Opinion
Vatican



Pope Francis waves as he leads the Angelus from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square June 25, 2017, at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 20, 2018
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I already linked to the Vatican News story about Pope Francis's remarks at the Angelus on Sunday, July 15. His reference to "divas on tour" made the rounds immediately and spawned many jokes. A friend was good enough to translate the entire text of the pope's comments for me and they are profoundly challenging.

The Holy Father spoke on the Gospel reading of the day, the sixth chapter of the Gospel of St. Mark, verses seven through 13, in which Jesus sends the apostles out on a mission two by two. And he drew our attention to two key aspects of this text and what they mean for those of us who call ourselves Christian all these centuries later.

First the pope said, "The missionary disciple has first of all a center, a point of reference, which is the person of Jesus." He noted the several instances in which Jesus is acting in these verses: It was he who called them, he who sent them, he who gave them power, he who commanded them. In almost every sentence, Jesus is the subject and the apostles are the direct object. This repetition, the pope noted, "highlights the fact that the Apostles have nothing of their own to announce, nor capable on their own to show for themselves, but they speak and act as those 'sent,' as messengers of Jesus."

The Holy Father went on to note that our status as missionaries is not a consequence of ordination, but of baptism, that all of us are called to be missionary disciples, to be sent by Jesus and speak on his behalf, not on our own.

"And even for us this mission is authentic only if it begins from its unchanging and consistent center which is Jesus," he said. "It is not an initiative of individual believers, groups or even large groups, but it is the Church's mission inseparably united with her Lord. No Christian proclaims the Gospel 'on his or her own,' but only as one sent by the Church who received the mandate from Christ himself."

The pope's concern to combat any resurgence of Pelagianism, which is a perennial temptation of the religious sense, is something we all need to take to heart. How easily do we confuse our agenda with the Lord's? How easily do we mistake our intentions for God's intentions, and think that by expanding our power we are extending the boundaries of the Kingdom of God.

Advertisement

The second point the pope made is especially challenging to us Americans:

> The second characteristic of the style of the missionary is, so to speak, a face, the heart of which is a poverty of the means. His tools are known for their sobriety. The Twelve, in fact, are ordered "to take nothing but a stick for the journey: neither bread nor bag, nor money in the belt" (v. 8). The Master wants them to remain free and light, without support and without favors, secure only in the love of the one who sends them, remaining strong only on the power of his word which they go to announce. The staff and the sandals are the attributes of pilgrims, because they are the messengers of the kingdom of God, not omnipotent managers, not immovable officials, not divas on tour.

The "divas on tour" comment garnered the lion's share of attention, but the whole paragraph is remarkable.

Americans have ever been known as a pragmatic and non-ideological people. We do not shun the "omnipotent manager," but instead celebrate him. Our Catholic Church in this country was literally built by brick-and-mortar bishops and by religious sisters who could run hospitals and schools. A knack for evangelization was not highlighted in the selection of bishops and religious superiors because Catholics were assumed to be born into the Church and to stay there all of their lives. The mission was institutionalized and codified. In all this, we were quintessential Americans, we were leaning into the cultural norm, even if the objective was, in part, to remain a cohesive unit of believers standing apart. We were sinking roots in American soil, not charting routes for evangelizing ourselves and others.

Look at a recent commentary by Bishop Robert Barron, auxiliary of the archdiocese of Los Angeles, and one of the delegates to the Synod on Young People selected by

his fellow U.S. bishops. This paragraph focuses not on the poverty of the evangelist, but on reassigning resources:

> Pope Francis memorably told us to "get out of the sacristies and into the streets," and to go "to the existential margins." Especially in our Western context, the streets and the existential margins are where we find the "nones." Two or three generations ago, we could trust that many people (Catholics certainly) would come to our institutions — schools, seminaries, and parishes — to be evangelized, but we absolutely cannot assume that today. But yet we still seem to devote most of our money, time, and attention to the maintenance of these institutions and their programs. Might it not be wiser to redirect our energies, money, and personnel outward, so that we might move into the space where the un-evangelized, the fallen-away, the unaffiliated dwell? My humble suggestion is that a serious investment in social media and the formation of an army of young priests specifically educated and equipped to evangelize the culture through these means would be a desideratum. But that's a subject for another column.

I am not saying that the bishop is wrong to argue that the Church needs to do a better job recognizing that social media is the Areopagus of our day. I set aside the deeply troubling pre-Vatican II ecclesiological perspective that sees clerical assignments as the key to unlocking the evangelizing box. Instead, I only note that Barron epitomizes an approach to evangelization that is totally tone deaf to the pope's call for the Church to see its mission as encountering people (meeting people where they are), accompanying (walking with them even when they are lost) and integrating them (appreciating how their gifts enrich the life of the Church to the point that they evangelize us).

The way the pope uses the word "face" is biblical in its roots. The face is not the moral stance of the person, but something deeper than that, a person's stance before the other and before the Other. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once observed that addressing the moral challenge posed by the face of the other is the essence of religious experience. Levinas wrote "Subjectivity is being a hostage." He understood that experiencing the other draws us into inter-subjectivity, into a relationship that changes us. We Catholics call that drawing into inter-subjectivity "communion."

As Pope Francis indicates, evangelization depends on our disposition to the face of the other, and it is hindered if we spend too much time formulating our programs and counting our successes (or our failures), measuring the movements of the Spirit with a sociological yardstick, pretending that polling data is decisive or even matters and investing our self-worth in the "success" of the effort, forgetting evangelization is a process that, wherever and however it begins, ends in the embrace of the Cross.

"And to this 'face' also belongs the way in which the message is received and welcomed by others: in fact it may happen that it is not welcomed or listened to (see verse 11)," Pope Francis said. "This too is poverty: the experience of failure. The entire story of Jesus, the one who was rejected and crucified, prefigures the destiny of his messenger." In our aggressively optimistic country, Christianity too easily forgets the cross.

There is so much to love and admire about our pope, but one of the things about him that we can most admire is the way he challenges us moderns and our modern ways. His freedom is so rooted in his cleaving to the Crucified and Risen One. The pope is not bound by the chains of self-reliance, choice and self-determination. Can we say the same of ourselves?

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up to receive free newsletters and we'll notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.