

Pope Francis signals new course for the papacy

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Ahead of his formal installation as pontiff on Tuesday (March 19), Pope Francis is sending clear signals that he intends to lead a papacy markedly different from his predecessor -- and perhaps different from that of any other pope in modern times.

In weekend meetings with the cardinals who elected him and in encounters with parishioners after Mass on Sunday, in a Saturday audience with journalists and in his first public appearance since his election, Francis set a tone of informality and approachability and indicated that it was no longer business as usual in the church.

Consider:

* As he concluded a Saturday morning meeting with some of the thousands of reporters who have been covering the papal transition, Francis said he would bless the group, but out of respect for their differences would not make the sign of the cross over the gathering. "Given that many of you do not belong to the Catholic Church, (and) others are nonbelievers, I give this blessing from my heart, in silence, to each of you, respecting the conscience of each one, but knowing that each of you is a child of God," he said, to applause.

* At the same event, Francis went off script to explicitly mention both the church's "virtues and her sins." In highlighting again his emphasis on solidarity with the poor, he indicated that it should extend beyond mere charity. "How much I would like a poor church, for the poor!" the pope exclaimed.

* Also on Saturday, Francis reappointed the heads of Vatican departments of the scandal-plagued Roman Curia, as expected, but did so only provisionally. The Vatican stressed that the pope "wants to take some time to reflect, pray and discuss

before making any definitive appointment or confirmation." When Benedict XVI was elected in 2005, he reappointed all the curial chiefs for the rest of their five-year terms, locking in a dysfunctional management team that was the focus of much criticism from the cardinals who elected Francis to clean house.

* On Sunday, appearing from his apartment window overlooking St. Peter's Square, Francis recited the Angelus prayer with a huge and enthusiastic crowd of more than 150,000. In the midst of his brief and informal reflection, he praised by name the writings of Cardinal Walter Kasper, "a very sharp theologian," he said. Kasper's desire to open the church to reform has prompted sharp debates over the years with Benedict.

* Earlier Sunday, the pope celebrated Mass at the small parish church of the Vatican, St. Ann's, just inside the Vatican gate, and stopped outside afterwards to greet each worshipper and kiss children on their heads as if he were the parish priest. He even stepped out of the gate onto the street where passersby got close enough to pat him on the back. His security detail appeared less enthusiastic about the outing.

* Francis also continued to stress his role as the new Bishop of Rome, first among equals rather than the boss of all other bishops. He continued to refer to his "brother cardinals," and at every liturgy and at meals he insisted on standing or sitting with the bishops and priests instead of taking the special place reserved for the pope. Vatican experts saw that as an important sign of the kind of collaborative leadership model many have been looking for.

Above all, Francis continually displayed an informality that prompted writers to dub him "the casual pontiff."

His homilies and talks in the first days of his pontificate were usually unscripted and brief -- often just a few minutes -- and were filled with simple wisdom and sincerity and quips.

"Don't think that I am doing publicity for the books of my cardinals!" he said after mentioning Kasper's writings to the crowd on Sunday.

He also shunned the papal limousine and continued to wear the creaky black shoes that he had on when he arrived in Rome from Argentina for the conclave. And he told the cardinals to wear simple black cassocks when they came to see him

rather than the more formal red choir robes with white linen-and-lace surplices.

"So long, Papal ermine and fancy lace! Welcome, simple cassock, and hopefully, ordinary black shoes! St. Francis must be overjoyed!!" tweeted an ecstatic Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan told NBC's "Today" show that he's noticed "little signs that send signals." Yet such signals are important, especially following the pontificate of Benedict, who took an intense interest in wearing the most elaborate and extravagant vestments, including a pair of red leather shoes.

By contrast, Francis has been stressing God's love and forgiveness, as he did in his homilies on Sunday.

"We too, I think, are this people who, on one hand want to listen to Jesus, but on the other, sometimes we like to beat up on others, condemn the others," he said.

"The message of Jesus is mercy," he added. "For me, and I say this with humility, mercy is the strongest message of the Lord."