Opinion
Spirituality



Pope Francis greets a young girl in the crowd during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 10. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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When Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio announced his new name would be Francis, a Franciscan friend of mine exclaimed, "Oh good! A pope with a Jesuit mind and a Franciscan heart!"

It's funny, all those jokes we have with one another in the church. When I'm with my Jesuit friends, sometimes my love for the pomp and circumstance of a good liturgy can be lost on them. When I'm with my Franciscan friends, the critical thinking some systematic theologians offer somehow gets lost in the nuance. And as devoted — some may even say pious — as I am about novenas, the rosary, and adoration, I still roll my eyes when I see women wearing doilies to communion or young priests in cassocks.

Our church is *huge*. I would like to think that our universal community can take a lot of diversity. We just don't have to prove we are better than one another or more holy than the next holy companion.

That's why my most recent pilgrimage has meant so much to me as I try to make sense of our fractured church. From financial trouble to reported sexual abuse cases beyond measure, we are drowning in this sorrow. I point fingers and place blame on others while slowly taking great pride in how small my splinter is in comparison to those in leadership.

I often get stuck in judgment, comparison and disgust.

But now is the time for work, commitment, truth, vision and hope.

I had been planning my current trip to Rome and Assisi since Pope Francis announced Archbishop Óscar Romero's canonization day in May. Yes, another pilgrimage. I wanted to deepen my own faith in both our hierarchical, often distant, community and in the most local, grounded, and intimate of communities. Romero's conversion, witness and inspiration lead me to care for all people despite obvious political and theological camps we find ourselves entrenched in.

Now that I'm actually here, my Franciscan friend's words ring ever so true — Francis does embody, like Jesus, a sound mind to understand the politics and law and a huge heart to experience empathy, compassion, loss and love.

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I came just an arm's length away from Francis *twice*! In the moment, I was not prepared for the encounter as he looked me squarely in the eyes the first time. I just kept saying, "Thank you! Thank you!" Nothing else came out of my mouth. I was stunned.

Later, a man who is part of his entourage, handed me a slip of paper with an invitation to check out the professional photos that were taken.

Side note: If you haven't already, go to www.photovat.com. This is a place where you can be inspired by just how loving Francis is, and how his love is contagious.

Scrolling through the pages and pages of photos brought me to prayer. I thought specifically of the passage in Luke's Gospel that reads"

> "An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, and said to them, 'Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great' " (Luke 9:46-48).

I always thought that Jesus wanted to teach his disciples that children were dependent and needed their assistance. But now I'm beginning to second guess that. As I scanned the pages of pictures of Francis holding and kissing children, I was drawn to his face. How he seemed so joyful, so present, so focused. He is even captured waving back at the children after he returns them to their handlers.

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And his security detail. I think of the moment in Mark's Gospel when Jesus passes through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem and a blind beggar, Bartimaeus, calls out to him. "Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him.' So they called the blind man, saying to him,

'Take courage; get up, he is calling you' " (Mark 10:49). These guys flanking Francis are brought into the joy of the moment as they confirm to all others reaching out, that yes, you too are being called and chosen by Francis.

As a person who most often is on the margins of our church, I want us — capitol C hierarchy and little c lay people — to do better. I want us to look one another squarely in the eye, use our intellect and our hearts to love one another better. Let's use the best of two centuries of theology, science, psychology, economics and two centuries of great love and service in action. When we keep children at the center, we will always find a way to peace and joy. And both will be contagious.

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