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The pope and poverty

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Looks like the Pope Francis Fan Club is losing membership. At least that's what the Gallup Poll folks are saying.

You had to know it wouldn't last. All that care for the poor business had to be getting on folks' nerves. You see, most of the people who hear what Francis says are rich.

The poor are not wired. The poor do not have smart phones and computers. The poor do not have televisions or radios. The poor do not have books or newspapers.

Oh, you say, there are poor folks on my block and they have cell phones and computers and TV and radio and books and newspapers.

Wrong. The deeply poor do not live in neighborhoods. They are not "down the block." They are in tin shacks, in huts, even caves. They are in lean-tos against abandoned buildings. If they can find them, they scrounge garbage mountains for things they need: clothing, furniture, and sometimes food. They hunt or fish or grow their sustenance. They fashion what they can from what is around them. In the country they have wood and stones and dirt. In the city they have the detritus of the rich (or at least of the richer), the droppings of plastic and resin the modern age uses to replace wood and stone.

So, when Francis talks about the poor, most of the people who hear him have no idea what he is talking about. Most of the people who hear him are, relatively speaking, rich.

Here are the numbers: half of the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day. That is 3 billion people. Now, maybe in the poorest areas of the world ? the favelas of Brazil, the jungle villages of Africa, the city edges of India, the seaside settlements of Malaysia and the Philippines ? you can manage on that scale of economy. But think of what \$2.50 a day allows for and what it eliminates.

People in what they call developed nations have access to all manner of things the truly poor would never dream of. There are department stores and supermarkets and delicatessens. There are planes and trains and busses and cars. There are hospitals and clinics and pharmacies. There are universities and high schools and continuing education programs. There is clean water, clean land, and clean air.

Most of us reading this column, myself included, cannot fathom life without these things. From time to time, one or another is out of reach. Most of the time, it's all just around the corner.

So, what about the poor? They should be miserable but the people with nothing, who own nothing and whose lives really depend on each other, so often seem happy even in their misery.

Why?

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I think Francis has the answer. He is, after all, a Jesuit priest. Jesuits pray the full 30-days of the Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola at least twice: first on entering the novitiate, and again during what is called their ?tertianship,? as they approach mid-life.

The aim of the Exercises is to free the individual to live wholly in God's care. That does not mean living off the grid. It means living with the understanding that all is gift and that we must gratefully use what we have for our own sake and for the sake of others.

That is the mystery of Francis the world, now apparently including some on the right, cannot understand. As a Jesuit in solemn vows, he truly owns nothing. As pope, he is trying to encourage the rest of us to understand that we also ?own? nothing.

Francis is teaching that our distress comes from the need to control ? property, money, even the weather. Of course we must care for and be responsible for what we ?have? ? our homes, our jobs and savings. But we must not be so bent on possessions, on controlling everything that our lives revert to Scrooge-like crankiness. We can no more control things than we can control the weather.

So now, Francis is saying both to individuals and to nations: ?lighten up.? You do not need so much. You do not need everything you have. You can spread it around and you should spread it around because in reality you do not and cannot ?own? anything. Once you die, you die.

Will the people now turning away because they fear Francis? condemning capitalism be able to recognize that he, like popes before him, criticizes the excesses and the evils of capitalism, not the system itself?

Will the people now turning away because they are, as one conservative pundit put it, tired of being scolded, recognize that Francis, like St. Ignatius before him, pointed out that all is gift?

No one says it is easy to live like that. It is not. But it is not all that hard, either.

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