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What's In Store for the Poor Beyond Good Intentions

Ken Briggs | Jul. 24, 2013 NCR Today

Noble sentiments by themselves don't usually count for much.

By the same token, turning good sentiments into concrete realities is rare for a very good reason. It requires effort and sacrifice over a long haul.

Whether Pope Francis' preferential option for the poor, therefore, depends on will and investment of time, energy and, yes, resources.

Telling the poor that he feels their pain is a good start. It is by every appearance heart felt and even penitential. He reaches out to those who are deprived of life's basic goods because in a basic understanding of Catholic social teaching justice has been denied them. Adequate food, shelter, clothing, schooling and medical care are counted as "rights" that underlie human dignity in that collection of teachings. It isn't the survival of the fittest mentality that dominates much of our social and religious climate (witness the attack on food stamps by the Republicans in Congress); much more radical than that.

But turning the corner from the pope's solidarity to action on behalf of those he reaches toward means moving Catholics and others from hearts to hands and pocketbooks. It involves forming motivation at the deepest levels of conviction to go beyond the meaningful gesture to going to bat.

Here's the danger, illustrated by the American habits of genuine but truncated expressions of empathy for the poor: Thanksgiving and Christmas when well springs of benevolent feeling supplies turkey and the fixings to people at the fringes of society. For the most part (yes I know there are some soup kitchens) the same people are left to fend for themselves the other 363 days, even with scarce food stamps. The givers genuinely swell with compassion, do a good service, then drop the ball, vaguely hoping, perhaps, that their contribution will suffice.

Pope Francis doesn't fit that profile so far as I can see. He would like lasting solutions to seemingly intractable problems. But who's suppose to follow up the words, the intentions, the sentiments? The implication is that the world can be tutored into doing it, that the hard hearts that allow massive suffering to go on will be softened, that the "market" will be moved to right the wrongs.

That would require nothing short of major conversion from attitudes of complacency and a free enterprise attitude that hold the poor responsible for their own plight. The television depiction of a child in squalor might spring a few dollars, but producing the more profound effect of identifying that child as our own to whom we'd give everything is possible only with the help of transcendence. And it's unimaginable without plunging into hard knocks politics -- the world will not accede passively to encroachments on its acquisitive appetites. How else could real advocacy work but by some combination of persuasion and power?

If the pope wants that kind of conversion, he will have to accomplish it at a time when the authority of the papacy is diminished. Exercising transformative leadership might be uniquely possible in a time of anger and

corruption; perhaps in terms of a self-conscious break with the existing papal model. It's not clear that Francis is heading in anything like that fundamentally new direction, but it can't be ruled out.

Making sure that that well trodden road to hell isn't filled just with good intentions demands attention, however, including the church's willingness to lay down its own life. That was the core of liberation theology which the pope frowned upon decades ago. Perhaps he is reformulating that mission. Meanwhile, whether those he has touched will receive anything beyond visits and blessings remains the pressing question.

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