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Pope Francis providing much needed hope

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 17, 2013 NCR Today

As Christians, we are always hopeful. Our hope, in the final analysis, rests in the Paschal Mystery.

At the same time, I have heard it said, again and again, from family, friends and others, among them *NCR* readers: ?I?m no longer hopeful about our church. I?m discouraged. I feel alienated, disconnected.?

Yes, after all we have been through in recent years anyone reading this understands this discouragement.

But that was until last Wednesday ? and the unexpected election of Pope Francis.

The choice of the name ?Francis? was the first surprise, the first nudge toward ?encouragement?. Others would quickly follow:

- that Pope Francis wore simple white when he first stepped out on the balcony overlooking St. Peter?s Square,
- that he asked for a blessing from the people before offering them a blessing of his own,
- that he rode on a bus with the other cardinals back to the hotel,
- that he refused the ?papal? seat at the table and mingled with the other cardinals,
- that he walked across a room to bless a cardinal in a wheel chair,
- that he kissed a cardinal?s ring after that cardinal reached to kiss his,
- that he carried his own bag, that he paid is hotel bill as an example to others,
- that he spoke personally with the hotel staff,
- that he crossed the street the next day, after mass, to talk with children on the playground,
- that he requested the faithful in Argentina not to come to Rome for his formal inauguration mass, but rather give the money to the poor,
- that he blessed some 5,000 media in silence, citing individual conscience while recognizing many were not Catholics, or even believers.

Here?s how Vatican radio described it:

After personally greeting some of the journalists present, Pope Francis, in Spanish, concluded: ?I told you I wholeheartedly imparted my blessing. Many of you don't belong to the Catholic Church, others are not believers. From my heart I impart this blessing, in silence, to each of you, respecting the conscience of each one, but knowing that each of you is a child of God: May God bless you.?

Those of us who have been discouraged for a long time expect a lot of this pope. We expect it fast. We want a lot. Probably more than any one human can deliver in a lifetime ? or a pontificate.

But change has begun. First, through symbols.

And no one is better than Catholics when it comes to communicating through symbols!

Our sacraments are symbols. Catholic life flourishes through symbols.

What I find refreshing is that Francis is providing new hope through the use of symbols, adding expectations for things to come. One ought not choose the name Francis unless one plans to deliver in a big way.

For starters, he is dissembling the regal papacy, the monarchial court out of another century, a style off putting to the modern age. It has been a style of church antithetical to the simple, life-giving message of the gospels.

He is sending signals to other bishops: get out of the mansions, become pastoral leaders. Live among the people you are called to serve.

Our hierarchy has desperately needed reform; our church new direction. In my opinion, new direction matters little if the tone is not authentic, rooted in the gospels. It matters little, if we are not grounded in the poor, in the marginalized. This is where we are to be anchored if we dare claim to call ourselves Christian.

We will have to wait to see where Pope Francis walks, in which direction he leads the church. But there is little doubt he has already changed the tone of the papacy. It is occurring faster than anyone could possibly have imagined.

Four days into the pontificate, Catholics and others are tuning in, listening and watching more carefully than perhaps at any time in years, even decades.

The messages coming from Francis are messages of humility, inclusiveness, mercy and love. A person delivering such messages cannot help but be less judgmental, more open to living and acting as Jesus taught us to live.

We are in a graced moment.

It?s as if the Holy Spirit is splashing buckets of fresh water over us.

So let me offer you two ?Pope Francis acts of hope? coming out of Rome today. [1]

Both are comments, reported by Vatican radio, involve comments Pope Francis made today, the first at a mass, the second, at the Sunday Angelus, which attracted some 300,000.

Pope Francis celebrated Mass on Sunday in the parish church of Vatican City, dedicated to St. Anne, the mother of Our Lady.

Readings were those of the fifth Sunday of Lent: including a reading from the Gospel according to St John, in which the woman caught in adultery and subject under law to death by stoning, is presented to Jesus for judgment, and he says, ?Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast his stone.?

Speaking without a prepared text, Pope Francis said, ?If we are like the Pharisee before the altar, [who said], ?Thank you, Lord, for not making me like all the other men, and especially not like that fellow at the door, like that publican?,? well, then we do not know the heart of the Lord, and we shall not ever have the joy of feeling this mercy.? Pope Francis went on to say, ?It is not easy trust oneself to the mercy of God, because [His mercy] is an unfathomable abyss ? but we must do it!? Pope Francis continued, ?He has the ability to forget, [which is] special: He forgets [our sins], He kisses you, He embraces you, and He says to you, ?Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now, on, sin no more.? Only that counsel does He give you.? Pope Francis concluded, saying,

?We ask for the grace of never tiring of asking pardon, for He never tires of pardoning.?

After returning into the church to take off his liturgical vestments, Pope Francis again greeted the faithful outside, before making his way to his study and the window overlooking St Peter?s Square, below which was gathered a crowd 300 thousand-strong, more than rivaling the throng of people who braved cold, rain and dark to meet the Pope on Wednesday ? the night of his election - and receive his blessing for the first time. Dozens of national flags were visible in the packed Square, and a deafening cheer went up when, at last, Pope Francis appeared. Mercy was once again the cornerstone of his reflections ahead of the traditional prayer of Marian devotion.

He told a story, of an elderly widow he encountered during a Mass for the sick celebrated in connection with a visit of the image of Our Lady of Fatima. ?I went to confession during the Mass,? he said, ?and near the end ? I had to go to do confirmations afterward, and an elderly lady approached me ? humble [she was] so very humble, more than eighty years old. I looked at her, and said, ?Grandmother,? ? where I come from, we call elderly people grandmother and grandfather ? ?would you like to make your confession?? ?Yes,? she said ? and I said, ?but, if you have not sinned?? and she said, ?we all have sinned.? [I replied], ?if perhaps He should not forgive [you]?? and, sure, she replied, ?The Lord forgives everything.? I asked, ?How do you know this for sure, madam?? and she replied, ?If the Lord hadn?t forgiven all, then the world wouldn?t [still] be here.? And, I wanted to ask her, ?Madam, did you study at the Gregorian (the Pontifical Gregorian University, founded in 1551 by St Ignatius Loyola, the oldest Jesuit university in the world)?? ? because that is wisdom, which the Holy Spirit gives ? interior wisdom regarding the mercy of God. Let us not forget this word: God never tires of forgiving us,? he repeated, ?but we sometimes tire of asking Him to forgive us.? Pope Francis went on to say, ?Let us never tire of asking God?s forgiveness.?

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[1] http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-preaches-mercy-forgiveness-first-papal-sunday