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Pope Francis' treatment of non-Catholics almost unbelievable

Maureen Fiedler | Mar. 18, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

On Saturday evening, I had dinner with my neighbors, and we were discussing (what else?) the election of Pope Francis and what it might mean for the church and the world. My neighbor Ed is agnostic, though I usually describe him as "an agnostic who practices Christian values better than most Christians."

In any event, I shared with him and his wife, Martha (who is Episcopalian), what Pope Francis said at the end of his first press briefing [1], at which thousands of journalists from around the world had gathered to take the measure of this man. Those journalists got an earful, and not just about the name Francis.

"Not everyone present belongs to the Catholic faith and others do not believe," the pope said at the end of the press briefing.

"I respect the conscience of each one of you," he continued, "knowing that each one of you is a child of God. May God bless you." And so, out of such respect, the new pope concluded the audience with the journalists by offering his apostolic blessing -- in silence, from his heart.

When I shared this story with my friends, they were awed and thrilled. The fact that a pope could have -- and express publicly -- respect for the consciences of nonbelievers (and different believers) was so unexpected and unusual that they could scarcely believe it. Now that's a way to win friends and influence people.

Let us hope he respects in a similar way the consciences of believers, including Catholic theologians, church reformers and -- oh, yes -- American nuns.

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