



St. Francis, Pope Francis, and a Vision for the 21st Century Parish

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A lot has happened in our Church in the last seven months. It was seven months ago that Pope Francis was elected. I was at a retreat center in Danville, CA six weeks after the election of Pope Francis giving a presentation to the priests of the Diocese of Stockton and during a lunch conversation with six or seven of us sitting around the table, one of the priests remarked, “This pope sure is different than the previous pope,” to which one of the other priests at our table said, “And different from the one before that and the one before that and the one before that.” And his point was that in first his two months, Pope Francis had already acted unlike any pope that any of us know anything about. This, by the way, was not meant as a backhanded criticism of previous popes; it is, rather, an acknowledgement of something quite distinctive and remarkable. And it is happening in our lifetimes. My brothers and sisters, I do not exaggerate, something very, very unique is happening in our 2000 year old Church, and we are here and alive to experience it AND to participate in it. It already has a name: the Francis Effect.

Of course, a lot has been made of this—mostly in jest—but the simple fact of a Jesuit choosing the name Francis IS significant, not because of the historical, mostly friendly tête-à-tête between the Jesuit and Franciscan communities, but because it makes very clear that this pope has no time for silos, parochialism and partisanship of any kind. Secondary labels are fine—Jesuit/Franciscan, clergy/lay, liberal/conservative—but the primary label is disciple. The Pope is interested in discipleship. In faithfulness. In following, not just admiring, Jesus. In doing what Jesus did.

But then there’s the more remarkable fact that any pope—Jesuit or anyone!—would choose the name Francis. Consider this: there are more books written about Francis of Assisi than any other saint. And despite that fact that Francis has been dead since the year 1126 and was canonized two years later, it has taken 887 years for a pope to dare use the name Francis. And why do you suppose that’s true?

Well, it’s one thing to choose the name Francis and then there’s the enormous expectations it creates. Almost amazingly Pope Francis has humbly walked his talk. Consider these words, excerpted from a March edition of the Tablet, an international Catholic publication, written right after Francis’ election:

It is astonishing how, from the first minute of his inauguration, Pope Francis chose a new style: he wears no mitre with gold and jewels, no ermine-trimmed cape, no made-to-measure red shoes or headgear, uses no magnificent throne. It is astonishing, too, that the new Pope deliberately abstains from solemn gestures and high-flown rhetoric and speaks in the language of the people. And it is astonishing how the new Pope emphasizes his

humanity: he asked for the prayers of the people before he gave them his blessing; he settled his own hotel bill like anybody else . . . and on Maundy Thursday washed the feet of young prisoners, including those of a young girl, a young Muslim girl.

This is all pretty remarkable stuff. St. Francis, I think, would approve. In other words—and we all know this—there is a bit of a value tension between at least the lifestyle assumptions of St. Francis and many of the assumptions, manners and trappings of the papacy, as it has evolved. And there's also the matter of priorities. If no previous Pope has chosen the name Francis, it might very well have been because they had no idea how to reconcile the competing expectations.

So, for example, since St. Francis was a man who not only spoke of concern for the poor but was personally committed to the poor, could we assume that this would flavor the new pope's mission. The answer, of course, turns out to be a resounding yes. Pope Francis himself made this clear three days after his election in a room of journalists, when he said in the matter-of-fact and humble style that is his that he chose the name Francis because of his concern for the wellbeing of the poor. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, then-Archbishop Bergoglio doubled the number of priests working in the slums and regularly visited the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods himself. He has already expressed, using the distinctive language of "tenderness" his concern for those who experience life at the bottom AND has voiced prophetic outrage at the exploitative structures and human indifference that maintain this unnecessary human suffering. His first official trip outside of Rome? Not to some head of state or ecclesial function—but to a place where migrants seek refuge. His memorable quote from this trip: "The globalization of indifference has stripped us of our ability to cry."

Second example: since St. Francis was man committed to simplicity, could we dare assume that this might flavor this pope's—any pope's— manner. So far, the answer is, wonderfully, yes. He lives simply—well, as simply as he can get away with. As Archbishop and Cardinal, he cooked his own meals, took public transportation and, as pope, he has eschewed about every bit of personal decoration he can get away with. He lives in an apartment, drives himself around in a used car, and carries his own luggage. It would not surprise us to see him wander out on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square in a brown robe, covered with patches, as was the habitual attire of St. Francis. And he is pretty clear that simplicity is not an elective. Some of you might remember a couple of months ago when Pope Francis expressed his disappointment with clergy and religious who drive fancy cars, making most first world Bishops slightly uncomfortable. "It hurts me when I see a priest or a nun with the latest model car, you can't do this," he said. Just so you know where you stand, the Pope drives a 2008 Ford Focus hatchback. But as one jokester put it, what car would Jesus drive? And the answer is a "Christ-ler."

Since St. Francis was a man known for his love of creation, could we assume that this would flavor the new pope's message, with a focus on the care of creation. So far the answer is a resounding yes. In this regard, Pope Francis continues the legacy of his predecessors in emphasizing the environmental crisis and our responsibility to love what God has given as gift. In early June, the Pope offered these words, which I love: "Cultivating and caring for creation is God's gift to each one of us . . . it means nurturing the world with responsibility and transforming it into a garden, a habitable place for everyone." Transforming the world into a garden is just a beautiful image and it speaks to a vision of humanity loving the world, all of the world, into something more verdant, more fertile than it is.

Finally, since St. Francis was a man who dialogued with the Sultan, could we assume that interfaith and ecumenical dialog would flavor Pope Francis' work? So far, the answer is certainly yes. Again, remember that before he became Pope, Cardinal Bergoglio was known throughout Argentina as a man who fostered very positive relationships with Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims and even non-believers. He has already written and spoken on the importance of openness and dialogue, which, to be candid, is different than publicly speaking to the defects of other Christian expressions.

So it has to be acknowledged that Pope Francis, when he was Cardinal Bergoglio, when he was Archbishop Bergoglio, was already doing all of these things. He did not change when he became Pope. This is not a show. And it would appear he is not going to change at 76 years old. In choosing the name Francis, our Pope has, may I suggest, chosen a name that fits him. He is, quite frankly, a saintly man – a man comfortable leading the church and ministering in a slum and making the link between the two. I think he thinks leading the church with a name like Francis IS very possible, even necessary. Before he is done as pope, Francis may well have ended the Roman Catholic papacy as we have historically assumed it would always look.

It is also reported and confirmed that Pope Francis has always been a fan of tango dancing and music. I am not sure what St. Francis would have thought of that.

At least from my perspective, for those of us who are committed to peacemaking and seeking justice in a world wracked by a billion people living in poverty, environmental degradation, unfettered consumerism, and hostility between religious groups, the Pope's messages are welcome, critical, and inspiring.

But I'd like to raise up two other events in St. Francis's life that provide some interesting ways to interpret Pope Francis' commitments and, I believe, the future of the American Catholic parish and our work. Both events have to do with transformation.

First, there is the story that forms part of St. Francis's compelling narrative. Remember that Francis of Assisi was raised in a wealthy home. He was, to quote another famous Franciscan, Richard Rohr, "an Italian dandy" – consumed with the things of wealth and privilege and comfort. But something happens to Francis. He encounters a leper on the edge of town. We know Francis did not seek him out; as a wealthy man of his time, he would have been very deliberate about avoiding such encounters. We don't know all the details but apparently he was moved with compassion for the man. And the story climaxes with Francis kissing or embracing the leper and remarking about the experience, "What before was unthinkable has become sweetness and light." And from that day until his death, Francis could not again imagine his life without the intimate link to those who struggled and suffered.

In so many ways, Francis's words and story speak of a familiar but always powerful Gospel drama. It echoes the story of, for example, Vincent de Paul, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Damien of Molokai and thousands and thousands of people of faith who, prompted by a deepening of their faith in God, consequently find themselves drawn into relationship with the "other." The "other" is the one whom we have been taught to ignore, to be suspicious of, to be afraid of, or to think of as different from ourselves, or to consider as less valuable, less human, less worthy.

And the potency of a faith in Jesus Christ is that it is somehow able to overwhelm the notion of the

“other.” Under grace’s sway, Francis of Assisi kisses a leper, Mother Teresa cares for those who are dying, poor, and homeless, racists repent, the greedy become generous, the self-preoccupied become compassionate, enemies embrace, and the blind see. Those who walked in darkness, now walk in the light. With a faith in Jesus Christ, people love better. They love in ways they had not loved before. In effect, they love bigger -- they love in the direction of those who are in greatest need. This is what Pope John Paul II called a “preferential love for the poor.” The struggle of others and, more specifically, the healing of the struggle of others becomes a touchstone for the crafting of our lives.

So, welcome to Catholic Social Teaching. But, more fundamentally, welcome to faith in Jesus Christ. Let me not be ambiguous: faith in Jesus Christ means necessarily that faith has drawn us into the care of each other, especially those who are poor. We may NOT imagine that any of us—who call ourselves Christian—is NOT called to address the concerns of those who suffer the constant and sometimes fatal grind called deprivation, abandonment, homelessness, unemployment, malnutrition and hopelessness. The option for the poor is not optional.

The second story I’d like to highlight about St. Francis’ life, and this story is connected to the first story, is the very familiar story of Francis receiving instruction from a crucifix in San Dameano, to “rebuild or repair my church.” This, as we all know, was ultimately not about the construction of buildings. This was about what was going inside and beyond the buildings. This was about the repair of the church, the people of God. Francis was called to help the church reclaim its mission and vision.

What does this have to do with Pope Francis and us? I imagine this is also what Cardinal Bergoglio had in mind, when, after the cardinals had assembled in Rome in March to select a new pope, he spoke to them of the need for the church to recover from what he called a “theological narcissism” that had the Church more **self**-preoccupied than **other**-focused. He said, and I quote: “the Church must take leave of itself and go to the peripheries.” He went on and criticized “the worldly Church living in itself, of itself, for itself.” According to Cardinal Jaime Ortega from Cuba, this was the speech that persuaded the cardinals to elect him as pope.

Let me repeat his words: “the Church must take leave of itself and go to the peripheries.” This, again, is what we Catholics call the option for the poor and vulnerable and solidarity. They are anchors of Catholic social teaching. They are anchors of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And, therefore, they ought to be anchors of what it means to be a Catholic parish.

For the last couple of years, I have been proposing a new way for the parish to be parish. Here’s my observation: In the Gospels there is an alternating pattern in Jesus’ ministry that I think provides a template for our lives, for our work in social ministry, and for our parishes. The narrative of the Gospels follows a pattern that gets repeated over and over. – it’s the drama of gathering and sending. Gathering and then sending and then gathering and then sending. It is the cycle of Christian community. Jesus, a teacher, sometimes called “rabbi,” does what teachers and rabbis do: he gathers disciples, he forms them, he trains them, he challenges them, he educates them, and he enlightens them. And, then, he sends them. Because gathering is for preparing and preparing is for action. Then, shortly thereafter, Jesus’ disciples, like their master, also gather listeners and believers and then the disciples send them. And as the Church has lived its life in human history at its very best, it has mimicked and embodied this alternation of gathering and sending. The Church gathers. The Church sends. The Church prepares. The Church acts.

Let me quickly define the terms: Gathering in the 21st century Church is the work of the work of religious education, bible studies, catechesis, youth ministry, and spiritual formation. Gathering is the work of liturgy or worship—gathering the people of faith for prayer and sacrament. It is the stuff of retreats and gatherings, like this one. Gathering is also fish fries, pot lucks and celebrations. Most of the time gathering happens geographically, as you would guess, at the home base, the mother ship, that is parish property. Gathering happens at the parish. And, at its best, “gathering” speaks to the sense of “Getting ready.” Gathering is about nourishing faith, nourishing the community, remembering our story, sharing in Eucharist, and being prepared for the second part of the drama called . . . SENDING.

Sending is about mission. Sending includes ministering in the slums, helping resettle refugees in our hometowns, serving meals at a soup kitchen. Sending is advocating for immigrants, the poor, women and the unborn. Sending is providing a safe place for battered women, extending care for battered soldiers, delivering care for the hurricane battered in Haiti or the tornado battered in Oklahoma.

Sending is Jesuit Volunteer Corps and St. Vincent de Paul home visits. Sending is the work of community organizing and peacemaking. Sending is the work outlined and given a vocabulary by Catholic social teaching. The proclamation of the Reign of God is to embrace the gift of life that God has given and to relish it, to share it, and protect it.

You see, the Gospel is a drama of gathering and sending. Gathering AND sending. It cannot be one or the other. It is, by design, necessarily and unavoidably both.

And here is the challenge. Parishes, as they are currently and routinely configured, are primarily or sometimes exclusively places of gathering. Period. If you look at the parish bulletin, the parish budget, the parish staff, the pastor’s time, it’s all about gathering. It’s about gathering for Eucharist, gathering for prayer, gathering for education, gathering for fun, and gathering for sacramental preparation (which amounts to gathering in preparation for more gathering). So often, the parish calendar is just one big list of gatherings.

Let me be clear, I am NOT bashing gathering. I have dedicated my life to it – I am a teacher for goodness sakes. You can’t teach unless people gather. BUT, gathering disconnected from sending ultimately mutates into something less than the Gospel and less than what is so very compelling about Jesus and the church he inspired. That parishes are structured for gathering and not structured for sending has at least two serious, deadening consequences.

First, parishes that emphasize gathering and not sending become static because they have lost their mission. Gathering is for the Church, but the Church is for the world. Parishes that do not structure themselves for mission, outreach, justice, compassion, charity, advocacy, solidarity, and peacemaking are parishes that have been reduced to puny expressions of the Gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it Cheap Grace. Pope Francis calls it “theological narcissism.” Because, really, what potent religious tradition, we can hear Pope Francis speaking, is primarily concerned with itself? Go to the peripheries. The question parishes must answer for the world out there is “What heroic, healing things does this parish do for the hurting of this world and how can we be involved?” Don’t you think that’s a question young people want answered?

Second, parishes that emphasize gathering and not sending, no longer even do gathering well, for we lose a sense of what we are gathering for. Eucharistic celebration gets turned in on itself.

Instead of “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,” it’s “Go in peace and make sure you come back next week.” Period. It’s time that religious educators, youth ministers and liturgists, not to mention deacons, pastors and bishops, understand that none of us can do our job without a focus on compassion and justice, without an eye toward mission. Parishes lose members, especially young members, not because they are wrong, but because they are not compelling, not heroic, not relevant, not courageous. Our children need and want a church that is heroic like Jesus, like Saint Francis, like Dorothy Day, like Mother Theresa. Our children want to be challenged to their bones. Our children want to be invited to something that will ask a lot of them. And so do we.

So, I infer from the words and witness of Pope Francis that it’s time. It’s time to rebuild, it’s time to repair, it’s time to re-imagine, or at least re-configure. Let our work become as new and fresh and surprising as Pope Francis.

You see, we don’t have to come up with something completely new. The absolutely fabulous good news is that the Catholic tradition as a collective body has THE most robust tradition of sending that I know of, expressed in literally hundreds of organizations like Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Maryknoll, Pax Christi, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Franciscans, Daughters of Wisdom, Benedictines, Missionaries of Charity, and thousands more. The Catholic Church has people, inspired by their faith, working with the poor, the abandoned, the dispossessed, the discarded, in nearly every country in the world. And, after all, St. Francis is one of us. Mother Theresa is one of us. Dorothy Day is one of us. Fr. Damian is one of us. Gustavo Gutierrez is one of us. Oscar Romero is one of us. Fr. Greg Boyle is one of us. If you needed a reason to be proud to be Catholic, just look at the cloud of witnesses, just look at the cloud of agencies, the cloud of care and love and compassion which has been inspired, empowered and set loose by the Holy Spirit in this world by this Church called Catholic.

BUT—and here’s the point—what I find so interesting is that historically almost every one of these remarkable expressions of sending have been located and operating OUTSIDE of the parish. You can’t join the Missionaries of Charity in your parish. In other words, why, when I want to follow Jesus and serve the poorest of the poor, do I have to look outside of my parish for a way to do this?

I suggest that we Catholics look at the broad horizon of our own tradition and see what structures, over time, most readily enabled the Church’s commitment to Jesus ministry to the poor and vulnerable. I think we all would agree that for decades and centuries, some of the most remarkable witnesses to the work of charity, peacemaking and justice have been women and men of religious communities. A lot of saints, prophets and martyrs have been women and men with letters after their last name, like OSF, SJ, MM, and so on. And this is really no surprise. The logic of most religious communities is that they had work to do, that they were called by Jesus to serve the poor and vulnerable. There were schools to build and staff for poor immigrant children; there were hospitals to build and staff to serve the poor; there were people on the streets of Calcutta who needed love. Nobody joined Maryknoll because the mass times were convenient. People joined Maryknoll to serve. People joined the Franciscans to serve. People joined the Catholic Worker to serve. In other words, *the terms of membership* meant you would serve, period.

So, then, why not parishes that ask everyone—EVERYONE—to serve, just like Maryknoll or the Missionaries of Charity ask EVERY ONE of their members? Why not parishes that presume EVERYONE will commit to the work of compassion, just like we presume everyone

will go to communion? Why not divide every parish and every member into teams of 12 and ask that team of twelve to commit themselves to at least one refugee family, OR one neglected patient at a nursing home, OR one at-risk child who needs tutoring and a little cloud of friends, and so on.

Here's where the rebuilding project gets interesting: WHY NOT half the parish budget for gathering and half the parish budget for sending? Why not half the parish staff dedicated to gathering—worship, education and community building-- and half the parish staff dedicated to sending—outreach, advocacy and community organizing? Why not half the parish's buildings dedicated to gathering, like worship centers and classrooms, and half of the parish's buildings dedicated for sending, like hospitality houses and literacy centers. Why not every bit of half of the parish's best energy for gathering and every bit of half the parish's best energy for sending?

So, now I ask you, in the name of repairing the Church, does this sound in any way heretical or unfaithful? What does the world look like when every Catholic is connected to another human being who needs a hand, or needs a home, or needs hope? And, I say nothing would draw people to church, draw people to faith, like a church that was always being sent to do heroic and sacrificing work, and then celebrating the stories at liturgy every Sunday.

A few years ago, I received a book that chronicled the difficult lives of children around the world living in violence. On the cover of the book was a picture of a young African girl, probably 10 years old, who was wearing a sad smile. Where her arms used to be were healed over stumps – her arms had been macheted off by some war lord. The God I know, the loving God I know is a God who would gather us, gather us in prayer, gather us in study, gather us in community, gather us for Eucharist, and after we had been formed and made ready, that God would send us, and we would want to be sent. And that God would send us to that little girl. And that God would form us in a way that we would not be satisfied until the world was a place where little girls and all people could laugh, grow, be safe and know love.

And I stand with St. Francis and Pope Francis that for the church to be attractive, compelling, lively and faithful, there is only one way forward and that is a church on mission, a church that serves that little girl, a church that goes to the peripheries, a church that, quoting Jesus, “proclaims good news to the poor, liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.” Thank you very much.