News



Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby, Pope Francis, President Salva Kiir and the Rev. Iain Greenshields, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, are pictured outside the presidential palace after the pope's arrival Feb. 3 in Juba, South Sudan. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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In the days and weeks after white smoke billowed from the Sistine Chapel on March 13, 2013, the newly elected Pope Francis captured the attention of those well outside the Catholic Church with his rejection of the luxurious papal apartments, his staunch emphasis on mercy and his off-the-cuff airplane press conferences.

To gain insight into how Francis is viewed among those with different faiths — or none — NCR invited the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, an atheist, a Muslim scholar and a rabbi to discuss the Jesuit pontiff.

Below are excerpts from their responses, with minor edits for clarity.



Bishop Michael Curry delivers a keynote reflection in January during Walk the Walk Week, a program focused on diversity and inclusion at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. (Courtesy of Barbara Johnston/University of Notre Dame)

Bishop Michael Curry is the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. The first African American to head the denomination, Curry has been compared to Francis for his energetic and pastoral approach. He became widely known following his powerful sermon at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.



Pope Francis greets a boy who ran onstage during his general audience in the Paul VI hall Aug. 17, 2022, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Curry: My daddy used to say that everyone was born in God's image and nobody has any more of that image than anybody else. Which means there is a profound equality among us as the children of God. And that passion for the value of human beings and of creation moves me. I have my own history that gets me to that place, but I sense something similar in this pope. Like when a little kid gets up on the altar and he has this naturalness of someone who clearly has been a pastor and has a pastoral instinct and conviction.

What's really cool about him — and we come from different traditions, of course — but I can see him as my pastor. And I have a feeling a lot of people can see that in him.

Pope Francis speaks to the media aboard the papal flight from Rio de Janeiro to Rome July 28,

Pope Francis speaks to the media aboard the papal flight from Rio de Janeiro to Rome July 28, 2013. When the pope told reporters, "Who am I to judge" a homosexual person, he was emphasizing a part of Catholic teaching often overlooked by the media and misunderstood by many people. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Curry: I find the pope a marvelous combination of humility, clarity and authenticity. I will never forget when he was on the airplane talking to reporters about LGBTQ folk and their relationship with God, and he said, "Who am I to judge?" which offers such clarity about who we are before God; who am I to judge somebody else's relationship with God? That was stunning. It was a holy moment.



Francis represents spiritual and moral leadership and life in a complex time — and that's a blessing to the world, to the rest of us.

He was just in South Sudan, as well as other parts of Africa, with the archbishop of Canterbury [Justin Welby] and [Rev. Iain Greenshields], the moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, hoping to help, to inspire, to find ways of peace. And when he speaks, we listen. People of different faith traditions listen because he doesn't come from a position of arrogance or dominance; there is a genuine humility. So folks trust him. We trust him because he's real.



Nadya Dutchin (Courtesy of American Humanist Association)

Nadya Dutchin is the former executive director of the American Humanist Association. Raised Catholic and now an atheist and humanist, Dutchin also previously served as co-executive director of a climate justice organization based in Washington, D.C.

The word "humanism" has a number of meanings; there is literary humanism and Christian humanism, for example. Dutchin, who shared her responses in an email,

told NCR that as an atheist humanist, she has a nontheistic worldview that asserts people can be good without believing in God. "We know that people can form ethical values that are informed by science, reason and compassion," she said.

Dutchin: The affirmation from Francis that ... the ultimate "sin" is disobeying your own conscience was pleasantly surprising to me. I think we've seen how disobeying our conscience and doing what isn't aligned with our values can create a "hell on Earth'' scenario for people across time. More than that, individual and collective determination requires that we are free to shape our lives. While I am not uncritical of the Catholic Church, I can always appreciate liberatory critical thinking.

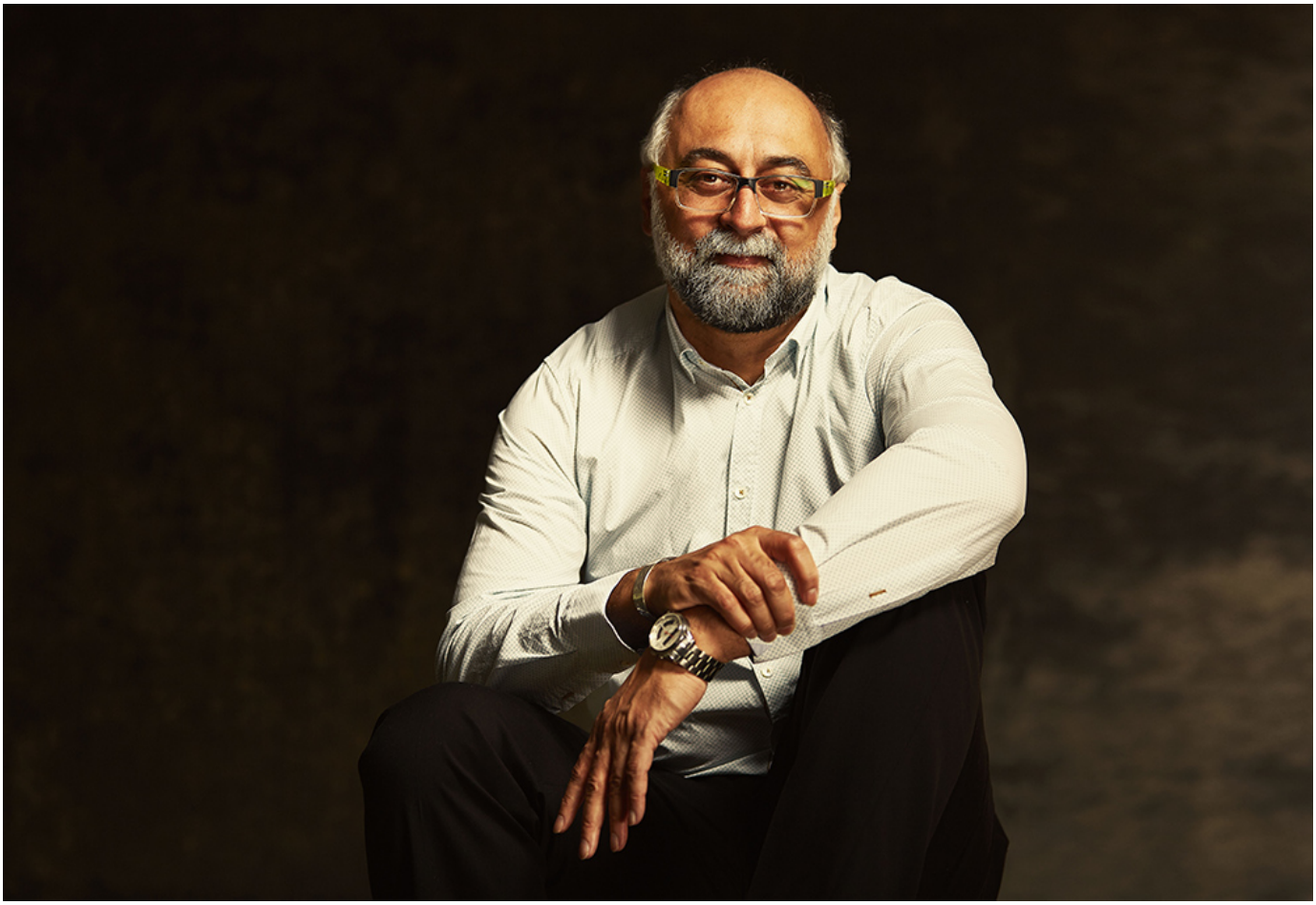
[In a letter published by the Italian newspaper La Repubblica in September 2013, Francis responded to questions asked by Eugenio Scalfari, co-founder and former editor of the newspaper and a self-described non-believer. Francis wrote: "There is sin, also for those who have no faith, in going against one's conscience. Listening to it and abiding by it means making up one's mind about what is good and evil."]



Pope Francis greets Jesuit Fr. James Martin during a private meeting at the Vatican in this Oct. 1, 2019, file photo. In 2021, Martin released a handwritten letter from the pope that commended his LGBT ministry. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Dutchin: As a nontheistic humanist, I know it takes deep character and courage to dissent from entrenched norms and institutions with long histories of demanding sameness, and Pope Francis has made some assertions that diverge from his predecessors. … He seems invested in building community and belonging by breaking from Catholic traditions that dehumanize LGBTQIA people.

It is my hope that Pope Francis marks a Socratic progression that leads to more human dignity and freedom and disentangles from authoritarian religious suffering and violence. We have one precious life on this planet, and I hope Pope Francis marks a culture shift toward cooperation and inclusivity over toxic polarization and dogmatic rigidity.



Amir Hussain (Courtesy of Amir Hussain)

Amir Hussain is a professor and chair of the Theological Studies Department at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He is also president of the American Academy of Religion.

Hussain: What really made me as a Muslim stand up and take notice was when soon after being elected pope, he goes to a prison in Rome on Holy Thursday and washes people's feet, including a Muslim woman's. And this was this moment of: Wait, he did what? He's washing women's feet and a Muslim woman's feet?



Pope Francis washes the foot of a prison inmate during the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper at Rome's Casal del Marmo prison for minors March 28, 2013.

Pope Francis washed the feet of 12 young people of different nationalities and faiths, including at least two Muslims and two women, who are housed at the juvenile detention facility. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

As a Muslim is was a very difficult thing to see Pope Benedict XVI, this man who wrote *Deus Caritas Est* ["God Is Love," Benedict's first encyclical], also write the Regensburg address, which was quite problematic, to say it gently, for Muslims. And then here's Pope Francis washing the feet of Muslim women.

[In 2006, during a lecture at the University of Regensburg in Bavaria, Germany, Benedict cited the words of a Byzantine emperor who said the prophet Muhammad brought "things only evil and inhuman." Benedict apologized after the comments provoked widespread condemnation and extremist violence against Catholics in the Muslim world.]

Pope Francis did it again — washing Muslims' feet — during the Syrian crisis, the war, in 2016. That humility of touching, of washing someone's feet and how powerful that is, and here's the head of the Catholic Church doing this for Muslims. I would not have thought I would ever see this kind of thing happen.



Pope Francis greets refugees who are traveling to Rome with him at the international airport in Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, Greece, April 16, 2016. The pope brought 12 refugees to Italy on his plane. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Hussain: In 2015, during the Syrian refugee crisis — when the photo emerged of the young Syrian boy who was drowned — there was all this discussion about if we should take more refugees or not. Then there was Trump's anti-Muslim campaign rhetoric. And in that context, Pope Francis brings three Syrian Muslim families to the Vatican.

Again I thought: This is astonishing. Here people are wondering: Can we do this — can we take refugees in? What will it mean for us? Are there security concerns? And there's Pope Francis.



Pope Francis greets Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar mosque and university, at Sakhir Royal Palace Nov. 4, 2022, in Awali, Bahrain. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Hussain: There is also Pope Francis' "*Fratelli Tutti* [on Fraternity and Social Friendship]," in which the pope cites the work of Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb. I think that's crucial — the pope in an encyclical citing a Muslim scholar.

[Ahmad el-Tayeb is the grand imam of Al-Azhar, a mosque and university in Cairo. Hussain also highlighted how, in 2019, Francis and the grand imam jointly signed the "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," which invites people of different faiths to "advance a culture of mutual respect."]

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And the pope elevates to cardinals [British-born] Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, who has done extraordinary work on dialogue with Muslims, and Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego.

San Diego is right on the border, so McElroy was dealing with issues of migration and being very outspoken, saying it was our duty to support migrants in general but Muslims in particular. He used the phrase "new nativism," describing the kind of thing that occurred almost [150] years ago, when people had the same concerns about foreigners who came into the country.

I'm not speaking just personally as a Muslim, but I think Muslims around the world are seeing the many ways the Francis' papacy has really had an impact.



Rabbi John Linder gives Pope Francis a copy of the Hebrew Bible during a visit with the pontiff October 2022 at the Vatican. (Courtesy of Rabbi John Linder)

Rabbi John Linder of Temple Solel in Arizona was part of an interfaith delegation of U.S. community organizers who visited the pope last fall. Members of the 20-person group, all affiliated with the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, said the pope listened attentively and offered memorable encouragement.

Linder: I doubled as a photographer during the visit with Pope Francis, and I have a photo of every single person the pope saw and greeted. For the pope it was not a photo op; it was looking each person right in the eye, affirming that person, and treating that person with all the dignity in the world and without any sense of hierarchy.

My guess is that when he's in St. Peter's Square he's looking out and hoping that each person in those huge crowds actually feels seen. Because I think at his core that is an essential value, an essential part of who he is as a human being.



Pope Francis prays at the Ermineskin Cree Nation Cemetery before meeting with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities July 25, 2022, at Maskwacis, Alberta. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Linder: I'm aware that in the Catholic world there are bishops with whom he's not winning a popularity contest, but I think the pope during his time in this position wants to make a difference. He is there to seek justice and ask for forgiveness. And because he's within arguably one of the most powerful institutions in the world, that's going to shake people up.

In places where the Catholic Church has in some way harmed communities, he is genuinely asking for forgiveness, like when he spent time with the Inuit community [as well as First Nations and Métis peoples] in Canada. I know those in the Catholic community are grateful, and for those outside the Catholic community he's been an example of a human being in a position of power saying: "I apologize for these actions and I'm asking for your forgiveness."

Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Pope Francis embrace after visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem

Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Pope Francis embrace after visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem May 26, 2014. They have been friends for 25 years and co-authored "On Heaven and Earth" in 2010. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Linder: I know all too well the history of the Jewish people and antisemitism and the role that Christianity has played in that. And I think we have made great strides, and I give thanks for Pope Francis for validating other faith traditions and seeing that the different traditions can strengthen one another.

I shared the following imagery in our home for the holiday of Hanukkah:

The candle that you light first on the menorah is called a shamash candle. It is the helping candle, and it's with that candle that the first night you light one light, the next night you light two lights and then consecutively up until eight.

The first light is not diminished by giving light to all the other candles, and collectively now you've got nine candles burning.

And I hope the pope would not feel offended by me seeing his leadership as that candle that brings light. It brings light in dignifying each faith tradition and all the peoples of the earth. I think he is a pope who believes we are all interconnected, and without one another we are not going to be able to fulfill our respective faith traditions.

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