

There is something marvelously surreal about the Catholic Church – an institution that announces the Pope’s death via an e-mail to news agencies throughout the world, and several weeks later announces the election of his successor with a smoke signal! You gotta love being Catholic!

But we are in the time called SEDE VACANTE – the seat is vacant or empty. Remember, the official teaching position of a bishop is seated – in a chair – a cathedra – from which we get the name cathedral – the house of the bishop’s chair. Only the Catholic Church would build an entire building around a single piece of furniture! But the Bishop of Rome has now left us and so we pray – both for the eternal rest of our Holy Father – but also for wisdom and guidance for the cardinals who will elect his successor.

I put aside my original homily and thought it might be good for us, who are at the moment fatherless, to reflect a bit on this Pope, and what his papacy has done for our one, holy, Roman Catholic Church.

Austen Ivereigh wrote 2 books on Pope Francis, one called THE GREAT REFORMER, and the other, WOUNDED SHEPHERD. He tells of meeting the Pope early on in his papacy. He writes: “I had met the long-term guest of Santa Marta in November 2014, when after Mass, I had presented him with a copy of my biography, THE GREAT REFORMER: FRANCIS AND THE MAKING OF A RADICAL POPE.....It was the pope, who via an intermediary, had asked for the meeting, in the gentlest way possible: could I perhaps find the time, when I was next in Rome, to see him?

I was shown into the visitor’s room on the ground floor, from where I imagined I would be taken to his 3-room suite. But it was Francis himself who came in, closing the door behind him, as I stumbled awkwardly to my feet. There was no courtier to say, “The Holy Father will see you now,” just the pastor-in-chief taking my hand and thanking me for my kindness in taking the trouble to come and see him. His graciousness is as legendary as his serenity, simplicity, and humility, but no less surprising when you experience it for yourself.

No, no thank YOU, I spluttered, and he laughed that I spoke Spanish like a PORTENO, someone from his home city of Buenos Aires. Then we sat down opposite each other. There was a pause, as he looked at me tenderly. “I’ve read a number of things you’ve written about me,” he said, “and I just have one criticism.” I braced myself. After a pause, he said, smiling: “You’re too kind to me.” The word in Spanish was BENEVOLO, something like ‘indulgent.’ Relieved and charmed, I assured him I would be more critical in the future, and we both laughed. The pope is fun.

He was also serious. He went on to explain, as he often has to others, that no one had thought this ‘change of diocese’ was a possibility, that in March 2013 he had a small suitcase and expected to be back in Buenos Aires for Easter, how he didn’t come with some great plan but had been managing the best he could with what he had.

We spoke about the limits of reform: paths blocked, resistance mobilized, mistakes made. No longer the great reformer of myth, he is the wounded shepherd: to be chosen by the Holy Spirit is not to be spared the trials of history. Spending time with him, I found him to be smaller, older, more vulnerable, more ordinary than in my mind’s eye. I was meeting the person, not the personality.

Yet here’s the thing. I also met his holiness. I saw it in the pauses, when he was listening to his heart, to those prompts of the Spirit that guide him. I saw it in his serenity, his peaceful freedom. It is a paradoxical quality: self-effacing, yet powerful; something you have, but also give away (it left me feeling loved, and free). I met the pope, in short, in all his ordinary humanity, yet at the same time was captivated by the extraordinary quality of what he was open to, of what he puts at the center of his existence. And I got the point he wanted me to understand. The real center of the Church, he told journalists shortly after his election, was not the pope, but Jesus Christ. (adapted from WOUNDED SHEPHERD, p. 1-3)

Second, his contributions are many beyond his personal holiness, but I point out his most famous encyclical, FRATELLI TUTTI, (Brothers all) on the environment, where he reminded us to take care of our mother, the earth, and to

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treat her with kindness and respect. To not be greedy and to care about the effects of our consumption on the lives of the most vulnerable of the world. Pope Francis insisted that a Church that fusses primarily with its own inner life has fallen into corruption. Expanding upon the biblical image of the oil that runs down the beard of Aaron and onto the collar of his robe, Francis said that the oil, which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, ought to extend to the very fringes of the robe and thereby come into contact with the wider world. When the anointing does not flow out, it becomes rancid, a symbol of ecclesial introversion. (Robert Barron, WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE, p. 116)

Bishop Robert Barron describes Pope Francis as having a very Catholic mind – a both/and mind. Barron believes that history's first pope from the developing world, perhaps without thinking of it in quite these terms, is a living role model for the type of evangelization that works in the cultural milieu of the early 21st century. "Pope Francis hasn't changed the faith, but he has changed the conversation," Barron says. "What Francis has done in terms of public conversation about the Church is to make it clear to people that we are not just about sex. That's been extremely helpful in our wider outreach." By placing an emphasis on humility and simplicity, on service to the poor, on concern for the environment and social justice, on immigrants and refugees, on opposition to war and the arms trade, and with his ardent outreach to the 'peripheries' of the world, Francis has succeeded in lifting up aspects of the Church's thought and life that were always there but that sometimes got lost in the myopic focus on sex and the culture wars." (Barron with John L. Allen, jr, in TO LIGHT A FIRE ON THE EARTH, p. 131)

Nothing better summed up the 'mercy' Church than the Pope's almoner. I didn't even know the Pope had an almoner – someone who is charged with taking care of the poor in Rome – until Francis came along! But his almoner, Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, shinnied down a manhole in mid-May 2019 to restore the electricity supply of 450 migrant squatters in a disused government office in Rome. Risking arrest and electrocution, the Cardinal, known as 'Don Corrado,' descended 9 feet to the fuse box in order to get the power back to the families, who had been living without lights or hot water after being cut off over a large unpaid bill. Krajewski said it was an emergency, and a desperate situation: people were unable to run vital medical equipment, and children were falling over in the dark. He assumed all responsibility and said he would pay a fine if he had to.

One last story. It was several years ago, and the end of a 2-day ecumenical retreat for the warring leaders of South Sudan at the suggestion of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who was often in Rome those days, and hosted by Francis at the Casa Santa Marta. The retreat had come at a crucial juncture: the country was merging shakily from a 6-year-civil war that had killed close to half a million people; a peace transition deal still held, but it was coming to an end.

Addressing South Sudan's president Salva Kiir Mayardit, his 3 vice presidents, and opposition leader vice president Rick Machar along with their officials, Francis spoke to them 'as a brother, 'urging them to 'stay in peace,' and some advice they should always present a united front to the people, so that divisions were contained behind closed doors. Then he looked sorrowful, as if imagining the resumption of war: the horror, the hunger, the women raped, the children traumatized, the death and destruction. 'I ask you from my heart, let's go forward,' he said. 'There will be many problems, but do not be afraid.'

Then he told his interpreter to come with him and walked over to the president, and bowing before him, fell heavily on his knees, and kissed Mayardit's shoes. One by one, for what seemed an eternity, the then 82-year-old pope did the same with the others. The effort – he is a large man, and the pain from his sciatica can be intense – made his breathing heavy and labored. Machar, overwhelmed, made to stop him but Francis told him: 'let me.' Vice President Rebecca Nyandeng Garang could not contain her tears. Choking with emotion, Archbishop Welby told them they had heard the prophetic call of Christ.

Francis later told a collaborator that he had felt, in that moment, the need to make a gesture. What came to him was God's chosen means of saving the world from destruction: the SYNKTAKABASIS, God's coming down to come close. "By His self-abasement," Francis said a few days later, on Palm Sunday, "Jesus wanted to open up to us the path of faith and to precede us on that path." That Holy Thursday, Pope Francis showed us what self-abasement means – as he washed the feet of 12 young prisoners. (Ivereigh, WOUNDED SHEPHERD, p. 340)

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I conclude with a prayer written by Brian Doyle, called PRAYER OF INTERCESSION FOR JORGE MARIO BERGOGLIO. Lord, thanks first of all for the humility of the guy. Any guy who says WHO AM I TO JUDGE? Is a guy with his head on straight, a guy who gets it that whatever you are absolutely arrogantly sure of you ought not to be, and that YOU, O LORD are the only ONE who is absolutely sure about things; the rest of us muddle along, dimly shuffling toward the light, mostly. And a guy who is suspicious of power and wealth and its trappings and prisons – that’s a good guy. A guy who when asked who he is says first I AM A SINNER – that’s a guy with his ego in proportion to his confidence. A guy who quietly turns the ship back toward its original destination, dealing with the broken Christ in every single one of us, rather than continuing along with power and pronouncements – that’s a good guy. A prayer for the peace and health of the man, that those addicted to power and money don’t drag him down. A prayer for him that he continues to foment a quiet revolution against wealth and power and arrogance and lies. A prayer that he remembers it’s all about kids and the Church ought to be ashamed to its bones for the rest of its life on earth for kids being raped in its house and men lying about it for years afterward. A prayer that he never gets cocky and always remembers we are a cult of countercultural revolutionaries, agents for life, agents for crazy hope, agents for the resurrections in this life, in our hearts and marriages and families and friendships. A prayer that he steers us ever away from being a huge corporation and ever back to the motley community of believers in the defiantly unreasonable and illogical and nonsensical. Keep your hand on this guy, please Lord? Protect him from his enemies, and help him quietly gather us back together in work that matters, not in silly arguments. (UNCOMMON PRAYER, p. 136-137) I believe that God answered this prayer of Doyle’s for Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

And now Papa Francisco has gone to God. And we pray together ETERNAL REST GRANT UNTO HIM, O LORD, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace. Amen. May his soul, and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.