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Pope Francis is Time's Person of the Year; Vatican is not surprised

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By Henry Chu

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LONDON — Just nine months into his pontificate, Time magazine has named Pope Francis its Person of the Year, reflecting the energy and the new, overwhelmingly positive image that the former Argentinean archbishop has brought to the scandal-weary Roman Catholic Church.

The magazine credited Francis, who turns 77 next week, with restoring a common touch to the papacy and with “balancing judgment with mercy.”

Since his election to replace the retiring Benedict XVI in March, the first Latin American pope has delighted Catholics and non-Catholics alike with his humility, his evident love of people, his outspoken comments against greed and unbridled capitalism, and his rebuke of a church too obsessed with topics such as abortion and homosexuality.

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“Rarely has a new player on the world stage captured so much attention so quickly — young and old, faithful and cynical — as has Pope Francis,” Nancy Gibbs, *Time*’s editor, wrote in an essay explaining the choice. “He has placed himself at the very center of the central conversations of our time: about wealth and poverty, fairness and justice, transparency, modernity, globalization, the role of women, the nature of marriage, the temptations of power.”

The pope figured on many people’s short lists of likely candidates for Person of the Year, which last year was awarded to President Obama. Runner-up to Francis was former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, whose blockbuster leaks of classified documents exposed American government electronic surveillance on a staggering scale.

Even Vatican officials professed not to be surprised by the choice of their boss for the honor.

“This fact is unsurprising, considering the resonance and very widespread attention given to the election of Pope Francis and the beginning of his pontificate,” said Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi, who suggested that Francis himself would find gratification in the award only as a means to an end: the spreading of God’s love.

“If this attracts women and men and gives them hope, the pope is content,” Lombardi said. “If this nomination ... means that many have understood this message, at least implicitly, he will certainly be glad.”

Francis’ brief tenure has electrified many, in part because of the stark contrast it poses with that of his predecessor, Benedict, whose shy and retiring personality and vocal opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion gave some the impression of an aloof and out-of-touch Catholic Church.

At the same time, Francis has exhibited a willingness to tackle some of the Vatican’s institutional problems, especially allegations of corruption and poor governance. An eight-man commission of senior prelates has already met twice to discuss potential reforms, though concrete proposals are still far off.

The Catholic faithful have responded warmly to the pope's lack of pretension, including his partiality to folksy wisdom, plain living, glad-handing and soccer. Italian media have reported an increase in churchgoing since Francis' election, and vendors on the streets of Rome and in St. Peter's Square do a brisk business selling likenesses of his image.

Some conservatives in the church are rattled by the changes Francis has promised, worried that the church and its 1.2 billion adherents will come unmoored from tradition; meanwhile, some liberals accuse Francis of not going far enough in areas such as the role of women in the church.

But Gibbs said the pope's influence in the church and the wider world had already been salutary.

"His pulpit is visible to the ends of the Earth. When he kisses the face of a disfigured man or washes the feet of a Muslim woman, the image resonates far beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church," she wrote. "This focus on compassion, along with a general aura of merriment not always associated with princes of the church, has made Francis something of a rock star."

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