Opinion
NCR Voices



Children wait to see Pope Francis as he arrives at the Steppe Arena to celebrate Mass in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Sept. 3. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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The Holy Father's trip to Mongolia was stunning in so many ways. Just last month, when Pope Francis went to World Youth Day in Lisbon, we all witnessed familiar images of enormous crowds at several events, with dozens of local church dignitaries forming a receiving line at the airport and the major services, motorcades that disrupt traffic for blocks and for days, and hundreds of concelebrants at the major Masses.

In Mongolia, there are only 1,500 Catholics, so the crowds were few. The one — astonishingly young — cardinal, Giorgio Marengo, was on hand to greet the pontiff, but the other prelates were all from the Vatican.

As my colleague Christopher White, NCR Vatican correspondent, noted in one of his excellent reports from the scene, there were only a few hundred onlookers outside the State Palace gathered to catch a glimpse of the most famous spiritual leader in the world, and Francis' visit "barely disrupted the city center, marking a stark contrast from many papal visits that can shut down entire cities."

They did not need many concelebrants to distribute Communion to the 2,000 people gathered in the Steppe Arena for Sunday's Mass.

Why go all that way, and at such considerable expense, for such a meager showing?

Many considerations are at work in the planning of a papal trip, and I doubt very much that anyone pays particular attention to the readings of the day when the timing of a pastoral visit is fixed. In the absence of human calculation, Providence often makes itself felt, and felt profoundly.

In this case, the answer to the question — why go to Mongolia? — was found in a sentence, not even the most arresting sentence, in the Gospel for the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time: "You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

The Holy Father framed his sermon on the psalm, which spoke about thirsting for the Lord, and how the Lord satisfies our thirsts. But when he turned to the Gospel, he discussed this very sentence:

> The Lord then rebukes Peter because he thinks "as the world does," and not as God does. If we think that success, power or material things suffice to satisfy the thirst in our lives, then we are thinking as the world does. That kind of worldliness leads nowhere; indeed, it leaves us thirstier than before. Jesus instead shows us the way: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

The pope did not apply this passage to his own decision to go to visit this small church in a remote country, but I shall.

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The church in Mongolia is a new church, a small church. Any evangelical "success" is in its future. It has little power or material strength. It is the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32), small but with the potential for greatness contained within it, not greatness in the calculations of the world, but greatness in the power of faith. Or not. It is given to none of us how the kingdom of God will manifest itself.

Still, we in the West know some of the things that do not bring on the kingdom: Anything that reeks of marketing or utilitarianism or faddishness always proves itself to be a counter-witness. In his meeting with clergy and religious at the Sts. Peter and Paul Cathedral, the pope said:

> As you lift your eyes to Mary, then, may you find refreshment, knowing that being little is not a problem, but a resource. God loves littleness, and through it he loves to accomplish great things, as Mary herself bears witness. Brothers and sisters, do not be concerned about small numbers, limited success or apparent irrelevance. That is not how God works.

How easily and often do we American Catholics fret about our dwindling numbers, our inability to "succeed" at shaping the culture? How often do we clamor for relevance?

The pope, a son of the church in the Global South, sees things with a different perspective, one more easily rooted in the miracles that happen when priests and religious accompany people who struggle, who suffer, who cling to Jesus the more easily because they are not busy clinging to worldly stuff. No wonder the pope seemed so perfectly at ease in the unfamiliar culture of Mongolia.

In 1 Kings 19:11-13, the Lord tells Elijah to stand on the mountain because the Lord will be passing by. There is a great wind, an earthquake and a fire, but God is not in them. Then Elijah hears a gentle whisper and he covers himself in his cloak. It is the Lord.

Our culture is windy with oratory, it quakes with provocations, and it is afire with its fascination with all that is great and grand and gaudy. Francis, in Mongolia, reminded us to listen for the whisper in which the Lord manifests himself.

Will we, like Elijah, cover ourselves in our cloak and recognize the Lord's presence in the littleness of the Catholic community there? Will we try to think as God does?

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Mongolia** feature series. View the full series.