

# What do the media say about Pope Francis?

What image of Pope Francis has the media left you with over the past few weeks? And are you troubled or comforted by that picture?

Let's survey some of the reactions, both positive and negative, to the media circus that has descended upon Francis.

Like the rest of us, theologian Tony Bartlett noticed that the media machine lapped up the "concern for simplicity and the poor" of the new Pope. The media found the poverty story "irresistible" because of the "extravaganza" of signs ready for propagation.

"From the choice of the name, the one hand wave and bow to the crowd, through the ditching of designer shoes, the trip in the bus and paying his own hotel bill, to his own telling of the story of the conclave, there were signs in superabundance for the media," said Bartlett.

Bartlett saw this positively, as a triumph. "The basilica of St. Peter's itself is a triumph of media, in stone, in marble, in sculpture and painting," said Bartlett. But the signs of Francis' humility and concern for the poor are even better suited to today's media environment than the image of the basilica's "mighty faceted form."

Instead of the image of an "imposing" Renaissance basilica, signs of material poverty are better able to triumph over the media, which Bartlett describes as "the boundless electronic machine which eats images like that for breakfast, spews them out on countless screens throughout the world, goes on ravaging for sound-bites and news feeds throughout the day, and never quits displaying all night long."

Bartlett's endorsement of the media effect generated by Francis' humble gestures was therefore enthusiastic: "The media becomes itself a sign of the gospel, whether it recognizes it or not. And that gospel sign flashes back powerfully and critically to the church and begins at once its radical reform."



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Although ordained in 1973, Bartlett left the priesthood in 1984. He is now a champion of what he calls being "virtually Christian," arguing that new media can reveal the Gospel better than ancient institutions. Bartlett is a critic of what he calls the "old legal self-concept" of the Catholic Church.

In contrast with Bartlett's positive view of the new media, Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan was extremely wary of their effects. McLuhan wrote a letter to the great Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain in 1969, in which McLuhan noted how insights from Maritain's writings played a role in his conversion to Catholicism in 1937; he also offered Maritain an insight of his own: "Electric information environments, being utterly ethereal, foster the illusion of the world as a spiritual substance. It is now a reasonable facsimile of the mystical body, a blatant manifestation of the Anti-Christ. After all, the Prince of this World is a very great electric engineer."

In other words, the Devil is happy if you like Pope Francis on Facebook – and leave it at that.

Similarly, Fr. Dwight Longenecker has offered a critical response to the media circus over Francis' photogenic humility. He cautioned (in a blog post called "Pope Francis' Poverty Will be Forgotten") that "the vast crowds (of mostly rich people) who profess to love his simplicity of life are responding sentimentally."

Father Longenecker predicted many ways that the media will eventually turn against Pope Francis. He even postulated a worst-case scenario: "members of the secular press (if they are very clever) will keep Pope Francis up front and center as a sentimental Franciscan-type figure, while studiously ignoring everything else he attempts to do. If



L'Osservatore Romano / Reuters / CNS

Pope Francis prays with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, March 23. Pope Francis travelled by helicopter from the Vatican to Castel Gandolfo for the private meeting with the former Pontiff.

they are really smart they will focus" on the gestures easily manipulated for sentimental media effects, and

ignore "his real work of preaching the gospel and being a prophetic sign of contradiction to our age."

Fortunately, Pope Francis has already indicated that he will not let himself be redefined and reinterpreted by the media machine. More than 180 countries, sovereign orders, and international organizations have formal relations with the papacy. Within days of his election, Francis addressed them all with a direct message to the diplomats accredited to the Holy See.

In that March 22 address to the diplomatic corps, the Pope began by admitting "one of the first reasons" he chose the name of Francis of Assisi was his "love for the poor." Then he made clear why the media get the story wrong if they reduce him to a sentimental figure concerned solely with material poverty:

"But there is another form of poverty! It is the spiritual poverty of our time, which afflicts the so-called richer countries particularly seriously. It is what my much-loved predecessor, Benedict XVI, called the 'dictatorship of relativ-

ism,' which makes everyone his own criterion and endangers the coexistence of peoples. And that brings me to a second reason for my name. Francis of Assisi tells us we should work to build peace. But there is no true peace without truth! There cannot be true peace if everyone is his own criterion, if everyone can always claim exclusively his own rights, without at the same time caring for the good of others, of everyone, on the basis of the nature that unites every human being on this earth."

That's why my favourite media image from the past few weeks is of Pope Francis visiting Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on March 23. We saw them kneel down together to pray side-by-side, and we didn't need the media to tell us what that image meant – because Pope Francis himself beat them to it and told us the day before.

C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. □