“Using Words” to Preach to the City and the World (3/14/13)

With not so-hushed anticipation, the thousands and thousands of onlookers crowding the square and the street leading to St. Peter’s Basilica waited in the rain to see and hear the new Pope Francis. The great joy of the announcement of his election, and the novelty of a non-European and a Jesuit and one who took the name “Francis” added to the drama and the excitement.

It’s clear now that the name Francis refers to the saint from Assisi – perhaps disappointing to the Jesuits who heard in that a reference to their saintly confrere named Xavier, yet inspiring in its tangential connection to our patron saint, De Sales (who was named for Francis of Assisi) – that name does suggest something about the new papacy. Recalling the life of the pauper saint from Italy, we envision the new pope as a man of humility and poverty and simplicity, a man concerned with social justice, with rebuilding the church, and with preaching the Gospel, which, when necessary, entails using words (as St. Francis famously quipped).

Pope Francis’ first words from that storied balcony made clear all of that – and more. Words of prayer and blessing were not, as some may have surmised, simply a substitute for not knowing what else to say on such a sudden appearance. Nor were the formularies the words of merely traditional rites.

Prayer is the language of Francis – the saint and the new pontiff. This, it seems, will be central to Pope Francis’ leadership of the Church on what he called its “journey” of charity, of fraternity, of trust. That is as it should be, for the Church is not merely a social or political or cultural institution. It is, first and foremost, a spiritual reality, for which its operating language is and must be liturgical. That he prayed with the people of his new diocese and that he asked them to pray for him, is not only appropriate, but telling.

Other words included in his first “Urbi et Orbi” address (“to the city and the world”), perhaps less noteworthy but no less telling, offered an indication of this new pope’s point of view on what lies ahead. To those who read in this conclave an internal-external division of focus between “operational management” of the Curia and “evangelical outreach” to the Church, Pope Francis made clear the priority when he noted that his vicar “will assist me … for the fruitful evangelization of this beautiful city.” Preaching the Gospel is the pope’s primary job, and in doing so he will undoubtedly use many more words. Managing the minions who now work under his authority (a large-scale change of scenery from life in Argentina, about which he will need time to become acclimated) requires that they understand that all else is secondary and is to be at the service of that preaching. Let that be what is “new” about evangelization for them … and for all of us who work in and for the Church.

From his education, we believe Pope Francis has the mind for this work. From his social and political experience, we know that he has the courage for it. His smiling and deferential interaction with the people of Rome suggests he has the charisma for it (though he does need to learn how to wave the
Italian way!). What we now will have to wait and see is whether he has the stamina for it. Let us pray he does.

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“Believing means entrusting oneself in full freedom and joyfully to God’s providential plan for history …. Faith, then, is an assent with which our mind and our heart say their ‘yes’ to God, confessing that Jesus is Lord. And this ‘yes’ transforms life, unfolds the path toward fullness of meaning, thereby making it new, rich in joy and trustworthy hope.

*(Pope Benedict XVI, 10/24/12)*

*BOLD BELIEF* is a daily blog from the faculty at DeSales University, whose mission as an institution of higher education in the tradition of Salesian Spirituality is to foster vital dialogue between Roman Catholic faith and human culture.