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Francis' challenge to bishops

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

Pope Francis is known for preaching the compassion and mercy of God, but he can be pretty tough on priests and bishops. Like Jesus with the religious leaders of his time (scribes and Pharisees), Pope Francis does not pull his punches.

Francis has now given major speeches to bishops in Brazil, Korea, Mexico, Italy, and the United States. Comparing and contrasting what the pope said to the U.S. bishops with what he said to other bishops gives us a better understanding of his pastoral vision.

Pope Francis began his 3,600-word talk to the U.S. bishops with words of affection to the bishops, Catholics, and all the American people. He specifically identified himself with those who reach out to the marginalized:

Whenever a hand reaches out to do good or to show the love of Christ, to dry a tear or bring comfort to the lonely, to show the way to one who is lost or to console a broken heart, to help the fallen or to teach those thirsting for truth, to forgive or to offer a new start in God ... know that the Pope is at your side, the Pope supports you.

He showed appreciation for "the unfailing commitment of the Church in America to the cause of life and that of the family," and or "the immense efforts you have made to welcome and integrate those immigrants who continue to look to America, like so many others before them, in the hope of enjoying its blessings of freedom and prosperity."

He also praised the church's work in education and charitable services. He mentioned the bishops' commitment to bring healing to victims of abuse and to ensure that such crimes will never be repeated.

Words of praise from the pope are common in addresses to bishops, as are his concern for immigrants, the poor, and the marginalized. But his praise of the U.S. church's work in education contrasts with his call for Brazilian and Korean bishops to do more.

And only to the U.S. bishops did Francis mention victims of abuse. He has been criticized for not being stronger with bishops on this. However, in his press conference on the way back to Rome from Mexico, he unambiguously said, "A bishop who moves a priest to a different parish if he detects a case of pedophilia is without conscience and the best thing for him to do would be to resign."

After words of praise and appreciation to the American bishops, the pope exhorted them to be "pastors with undivided hearts and selfless devotion." He urged them to find their identity "in constant prayer, in

preaching [Acts 6:4] and in shepherding the flock" entrusted to their care.

They should not preach "complicated doctrines," but joyfully proclaim "Christ who died and rose for our sake." He said the same thing to the Italian bishops.

This is a common theme of Francis. For example, to the bishops of Brazil he said, "Perhaps we have reduced our way of speaking about mystery to rational explanations; but for ordinary people the mystery enters through the heart." He frowns on homilies that are "simply moralizing, detached, abstract."

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To the Italian bishops he compared this to Gnosticism, which "brings us to trust in logical and clear reasoning ... which however loses the tenderness of the flesh of the brother."

Francis told the American bishops "to flee the temptation of narcissism, which blinds the eyes of the shepherd, makes his voice unrecognizable and his actions fruitless."

This temptation is not specifically mentioned by Francis to the bishops of other countries, although he frequently attacks clericalism. For example, to the bishops of Brazil, he warned against "the temptation of aloofness and clericalism, of coldness and indifference, of triumphalism and self-centredness."

Perhaps narcissism is seen by Francis as a peculiarly American form of clericalism.

He said to the U.S. bishops that "it is helpful for a bishop to have the farsightedness of a leader and the shrewdness of an administrator, but we fall into hopeless decline whenever we confuse the power of strength with the strength of that powerlessness with which God has redeemed us."

To the Italian bishops, he compared this to Pelagianism, which "brings us to have trust in structures, in organizations, in perfect plans, however abstract."

With the Brazilian bishops, the pope also emphasized the pastoral over the administrative. The work of bishops should benefit the people of God as a whole, not just the church as an organization, he told them.

Similarly, to the Mexican bishops, the pope said, "the Church's power does not reside in herself; it is hidden in the deep waters of God, into which she is called to cast her nets."

Nor can we "let ourselves be paralyzed by fear," Francis told the American bishops, or "give in to fear, to lick one's wounds, to think back on bygone times and to devise harsh responses to fierce opposition."

Rather, they should be "promoters of the culture of encounter."

"The path ahead," he said, "is dialogue among yourselves, dialog in your presbyterates, dialog with lay persons, dialog with families, dialog with society. I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialog fearlessly."

In Brazil, Francis also spoke of the importance of the culture of encounter and the importance of dialog. He told the bishops that the church needs "ministers capable of warming people's hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness."

This dialog require both boldness and humility, Francis told the American bishops.

Humility is necessary "to understand the thinking of others, or to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain."

Humility was urged on other bishops. "[C]loseness and humble bowing down are more powerful than force," Francis told the Mexican bishops, who should imitate the "freedom of God who chooses the humble in order to reveal the majesty of his countenance."

Likewise he urged humility on the Italian bishops. "If we do not lower ourselves we will not see his [Jesus'] face," said Francis. "We will not see anything of his fullness if we do not accept that God has emptied God's self."

Francis warned the American bishops, "Harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart."

This exhortation about harsh language is not in his talks to other bishops, although it comes up twice with the U.S. bishops. Judging by his talks, it appears to be a concern unique to the United States.

"We need to learn from Jesus, or better to learn Jesus, meek and humble," said Francis in the U.S., and carry out the mission the Lord gives us in communion and collegiality. The year of mercy is "a privileged moment for strengthening communion, perfecting unity, reconciling differences, forgiving one another and healing every rift."

Communion is a common theme of Francis. In Brazil, he praised CELAM, the supranational episcopal conference in Latin America, for "working in a spirit of solidarity and subsidiarity to promote, encourage and improve collegiality among the bishops and communion between the region's Churches and their pastors."

Perhaps Francis believes that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) could learn something from CELAM about collegiality and communion.

A humble and united witness is especially important in the United States because of the challenging issues of our time, according to Francis.

The innocent victim of abortion, children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, wars, violence and drug trafficking, the environment devastated by man's predatory relationship with nature -- at stake in all of this is the gift of God, of which we are noble stewards but not masters. It is wrong, then, to look the other way or to remain silent.

"These essential aspects of the Church's mission belong to the core of what we have received from the Lord," affirmed Francis. "I urge you to offer this witness, with the means and creativity born of love, and with the humility of truth."

The Mexican bishops were also encouraged to communion and unity.

Rather than harsh rhetoric, the pope proposed the U.S. church be "a humble home, a family fire which attracts men and women through the attractive light and warmth of love." To the Brazilian bishops he also spoke of the need of "a Church capable of warming hearts." And to the Mexican bishops he also described the church as a *casita sagrada*, "a small home in which her children can feel comfortable."

Finally, he urged the U.S. bishops to "be pastors close to people, pastors who are neighbors and servants." They should resist "the temptation to become notaries and bureaucrats, but instead reflect the motherhood of the Church."

It is clear that Pope Francis emphasized some issues with the American bishops more than others. He warned against emphasizing the administrative more than the pastoral, harshness rather than warmth, their power rather than the seemingly powerlessness of God. He called them to collegiality and communion. He warned them against fear and narcissism, and encouraged them to dialog with both boldness and humility.

Some of the usual Francis themes were absent. For example, he did not warn the U.S. bishops about acting like princes. Clericalism was not specifically mentioned, as it was in Brazil, Mexico, and Korea.

In reading the speeches, what we might consider vintage Francis is most evident in the two speeches to bishops in Brazil, one to the Brazilian bishops and the other to the leaders of CELAM. The two speeches (the first 4,600 words, the second 3,300), which drew on their common experience working together at Aparecida, gave him time and space to lay out his vision for the bishops and the church.

Likewise, he more at ease in speaking in Mexico (4,400 words) than in the United States.

When Francis spoke in Korea (2,100 words) and the United States (3,600), his language was less graphic and forceful. It was as if he held back because he did not feel as sure of the situation as he did in Latin America.

Pope Francis' two talks in Brazil continue to give the best expressions of his ecclesiology and pastoral vision. Reading his talk to the U.S. bishops in isolation from these is a mistake.

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