non-negotiable age limit of 80 years for all office holders in the Vatican (bishops must tender their resignation at age 75). Francis was on the point of retirement himself when he was unexpectedly transferred to Rome.

His recent outspoken attacks on the "pharaonic" lifestyle of some of his fellow cardinals, on the gossip culture which infects the Vatican bureaucracy, his insistence upon financial transparency and modern accounting procedures for church funds, have not gone down well among the prelates responsible for the day-to-day running of the international church.

The gulf between Bergoglio's "church of the poor" and the leisurely, princely attitudes of some administrators of the papal court, the mini-state in the centre of Rome—all that remains of former territories of the Papal States—has been revealed for all to see. Francis has tackled the Vatican's financial scandals vigorously, has replaced the leadership of the Vatican Bank, set up a mechanism for dealing with the clerical sexual abuse crisis, created a new advisory "kitchen cabinet" bypassing the traditional Vatican chain of command, and embarked upon a series of gruelling international journeys. But time presses. His health is compromised by the loss of a lung in his early twenties, and he suffers increasingly from painful sciatica causing him to stumble occasionally. In December 2016 he himself will pass the 80-year threshold.

In your travels with Pope Francis to such countries as Brazil, the Holy Land and South Korea, what has struck you in particular about his reception outside of Italy? Has it differed from the way other popes with whom you have traveled have been received?

Pope John Paul drew similarly huge crowds during his many return visits to his native Poland – but Pope Francis' travels have been much more eclectic. He has travelled mainly, not to centers of world power such as Washington and New York—although he attracted big crowds there—but also to out-of-the-way places like the tiny Mediterranean island of Lampedusa to highlight the refugee crisis, and to the capital of minuscule Albania. He's not a triumphalist pope, but a "back-to-basics" pope, not interested in celebrity, but in the conversion of hearts and a change in the Catholic mindset.

We know that the pope is extraordinarily popular worldwide, but we also know that he faces opposition within the church, including at high levels. How effective is that opposition, and how far does it hinder him in his goals?

Pope Francis knows very well that there is a body of opinion inside the Roman Curia that his radical changes mark only a temporary phase in the church's long history, and that when he decides to resign, or dies, things will return to "normal". That might be true if a papal election or conclave were to be held today.

The best opinion is that only about 30% of church leaders fully support Pope Francis' new mentality of mercy, while 70% prefer to sit on the sidelines, watching warily which way the wind is blowing inside the Vatican and biding their time until the next change of leadership which, I predict in my book, will be "the mother of all conclaves". The arithmetic is simple.

The majority of the 120 members of the electoral college were appointed by his more conservative predecessors Popes John Paul and Benedict. The temptation may well be to return to "normality" when Francis goes. However, he has already appointed some one-third of the cardinals who will elect his successor, many from developing countries previously considered marginal. The electoral college balance is bound to continue to change: the next Consistory, or group promotions to the rank of Cardinal, could take place as early as Spring 2016. The longer he reigns, the better the chance the



Church will reach a tipping point in favour of electing a Pope Francis II.

Two new books have just appeared, documenting financial misdeeds inside the Vatican—wasteful spending and corruption. But did not Pope Francis make every effort to try to stop this?

Yes, but from the leaked evidence he has not been totally successful.

His final decisions about last October's Synod on the Family have not yet been presented. Will he change church teaching on such hot issues as Holy Communion for the divorced and remarried, and on homosexuality?

He has at least opened a window for change. The church itself will decide whether to continue along the path he has indicated, or to slam that window shut.

What has been his greatest achievement?

One is surely his opening to all religions. He commands the respect of people of faith worldwide, and even of atheists. He has overseen and enforced a cleanup of the Vatican bank. On a more humdrum level, he has adopted a modest and frugal life style, even though within the Vatican there are still cardinals living in ostentatious luxury. One is the Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, ex-number two to former Pope Benedict, who lives out his retirement in a newly decorated, huge penthouse apartment, right next door to the Pope.

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