

Franciscus

My first impression when Francis appeared on the balcony after vesting in just a simple white cassock in the Chapel of Tears was that he was shocked beyond all belief and scared of what this all means. He humbly asked the people applauding with joy to pray for him. The next morning, he would board a bus carrying other cardinals to pay his bill for lodging during the conclave as if it were expected of the new Vicar of Christ. We would continue to learn of his simplicity from eschewing the papal residence for a regular place at Casa Santa Marta, a guest house, to being driven in simple cars wherever he travelled. This living as the people he served went back to his time as Archbishop of Argentina when he took a simple apartment, cooked for himself, and used public transportation. His life of poverty was most evidenced in his love and service for and to the poor and the marginalized. He frequented their *favelas* (informal settlements or shanty towns) sharing a mate with them. I remember Cardinal Tobin telling the story that after elected Pope, Francis was asked if he ever saw sharing this traditional drink as a dangerous practice insinuating someone may poison him to which the Pope responded, they are my people, not Cardinals. Yes, he had a nice sense of humor.

I believe he had an outside restroom and/or shower installed for the homeless at the Vatican. He asked for the Pope mobile to be open for free access to the people. He was not the first pope to be of the people, to kiss babies, hug children, and embrace the sick and elderly, but it seemed as these are enduring images of his love for all people. Some images are more startling than others such as the kiss to a man severely disfigured or the young girl he met in a town hall with David Muir who herself suffered from skin issues whom he asked to sing a song for him with the most engaging smile and genuine appreciation for her. He seemed to enjoy each day as a gift. Was it because his family did not board the scheduled ship from Italy to Argentina that would eventually sink? Was it living with half a lung? Was it an omnipresent conviction of God's love and mercy for him and all those whom he served? Was it all these?

The wife of former OMC Deacon Cliff Brown gave me what had to be the first biography of Jorge Bergoglio, SJ, Pope Francis: Untying the Knots by Paul Vallely shortly after being elected as successor to Peter. It detailed his early leadership positions in the Jesuits usually reserved for older and more seasoned brothers especially as a formator of seminarians and provincial. One detail I recall was his doing the laundry of the seminarians, not a job of any formator I have ever known! But there are stories of his being tough and demanding to the point where he was sent to Germany to work on his thesis after his term of office. It was here that he became enamored of the image known as Mary, the Untier of Knots. Now, the rest is my imagination. I often thought that this inspired him to go back to Argentina a somewhat different person that served him well as Archbishop and later, Pope. Thus, he would constantly exhort us to welcome others as we are ALL God's children, to love rather than judge, to smell like sheep in service to all especially those on the periphery, to be in the company of and be known by name and affectionately by the poor. The lessons were powerfully taught in his simplicity of living. Soon everyone was talking about this new Pope. Non-Catholics were mesmerized by his acceptance of everyone, his outreach to the LGBTQ community, and the embrace of those who have traditionally felt marginalized such as the divorced and remarried. Of course, he had his critics for some of his progressive views but so did Christ and most who prioritize mercy, forgiveness, compassion and love. He made some comments which I am sure he would rather have taken back like the rest of us. Women would have more of a say in the church during his papacy but not enough for many. Perhaps it is the start. He approved of blessing same sex couples as we should never withhold blessing others. He saw the importance of inclusion, inviting the laity to participate in the Synod on Synodality. In these last few months, like John Paul II before him, he showed us the value of suffering in his illness. During his monthly stay in the hospital, he frequently called the parish priest of Holy Family Church in Gaza for encouragement. He remained other-centered as pontiff even in illness as seen powerfully in his Easter appearance and blessing, weak in tone, strong in affection and care as Pastor to us all.

I have a file of articles which I was to read on that “rainy day” that deal with Francis’ “culture of encounter.” Again, I will opine on what I think he meant by this important aspect of his papacy. I feel strongly that he wanted us to first “encounter” another first and foremost as a child of God, as the same image and likeness in which we were created, welcoming the other into our company, enjoying, appreciating, and valuing their presence of God. Then, we can learn and appreciate who they are, understanding others, regardless of whether we agree with everything about them. It certainly staves off the distancing we impose for the other who is of a different race, nationality, creed, political affiliation, or loves differently. I know diversity, equity, and inclusion are politically charged terms and concepts but I see them as central and valued in the Gospel and in Christ’s life. Simply put, his culture of encounter was all three with no exceptions. He and Francis encourage me to encounter others especially those with whom I have never sat down and listened to their story with openness and sensitivity, like the many immigrants who want what our ancestors sought and won, the transgender person’s struggle, the loneliness of the divorced who may feel unwelcomed by the church but not their God. This is why I emphasize our seeking the last, the lost, the least, and the lonely in our effort to be the “presence of Christ” as our parish mission challenges us to be. Francis begged us to see all for who they are, children of God. Most importantly, Christ would dine and welcome them into his company. So, must we. They may be our blood members, and they are certainly our sisters and brothers in Christ, no one excluded. It will all make sense in the Resurrection but needs to be embraced and lived now. It is fully understood by the soul of Pope Francis. Does it surprise anyone that in his will he wrote, “the tomb must be in the earth; simple, without particular decoration and with the only inscription: Franciscus?” Rest in peace, Franciscus, and pray that we may work to untie the knots that separate us from fully embracing others as Christ did and continues to do!!!

~John Fisher, OSFS