Opinion

Guest Voices



Pope Francis and Juan Carlos Cruz Chellew (Courtesy of Juan Carlos Cruz Chellew)



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When I try to describe what Pope Francis means to me, I immediately think that I should write something a theologian would say, smart and peppered with citations. I am no theologian, but my story with Francis does have an episode from the New Testament that serves as a lens for me and is probably familiar to all of you.

Jesus was called to Bethany by his friends Martha and Mary because their brother Lazarus had died. He had been dead for four days, and when Jesus went to the grave, he resurrected him, and Lazarus continued his life. So yes, I do feel like Lazarus. I am a regular person who has received way too much; therefore, I have a duty to return all I can.

I met Francis one day during a battle of years with so many church leaders who — as some still do — had tried to silence me and so many survivors about the horrors of abuse. In 2018, I was given the opportunity to speak to Francis directly. At the time I was a man in pain and I didn't want anything left unsaid during that conversation.

I wanted to speak for so many survivors that deserve the privilege I was given and will never have it, to tell him about so many who have died waiting, those who have committed suicide, and those who are not believed and continue begging for justice. I wanted to tell him about the plight of the LGBTQ community and the cruel rejection of many in the church.

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After playing it beforehand for days and hours in my head, we met in the hallways of the Vatican's Santa Marta guesthouse, where — to my surprise — I encountered a man who was humble and ready to listen to whatever I was going to say.

We sat for three-and-a-half hours in a room where I told him about what they had done to me and to many others, and the machinations of the leadership of the church.

I also told him this was not unique and that it was a pattern for thousands of survivors all over the world. I told him how my faith and the figure of Mary have sustained me in the darkest times, even when I wanted to die.

I spoke about those church leaders — many bishops and cardinals who seemed more like wolves instead of shepherds — who destroy the most sacred things a human being has: our belief, our faith and our dignity.

As we traveled through the pain, his face, his posture and his occasional words felt sincere, unlike others who through the years had just pretended to listen. We cried and laughed. I went in with a huge backpack of anger and pain and came out of the grave, like Lazarus, feeling that I had a second chance and more motivated than ever to help others. He changed my life.

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Through the years, I have come to know and understand a pope who has the weight of the world on his shoulders. A man who wants to change so much — and as he does, he realizes how much there is still to do. From the outside, I feel the frustration when I see those who say yes to his face but, when they go back to their dioceses or offices, change nothing.

I am amazed at this man who walks to where others want to run away, who exalts those who are poor and marginalized, and who is not afraid to speak his mind in the face of injustice. And when I am discouraged and I talk to him, his sense of humor

can lift me up. He is the only person in the world who after every interaction I have with him it feels like the first time we've met.

Francis' example makes me want to speak up against those loud and powerful minorities who try to monopolize religion through power, money and antique laws that turn people away. Those who cast so many of us to eternal damnation without even evaluating their own lives.

I do think he knows that there are millions around the world who have been touched by his love and love him back. I am not saying that he is perfect or that he has solved everything that needs to be solved, but who is and who does? He sincerely tries. I see it when he invites, cares and loves everyone.

I know many don't share how I feel and that is OK. My change in these years has been unbelievable. I was very lost. I felt unworthy. I was in terrible pain. I didn't have much will to keep on living, let alone fight for others. Pope Francis pulled me out of the grave and I will be grateful forever. I have been given much and much will be demanded from me. I take that very seriously.

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.
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