NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pope Francis & Springtime

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 23, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

What is it about this pope?

I recall the first time I attended a General Audience. It was the early 1980s and the audience was in the Paul VI Hall, the modern structure just to the left of St. Peter?s. As soon as Pope John Paul II arrived, people began standing on chairs to see him, screaming as if he were a rock star (I am not much of a fan of rock music), and the whole mass of people seemed to surge towards him. I confess, the experience gave me the creeps. It had the feeling of a personality cult. I imagined that this is what it must have felt like to attend a political rally for Huey Long.

Over time, I came to temper my unease. People want to see the pope, any pope, they want to touch him if they can. This desire is different from, but related to, our Catholic sacramentality: We do not, like our Protestant brethren, stake all on the Book. We eat the Lord?s body and drink His blood, we let the water of baptism and the oil of confirmation pour down upon our brows, we smell the incense, we listen to the music, we let all of our senses experience grace.

Pope Francis spoke about this in one of his talks, when he recalled an older woman after Mass asking a young priest to bless her. The young priest gave her a long theological commentary on the fact that she had just been blessed at the Mass and had no need of an additional blessing. The Pope pointed out that this woman wanted to be touched by the holy ? so touch her and give her the blessing she seeks! And leave the theology for another day.

It is this quality of Pope Francis, his simplicity, his ability to sense what ordinary people are thinking and feeling and to speak to them in ways that they understand, this is what has created the sense that it is springtime for the Church again. It is his awareness that if you are going to speak about poverty, it is best not to be spotted in a Mercedes, sit on a golden throne, and dress up in Baroque, jewel-laden attire. It was the look of profound disinterest on his face while he stood at the palace in Rio and the bands played the national anthems, a clear contrast to the look on his face as the motorcade took a wrong turn and got ensnarled in traffic, and people mobbed him. The security personnel looked terrified (and I felt terrified watching it on television!) but Papa Francesco just kept waving and smiling as best he could. I wonder what he thought, though, of the pictures of security personnel pushing people away. My hunch ? next time he will take a helicopter and have more time to work the rope lines.

This simplicity is apparent in his talks. I liked the sheer density of a Ratzinger sermon or speech, but I am weird that way. The average listener in our fast-paced culture probably had to read his texts through a couple of times to get it all, and no one reads texts through a couple of times anymore, not when there is Twitter. I do not fault Pope Benedict for that, but I recognize the limits of density at this moment in the Church?s history as a method of evangelization.

There is something else at work here too. It is the sense that, for him, whatever issues he faces, from reforming the curia, to socio-economic difficulties, to secularization and inter-religious dialogue, here is a man who has refused to give up hope. He never gives voice to the narrative one hears too often from some of our stateside bishops, that narrative of decline and doom, with (mostly) imagined forces antagonistic to the Church engaged in an effort to marginalize the Church and uproot the faith from Western culture.

To be sure, Pope Francis challenges everybody, his talks tend to invite everyone to become uncomfortable. Who in the modern West does not know the temptation to become a ?part-time Christian?? Who does not recognize that when people see gross displays of wealth ? think Architectural Digest or Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous ? and they then feel envy rather than revulsion, something needs to change in their moral compass? But, when Pope Francis addresses these issues, when he embodies his call to simplicity, when he carries his own glasses and asks for a small car, it is always meant to send a message of encouragement: ?If I can do this, so can you!? he seems to be telling the Church. He does not wag his finger at anybody, but if you listen to his words, you find yourself shifting in your seat. They make us uncomfortable. They should.

There is much in our culture that is hedonistic, materialistic, self-assertive, gross. This should, obviously strike Christians as a challenge insofar as we seek to follow Jesus of Nazareth who rather famously called upon His followers to deny themselves, sell all they possess, recognize that the spiritual is more important than the material, that Mary chose the better portion. It will not do to retreat to an imagined golden age. It will not do to complain and moan about the ambient culture. What Pope Francis is doing, this week in Brazil more than ever, is point all of us in a new direction, which is a very old direction, the direction of Jesus Christ: Go amongst the poor, preach the good news, extend peace and pardon to those you encounter, trust in God?s mercy. This remarkable messenger is remarkable only insofar as he is so obviously and thoroughly rooted in the message. There is springtime in the air, and also contagion, a good contagion, the irresistible contagion that wants us to run to our friends and say, ?We have seen the Lord,? and the hope that now, with Francis, the world is being invited anew to run to the empty tomb.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/10/2014 - 04:39*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/pope-francis-springtime