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# The Substance of Pope Francis

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 29, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

In the four months of Pope Francis? still young pontificate, and throughout the past week during World Youth Day in Rio, there has been a great deal of commentary on the new pope?s style. It is now obvious that the style is the substance.

Pope Francis is known for his accessibility. That was on full display as he arrived in Rio, when the motorcade took a wrong turn down one of the marginals that lined the boulevard and got stuck in traffic. His car was swarmed with people wanting to reach out to him. The security detail looked very, very nervous. The pope, who declined to roll up his window, looked elated. In the press interview he gave on the plane back from Rio to Rome, he had this to say: ?The climate in [Rio de Janiero] was spontaneous?I could be close to the people, greet them, embrace them, without armored cars. During the entire time there wasn?t a single incident. I realize there?s always the risk of a crazy person, but having a bishop behind bulletproof glass is crazy too. Between the two, I prefer the first kind of craziness.?

This should not be dismissed as a stylistic point. Indeed, in his talks in Rio, he repeatedly called upon the Church?s bishops, priests and laity to get out into the highways and byways, to be with the people, especially the marginalized and the poor. He did not say that this would yield more vocations, a bigger collection, or stem the tide of secularism. He said ? and he evidenced in his own behavior ? that accessibility is no mere functionalism. The result is not the point. The point is that this is what it means to be a Christian. As he told the young people in the final Mass yesterday, the Master ordered His followers to go and make disciples, He did not say ?if you feel like it? or ?if you have the time.?

Another obvious dynamic in this pontificate is the way the Pope has held up the social doctrine of the Church. This is not merely a change in emphasis, this is content. Pope Francis tells us repeated, in his words but even more so in his deeds, that the Church?s concern for the poor, our thirst for justice, our calls to re-fashion political and economic systems so that they are more humane, this is one of the principal ways we witness to the fact that Christ is alive. It is not an add-on to the Christian creed, it is integral to the Christian creed.

As a friend pointed out to me this weekend, all justice is social. True enough. But, it has been one of the characteristics of a variety of Catholic apostolate to essentially accept the economic and political rules of the game as determined by others, and then do our best to get along. In the face of this syncretism, Pope Francis calls for a revolution. It is not enough for the apologists of modern capitalism to point out that it has lifted many people out of poverty: It has left many more millions in poverty. In the early 1980s, I remember an editorial in The New Republic that said of Marxism that it should no longer be evaluated based on its theoretical claims but on how those who live in Marxist regimes prosper or not. Marxism was a moral and human failure. Sadly, so too is modern capitalism. The Pope sees this and sees it clearly. He does not criticize capitalism merely because of its results, although clearly to him, the ?creative destruction? that capitalist apologists tout is to Francis more about the destruction than the creativity. He criticizes modern capitalism because it shapes a culture of greed, creates idols that de-humanize, and encourages a hyper-materialistic view of human happiness.

Many have noted that the pope did not mention the word ?abortion? in his many talks in Rio. I think we know

what Pope Francis thinks about abortion, but I suspect that he understands that it has become an ?issue? and, just so, politicized in ways that frustrate any amelioration of this great evil. I suspect, too, that if the Church had spent the past fifty years talking about abortion as a social justice concern and not as an issue of sexual morality, we might have had a more fruitful result. Whatever has motivated Pope Francis not to mention abortion explicitly, undoubtedly, he intends to confront it differently. We do not know what shape that will take. But, it is a blessing to see the pope decline to keep beating his head against the wall.

A third dynamic quality of this pontificate in which the style is the substance is the pope?s commitment to dialogue. In his talk with civic and cultural leaders, Pope Francis said that when people ask his advice about something, he always replies ?dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.? The pope is not making a methodological point, or at least not primarily a methodological point. This is about the proper stance of a Christian to the world. This is about that deeper sense of conscience, beyond discerning right from wrong, in which we entrust ourselves to Christ in such a way that we find ourselves engaging other people differently, leading with love and openness to the gift that person has to bring to us, creating a ?culture of encounter? as Francis called it, touching upon Levinas? observation that conscience is the moral challenge posed by the face of another.

How often we fail to do this! How often I fail to do this! Papa Francesco admitted that he often fails to do this! But, we see here, as we saw in his open window amidst the crowd, a man of deep faith, someone who has all the security that comes from having abandoned himself to the Lord, someone who in our midst is living out the Lord?s maxim that he who loses his life for Christ?s sake will find it. Dialogue can be frustrating. It can lead nowhere. It can be invoked as a smokescreen to avoid resolving an issue that must be resolved. ?God so loved the world that he did not send a committee.? But, dialogue, real dialogue, is the stance proper to a Christian as he or she engages the world.

I wonder how differently the debate over same sex marriage might have been these past ten or fifteen years if the leaders of the Church had actually sat down with gay people and asked them what they wanted. I wonder what would have happened if we had said, ?We will work with you to guarantee that you get benefits, we will affirm your human dignity.? How different the debate would have been if our bishops had said what Francis said about homosexuals on the plane: ?Who am I to judge?? Again, I do not want to reduce the call for dialogue to a kind of functionalism, suggesting that a better outcome would have justified the method, although I think it would have. The Pope is calling us to something deeper here.

The depth is seen, too, in his repeated calls to the Church?s pastors to change the way we view the Church, especially to end the evil of clericalism. In his address to the Brazilian bishops and later to the leaders of CELAM, not once did he blame others for the woes of our times. He urged the bishops to ramp up their game. He urged the priests to go out of the doors of their churches and into their neighborhoods to be with the people. He did not blame secularizing forces or Pentecostals or anyone. He said, ?We can do better,? and then proceeded to show how to do better. It should surprise no one that he drew three million people to the beach. Will the bishops follow his lead? Will they see how he is modeling a different type of leadership in the Church?

Let me finish on this point. Pope Francis comes across as very unassuming. He seems as naturally gracious when walking through the slums as he does when walking with the mayor in a baroque palace. He has a knack for attracting people but, just as importantly, a knack for not calling attention to himself, for pointing beyond himself to Christ by directing our attention to the wounded the world and seeing the wounds of Christ in the wounds of humanity. There is no narcissism in Pope Francis. This may be his most important quality, the ability to attract people without making it about himself. I watched EWTN?s Raymond Arroyo fret about the security problems. Arroyo said that people were not coming merely to see the man Jorge Mario Bergoglio, but to see the pope, that he is no longer just a man, but that he embodies an office. There is undoubtedly some truth in this observation, but there is also something missing. The divinity of Christ is mediated through His humanity. Pope Francis is mediating, quite consciously, the Petrine ministry through the habits and posture of Jorge Mario

Bergoglio. There is nothing abstract about the Incarnation and nothing abstract about Pope Francis, and those who prefer the abstractions tend to do so because an abstraction is easier to manipulate and control. If there was any doubt that no one except the Holy Spirit is going to be controlling Papa Francesco, he dispelled those doubts this week.

In his interview with John Allen ? and I can?t conclude without praising John for providing NCR with simply the best, most comprehensive coverage of World Youth Day compared to other news outlets by a factor of ten at least! ? Cardinal Sean O?Malley said of the conclave that elected Pope Francis, ?I think it?s so obvious the Holy Spirit gave us the right man.? Yes, it is more obvious every day.

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