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

Another Home Run From Papa Francesco

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 1, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Papa Francesco went to the Church of the Gesu in Rome yesterday, to celebrate the Feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola with his fellow Jesuits ? ?Us Jesuits? as he said. And, he delivered another home run of a sermon [1], a sermon which came just in the nick of time because it was so deeply rooted in tradition and after his press conference on the plane back from Rio, there were some who questioned this pope?s commitment to tradition. He has, after all, overturned rather a lot of traditions in the past few months.

This pope fascinates in part because he is so obviously adept at presenting the Gospel in a way that is at once relevant and challenging. He likes to get to the spiritual core of a text, place himself and his hearers inside the story in the manner of the Spiritual Exercises, and draw out often pithy lessons for us: No ?part-time Christians,? the ever-present need for God?s mercy, etc. Yesterday, he certainly did this but he did so in a way that highlights what I find equally fascinating about this pope: His understandings of the human drama are rooted in the traditions of the Church, in Scriptural and Patristic language, not in the canons of modernity.

Shame. This was focus of the last section of the pope?s homily yesterday. We have been lulled by modern psychology into thinking that shame is a bad thing, a debilitating thing, something that crimps our freedom because it is rooted in a sense of our own inadequacy and we moderns are quite certain, thank you very much, that our cult of self-esteem is not only therapeutic, it correlates with the facts. We find it impossible to believe that God would not share our high estimation of ourselves. This cult of self-esteem is very crude and frankly dishonest. And it yields an equally crude variety of all-encompassing politicization of the faith. ?What about me?? is its slogan. The self becomes the measure when, for the Christian, Christ is the measure. And so, we encounter an equally crude theology in which Christ is turned into whatever we wish Him to be, an Upper West Side cosmopolitan for some, a devotee of the traditional Latin Mass for others. We do not look to the pope, our spiritual father, for whom we pray at every Mass (and hopefully whenever we pray) and ask what gifts he is bringing to us, we evaluate him based on how he does or does not conform to our political platform, or theologized advocacy, or strong sense of self.

Pope Francis does not invite us to wallow in shame ? that really would be psychologically debilitating. Instead, he turns, as Jesuits do, to that great early foray into human psychology, the Spiritual Exercises:

The shame of the Jesuit. The invitation that Jesus makes is for us to never be ashamed of Him, but to always follow Him with total dedication, trusting Him and entrusting ourselves to Him. But looking at Jesus, as Saint Ignatius teaches us in the First Week, above all looking at Christ crucified, we have that very human and noble feeling that is the shame of not reaching the highest point; we look at the wisdom of Christ and at our ignorance; at His omnipotence and our weakness; at His justice and our iniquity; at His goodness and our wickedness (cf. Sp. Ex. 59). Ask for the grace of shame; the shame that comes from the constant dialogue of mercy with Him; the shame that makes us blush before Jesus Christ; the shame that puts us in tune with the heart of Christ who is made sin for me; the shame that harmonises our heart in tears and accompanies us in the daily following of ?my Lord?. And this always brings us, as individuals and as a Company, to humility, to living this great virtue. Humility that makes us understand, each day, that it is not for us to build the Kingdom of God, but it is always the grace of God working within us; humility that pushes us to put our whole being not at the

service of ourselves and our own ideas, but at the service of Christ and of the Church, like clay pots, fragile, inadequate, insufficient, but having within them an immense treasure that we carry and that we communicate (2 Cor. 4:7).

The experience of shame, the mindfulness of sin, does not point to itself. It points to the Savior, to the one ?who is made sin for me.? I confess that when I got to the phrase ?the shame that makes us blush before Jesus Christ,? I was moved to tears. Who among us should not so blush?

Another passage in his sermon picked up on a theme we encountered yesterday, in his talk to CELAM, the idea that the missionary has a double focus, but is not double-minded, looking always to Christ and always to the periphery where Christ?s healing presence and saving deeds are most needed. Pope Francis said:

To be men rooted and grounded in the Church: that is what Jesus desires of us. There cannot be parallel or isolated paths for us. Yes, paths of searching, creative paths, yes, this is important: to go to the peripheries, so many peripheries. This takes creativity, but always in community, in the Church, with this membership that give us the courage to go forward. To serve Christ is to love this concrete Church, and to serve her with generosity and with the spirit of obedience.

The ?membership? of which he speaks is baptism, the ?putting on Christ,? the death to self and rebirth in Christ. This is the source of the courage needed to go to the peripheries.

His insistence on loving this concrete Church is also worthy of note. It is commonplace today to speak of the ?institutional Church,? usually with derision, as if there were two churches, the ?institutional Church? which is all hidebound patriarchy, and the real living Church which is all sweetness and light. I am no fan of hidebound patriarchy, and I do not think the Holy Father is either. Obviously. But, a couple of weeks ago, a friend who is without work had a tumor on his leg. Being out of work, he had no health insurance. I called a priest friend, the priest friend called someone at Catholic Charities, and within a few days, my friend had a voucher to visit a doctor for free. I do not know who set up this voucher program that helps the poor receive needed health care. For all I know, it was a cleric who was a sonuvabitch. But, whoever it was, it was someone who responded to the charism of the Church and the direct mandate of Christ to bring good news to the poor (my friend certainly experienced the assistance as good news!) and it was made concrete because the Church is an ?institution.?

Finally, the Pope spoke of the need to be ?conquered by Christ,? that this is the mark of discipleship. ?He is always first,? Francis said. In the days and weeks and months ahead, as the critics of Pope Francis emerge, you will see how they focus on this agenda item or that, but Francis intently wants us to focus on Christ, especially as we encounter Him in the poor and the marginalized. Put differently, he wants us to focus on Christ by following Christ. That is a message and a method for the ages. It is not at war with the tradition although, as Francis is powerfully suggesting to us, tradition is no piece of bric-a-brac to be kept on a mantle, but the taking up of the baton of faith, passed on to us by the saints of old, so that we can encounter Christ here and now. This un-modern pope is not hankering for the past. Papa Francesco is so obviously rooted in the tradition because he knows it is not past. In Christ, the saints of old are as much a part of eternity as the crying needs of our brothers and sisters today. Christ is always present. If only we seek Him.

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[1] http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/2013/07/us-jesuits-on-ignatius-day-pope-comes.html