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Pope Francis asks us to be the reform we want to see

Isabella R. Moyer | Sep. 27, 2013 The Francis Chronicles

My brother recently mused, "This new pope is really something. I'm thinking of returning to the church!"

He's not the only one voicing this sentiment. Based on all the positive media coverage and glowing commentaries, Pope Francis might be our best draw for the new evangelization. The prospect of a wave of Pope Francis recruits is cause for genuine excitement. There is hope that the hemorrhaging from our pews might be reversed. It also poses a real challenge. If someone decides to make that first tentative step through our church doors, what will he or she find? Will it be a joyous homecoming or yet another disappointment on the faith journey?

Pope Francis is capturing hearts and rekindling long-dormant embers of faith by actively reaching out to the many souls who have been hurt, disillusioned or disappointed in the church of their youth. His method is simple: Use clear language to show the beauty of the Gospel message. Follow up with concrete actions to show how it is to be lived. And wrap it all up with genuine warmth and mercy.

Francis is also speaking out against many issues that have caused the disillusionment. These include clericalism, careerism, authoritarianism, rigid dogmatism and an excessive focus on morality that closes the doors to a more inclusive dialogue. He is railing against a fortress mentality. The church is not for the perfect or the elite. We are to embrace the messiness of life, not hide from it.

Pope Francis' vision of church is resonating with those who have been living on the fringes for too long. But is his vision of church present in their parish and diocese? Is it present in yours?

We have communities that are shining lights of liturgical celebration and eucharistic nourishment, where prayer overflows into Gospel living. These communities naturally draw in new souls. An open-armed welcome will await any Pope Francis recruit.

There is also no denying that our church, like the world, is often a messy place. We have weaker communities that range from boring and apathetic to completely dysfunctional. Clericalism abounds. Liturgical and doctrinal police fill the pews, ready to send judgmental complaints to bishops and nuncios. Pope Francis' smiling face might grace the church lobby, but his pastoral spirit is nowhere to be found. These parishes not only lack the hospitality to welcome returning Catholics, they also have the potential to cause further harm to an already bruised spirit.

I worry that our new pope may have raised expectations too high. I worry that the many souls he has touched will be disappointed by what they find when they enter through our church doors.

I also worry about my own responsibility in being the church that Pope Francis calls us to be. This is my greatest worry. It's been glorious fun to sit back and take in all the surprises and good news of this papacy. It's been a refreshing exercise in hope as we witness a much-needed revamping of our Catholic identity in the world. But if there is any disconnect between Pope Francis' vision and the reality lived in our local parish or

diocese, it is up to us to do something about it. We need to step out of the four walls of our church. We need to model the Gospel message, not just preach morality. We need to become agents and experts in dialogue, in big conversations and small. Perhaps we should pick up the phone, call someone out of the blue and make ourselves available to simply listen to their story?

Yes, Pope Francis has given us new energy and hope. He is also giving us a mandate to be the reform that we want to see.

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