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'Francis effect' evident at international meeting of Marianist Lay Communities

Isabella R. Moyer | Feb. 14, 2014 NCR Today

I recently observed the global "Francis effect" at the 6th International Meeting of Marianist Lay Communities in Lima, Peru. The theme of our meeting, "Faith of the Heart in the Heart of the World," was chosen before Pope Benedict XVI called for a Year of Faith and before the election of our new pope. We had no idea that our theme would be so timely.

Faith of the heart, as understood in Marianist spirituality, is not merely a sweet emotion or pleasant spiritual experience. Faith of the heart calls us to balance the mind and the heart, to know what we believe and to intentionally love what we believe. As with any form of love, there are times when warm fuzzy feelings are not enough to fortify our faith journey. I liken it to the experience of parenting.

My husband and I raised five children. Before the birth of our first child, we read many books and sought the advice of family and friends. After our son was born, we quickly discovered that knowledge can form a competent caregiver, but it is love that transforms the heart. Love pulls you out of your bed in the middle of the night to comfort and console a crying child. Love is the guiding force during the "dark night of the soul" moments of family life. Love helps you cling to hope when peace is lost in the midst of fatigue, anger, disappointment or sorrow. Love is more than a pleasant emotion; it is a deep commitment and an intentional act of the will.

The same is true of our faith. Doctrine and theology can make us competent Catholics. But doctrine without a loving heart makes for a cold, unwelcoming religion. It is also an ineffective form of evangelization when our focus is on changing minds and not converting hearts. Pope Francis has freed us from the pressure of being sourpuss apologists and militant defenders of the faith. Instead, he has called the church to go beyond institutional walls and into the streets, into the heart of the world, to spread the good news of the Gospel with simplicity and joy. Yes, we must know and share the foundations of our belief, but we must first know and love Jesus and live his message in our actions.

An international meeting is a graced moment to share faith experiences from all corners of the world. It is always a joy to celebrate liturgies and prayers in a diversity of languages, musical styles and cultures. The deep love for local devotions and customs in many countries is inspirational and religious trinkets and symbols are proudly and generously shared with all.

I also learned that we experience many of the same challenges. Excessive clericalism and heavy-handed authoritarianism can be found in all corners of the world. We are not the only ones who despair when doctrine and laws overshadow much-needed works of mercy. This past year has given us all a reason to rejoice at the spirit of newness, hope and change that Francis has ushered into our church.

We spent a full day in Lima reflecting on the words and images of Pope Francis. Delegates from Buenos Aires, Argentina, shared personal stories and photos of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, a good friend to the Marianist

communities there. We pondered quotations from *Evangelii Gaudium* and affirmed the need to spread the Gospel message with joy.

Francis has a gift for getting to the core of the Gospel and presenting it in ways that are inviting and welcoming to all. In place of a wagging finger, he offers open arms ready to embrace and heal this broken world of ours. He speaks to the heart, for the heart has the power to transform what is in the mind into acts of love.

The words and actions of Pope Francis are a model to be studied and imitated in the task of the new evangelization. The spirit of Pope Francis is a much-needed boost of energy to help us all move forward in our collaborative mission as the people of God, the church.

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