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Pope Francis demonstrates how to give witness to the disabled

Renée Schafer Horton | Nov. 14, 2013 The Francis Chronicles

All human beings have a profound need to have a witness to their lives. We want someone to notice us, to say we matter, to hear our cries of pain and shouts of joy. We want, in our deepest core, to be known. I would argue that even introverts and recluses have this need and might even suffer more acutely than others because of its lack.

Last week, an estimated 600 disabled people had that need met, at least in part, through Pope Francis. The photos of the event [1] show him strolling through a sea of wheelchairs, stopping to touch each person, allowing them to touch him back, and making sustained eye contact. The photos illustrate what words cannot adequately express: The pope's actions say, "I see you. You matter." Unlike the Vatican security detail and other onlookers in the room, the pope looks absolutely comfortable with the disabled, an attitude of openness around him, an air of authentic welcome. It is something one cannot fake.

The expressions of unabashed joy and brutal relief on the faces of the disabled who were photographed are enough to make one weep. It is as if they are saying with their eyes, "Oh, my Lord, you SEE me. No one ever sees me!"

It isn't that prior popes were unfeeling toward the disabled or other societal outcasts. Far from it. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict both championed the causes of life and dignity for all. They had their Kodak moments [2], but these moments were rarer. In contrast, it seems Pope Francis is physically unable to go through a day without having some contact with the poor of mind or body -- and all those moments are caught by someone's camera, somewhere. Those photos appear more powerful than words, which could account for Francis' magnetic draw on so many, including, apparently, a number of atheists on Twitter [3].

Many people, me included, are uncomfortable with the disabled. It isn't that we think the disabled are somehow less important than able-bodied people. Rather, it is simply that most of us are unsure what the correct etiquette is. I think we have a fear doing the wrong thing and then being embarrassed. We don't want to stare. (Is he missing a leg? Does she have cerebral palsy?) We don't want to offend. (Should I open the door for her? Would he like me to help him with his bags?) So instead of taking the risk of doing or saying something inappropriate, we do the most inappropriate thing of all: We ignore the person in front of us. And in that moment, they become invisible.

Pope Francis, in his near-daily examples of joyful living of Jesus' outreach to the poor and outcast [4], challenges us all to open our eyes, see our brothers and sisters, and then act.

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