

Pope Francis a huge hit with U.S. Catholics (for now)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) He has been Pope Francis for less than a month, but the keep-it-simple prelate from Argentina is a wow with American Catholics -- at least for now.

The tables may turn on Francis once media attention moves from his no-fuss style to his substantive actions, said a Vatican expert Wednesday (April 3).

The former archbishop of Buenos Aires has an 84 percent favorable rating among U.S. Catholics, including 43 percent who hold a very favorable view of him, according to a new survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

That is significantly higher than U.S. Catholics' view of Pope Benedict XVI early in his papacy but the ratings are not directly comparable.

Francis' favorable score was measured in a survey of 1,001 Americans including 193 Catholics conducted March 28-31. That's just two weeks into his papacy while the media is still cooing about how he lives humbly, pares down Vatican pageantry and devotes the substance of most talks to serving the poor.

Views on Benedict, who came into the papacy in April 2005 with a reputation as a shy theologian and strict enforcer of doctrine, were surveyed three months after he became pope.

Just 67 percent of U.S. Catholics had a favorable view of Benedict in the Pew Forum's measure in July 2005. By that point, Benedict had already taken a widely publicized unpopular action by firing the editor of the Jesuit magazine America, political scientist and Vatican expert Thomas Reese.

Americans had their highest view of Benedict in 2008 when he visited New York and Washington, D.C., but Benedict never reached the 91 to 93 percent favorable heights hit by Pope John Paul II between 1987 and 1996, in Pew Forum research.

Greg Smith, a senior researcher for the Pew Forum, points out that Francis and Benedict had identical unfavorable ratings -- 5 percent for each. The difference is in the number of people who said they had not formed an opinion. Francis was elected in the era of instant communication through social media so many had formed some opinion of him, Smith said.

Right now, opinion on Francis may rest on his novelty, Reese said.

This is the archbishop who took the bus to work for 15 years, who shrugged off the fancy red cape when he came to the balcony as pope, and who eschewed the official papal apartment for a simple suite at the Vatican hotel.

Soon, however, he'll begin making appointments and issuing statements that may not please so many Americans. Reese said U.S. Catholics will be watching:

- What will Francis do about last year's controversial crackdown on the leadership of U.S. nuns?

- Will he continue Benedict's tight watch on theologians?

- What qualities will he look for in the bishops he names?

- Can he bring transparency, efficiency and integrity to the bureaucracy of the church, known as the Curia?

It can take a pope years to shift the medieval structure of the Curia, Reese said Wednesday in a speech at the National Press Club.

"How do you fire a cardinal" in a structure modeled on a centuries-old nobility? In the old days, Reese quipped, "You didn't fire princes or dukes, you assassinated them. You poisoned them. But we don't do that any more."

Even Pope John Paul II needed the first seven years of his pontificate to turn over the department heads of the entrenched Curia, he said.

Yet, Reese sees opportunities for success for Francis' message of stepping up to serve the poor. "Young people are attracted to action for justice. They see that in

Francis and they see he is authentic."

When he was archbishop, he didn't blame the declining number of Catholics in Argentina on "isms" like relativism or consumerism. He asked what the church could do to make its message more compelling, Reese said.

Francis sees that "churchy-ness" -- a Vatican focus on internal power and control -- "gets between people and Jesus ... If he can make a change in the culture of the church, he can make a tremendous difference," Reese said.

(Cathy Lynn Grossman writes for USA Today.)