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Pope Francis' Installation Mass

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 19, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

My dogs are wondering why Daddy is up at 4:15 a.m.

Pope Francis? installation Mass this morning was, in keeping with what we have seen so far from the new pope, notable for its simplicity. Instead of having all the cardinals make their obedience, six were chosen to represent them all. Instead of the Gospel being sung in both Greek and Latin, it was proclaimed only in Greek ? ?there is enough Latin in the rest of the service? we were told by the Vatican, something we have not heard recently. The vestments are modest. The sermon was not theologically difficult, the message was simple and accessible.

And what was that message? Like St. Joseph, whose Feast Day it is, we should care for those entrusted to our care. That message could scarcely be more simple and, yet, is it not the heart of the Church?s mission in the world? Every person matters. That is the root of all of our Catholic social teachings, all of our moral teachings. Every person matters. In his sermon, he delineated this foundational teaching: Husbands and wives must care for each other; parents must care for their children, and children, later in life, must care for their parents; societies must care for the poor and the vulnerable. And the Church must aid all in helping to assume this responsibility to care for one another. So simple and, yet, looking around at all the lonely people, all the hungry children, all the broken marriages, who can doubt that our world needs to hear this message.

Pope Francis mentioned creation at least one dozen times. He called on the powerful of the world, those with power in the economic, political and social spheres, to exercise care for creation. Clearly, concern for the environment, which Pope Benedict articulated theologically, will be a central motif of Francis? pontificate. We knew his choice of name would indicate a special concern for the poor, and it is now evident that Francis? love for creation will also be reflected not only in the choice of name but in the choice of what the new pope will address when he is on the world stage.

The new pope has now twice declined to distribute communion himself. At the Mass Sunday at Santa Anna, the little parish church in the Vatican, he sat down and let the deacons distribute communion. Today, thousands of priests and deacons undertook the task. There is no way of knowing why he is doing this, and I do not know if this was his practice in Buenos Aires. But, I like it. One of the innovations of Benedict?s papacy was that, at all papal masses, the people to whom pope distributed communion came up and knelt at a little prie-dieu, showing in an external way the proper internal reverence one should have when receiving the eucharist. Meanwhile, everyone else in the square had to climb over each other to receive the eucharist standing. This sent the unintentional message that communion from the hands of the pope was somehow more special. The Body and Blood of Christ is precious beyond imagining when it is distributed in the lowliest parish church or in Saint Peter?s Basilica, from the hands of the pope or the hands of a priest or deacon. I am glad Pope Francis is doing this differently but I would still like to see the prie-dieux consigned to history. (Leave it to Raymond Arroyo to suggest that the pope did not distribute communion himself because, with all the world leaders, presumably in various states of grace, he wished to avoid controversy. I am thinking that Pope Francis does not share this Jansenistic interpretation of who should and should not receive communion.)

Beyond imagining. Pope Francis told us something we do not always want to hear. He noted that Saint Joseph

was obedient even when he did not understand. We know from the Sacred Scriptures that Saint Joseph intended to divorce the Virgin Mary quietly when he found out she was pregnant, until an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him that the child was from God. We know, too, that the Master told Peter that his faith would lead him where he did not want to go. All of us, as Christians, find ourselves at times hearing things we do not want to hear, shying away from an invitation to go where we do not wish to go. Sometimes, we are called upon to think with the mind of the Church when the mind of the Church strikes us as inadequate or incomprehensible. But, called we are, and called to obedience. It is my most fervent prayer, that the simplicity of this man, and his concern for the poor, will enable Catholics who struggle with the Church?s teachings to think again, to wonder how this man who shares our commitment to the poor can nonetheless reach conclusions on other issues that puzzle us or worse. There is no salvation except through the Cross, and we live in an age that seems allergic to suffering, that resents any impediment to our self-assertion. As I have noted before, in the Gospels, the moment when the divine and human wills of Jesus are most clearly in tension, we rightly call that moment the Agony in the Garden.

For all his simplicity and evident charm, Pope Francis has undertaken a job that will surely carry more than its fair share of agonies. We must pray for him, as he asked us to do in his homily this morning. The needs of the Church are great and we all hope that he will turn his attention to reforming the curia in Rome. But, that needed reformation can best be achieved, in part, not by what Francis has called a ?self-referential? Church, but by emptying ourselves in service to the poor. It is among the poor that we encounter Christ. Only in the light of that encounter can the Church truly be herself. Only in the light of that encounter can we discern the truth of the human person. Only in the light of that encounter is the darkness of life cast out. Pope Francis, today, began to walk in the shoes of the fisherman. He has, in word and deed, shown his evident willingness to walk with us. Will we walk with him?

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