

Filling in the Francis Gaps

Ken Briggs | Mar. 15, 2013 NCR Today

What does it mean to call Pope Francis an "advocate for the poor"? Among the trio of images attached to him within hours of his election -- simplicity and modesty being the other two -- his depiction as a friend of the neediest looms largest because it relates directly to the welfare of suffering people.

Without evidence of how that devotion has expressed itself, however, the term means almost nothing.

Both leftists and rightists voice such sentiments and mean entirely different things. Leftists emphasize church action to challenge the power of the rich and powerful who largely control the destiny of the poor. Rightists stress the responsibility of the downtrodden to lift themselves out of dire straits through virtue and right choices, offering church services mostly in the form of charity. One aims at a more equal society; the other at encouraging outsiders to join the status quo.

The actual record of the former Buenos Aires cardinal is yet to be explained. Was he a friend of the poor who took risks by confronting the established order or did he see his mission as a model of how to be content with a simple life like theirs.

In Latin America it matters keenly because the hierarchy has such a history of buddying-up with the wealthy elites. Liberation theology was a significant protest against this huge gap and the system which reinforced it, but most of the bishops, including this one, fought fiercely against it. In doing so, Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger and their Latin American allies were quick to declare their love for the poor. Liberation theology was just too prone to Marxist influence to be the right solution, they said. But nothing took its place. Where was the current pope in all this? Did he have a plan to alleviate poverty or was his counter-argument that the church's purpose was to comfort the afflicted without aiding a movement to improve their condition?

There's much more to tell, of course, and perhaps the record will clarify what siding with the poor means to Pope Francis.

Much is made of his taking the name Francis. It's daring in the sense that it implies a radical alternative to the way Christians have increasingly lived comfortably in the lap of values which the Gospel reject. When the "preferential option" blank is filled in, we'll see whether the implementation matches the uneasiness inherent in the papal name.