

A Jesuit's view: Why Pope Francis is different, and why a Jesuit pope is rare

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The interest in the new pope has been fueled by his obvious humility, his informality, his reaching out to the poor and his penchant for stripping down the layers of Renaissance garb that often engulfed his predecessors. He is a simple man with simple tastes.

His simplicity and humility are classic attributes to which all members of his religious order, the Jesuits, aspire, but it is not a Jesuit attribute to rise in the ranks of Catholicism to bishop or cardinal -- much less pope. However, there is a wisdom to the choice that is rooted in the Jesuit tradition.

When Pope Francis entered the Jesuit Order, he chose a lifestyle, an intellectual history, a spirituality that formed his world view. He chose a religious order that was not another expression of a silent monastic life but one that encouraged its members to dialogue with the world. Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuits in 1534, wanted us to live and work wherever there was need.

Prayer was to be a large part of Jesuits' lives, but it would grow out of their involvement with the poor, the uneducated, the dispossessed. They were to be "contemplatives in action."

That has been Francis' history. It has been imprinted on his heart. So when Pope John Paul II appointed him bishop in 1992, that Jesuit commitment never wavered. He was ordained a bishop, but he remained a Jesuit. Though now a pope, he remains a Jesuit. The Jesuit seal is on his papal coat of arms.

However, since he is the ultimate Superior and cannot be limited by other obligations, he cannot retain the rights and duties of being a Jesuit: He cannot attend formal gatherings of Jesuits that review rules and lifestyle. He cannot take part in ordinary governance.

Is Francis still bound by the vows that all Jesuits take — poverty, chastity and obedience? Ladislav Orsy, S.J., a canon lawyer who teaches at the Georgetown School of Law, says: "Religious vows are made to God, so his vow of poverty holds but he is the only judge of how to observe it in his circumstances. His vow of obedience, however, loses its meaning because he has no Superior to obey." And, of course, his vow of chastity still holds.

So the legal bond between him and the society has been broken; however, the spiritual bond, the brotherhood, the ideals by which he and other Jesuits have been formed -- all these remain.

Much has been made of the fact that Francis is the first Jesuit pope. Why hasn't this happened before?

After a long formation, Francis, like other Jesuits, made what we call Final Profession, which includes several promises. One of them, unique to men's religious orders, is never to seek the office of bishop, and never to accept it unless the pope expressly wishes it. Ignatius enjoined that promise on us because he wanted us available, ready to take up our cloaks and go wherever we are sent. A bishop cannot in that way be available.

Further, Ignatius wanted to keep his Jesuits out of the Renaissance caldron of ambition, an ambition that entertains us (Showtime's "The Borgias") but was always a scandal.

So the possibility of a Jesuit pope has been minimal.

If Pope Francis' decision to hold the Holy Thursday liturgy in a jail for juvenile offenders is any indication of his future work, it is clear he will be a bishop of compassion, a shepherd eager to care for his flock.

For this Argentinian Jesuit, his work will not be delegated; it will be borne with love.