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Pope Francis: Culture Warrior or Among the Poor?

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Distinctly Catholic

A dear friend called yesterday and reminded me of something I had almost forgotten. "So, based on these early days," my friend said, "I am thinking you were a bit closer to the mind of the cardinals than George Weigel." The reference was to the essays, published in the *Wall Street Journal*, by Mr. Weigel and myself, among others, in which we were asked to complete the sentence: "The new pope should be?." Mr. Weigel wrote that the new pope should be a culture warrior. I wrote that the new pope should be among the poor.

So far, I am not picking up much in the way of "culture warrior," are you? Yesterday, listening to the new pope's sermon at St. Anne's Church, I heard him warn us all about the temptation to put ourselves in the place of the man who stood in the front of the synagogue and said, "I thank thee Lord that I am not like other men." Yet, that temptation seems to me to be at the heart of the culture war personality: I have the answers, anyone who disagrees is demonic and threatening the Church. The alternate path is to kneel at the back of the synagogue and say "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." This alternate path is one that is mostly left untrodden by some of our culture warrior bishops and commentators, no?

Then, we saw something quite stunning. After the Mass, the new pope stood outside the church door and greeted the parishioners. He kissed the heads of the children, hugged some people "he likes to give and receive hugs" let those who wished kiss his ring but did not force it into people's faces. He could have been almost any parish priest, greeting the flock after Mass. I suspect every parish priest on the planet felt a tsunami of affirmation watching the pope do what they do, recognizing the importance of friendship for the health of the Christian community. Again, this does not seem like culture warrior stuff to me. At least so far as I could see, Pope Francis did not wag his finger at anyone. He did, however, bring a young priest

who works with street children up to the altar and ask the congregation to pray for his work.

The day before, Saturday, the pope met with the press. There he explicitly said that he wants a Church that is poor and for the poor. We will all have to wait and see what he means by this precisely, how it will play itself out in terms of pastoral priorities. I think it is safe to conclude at this stage that bringing back the Tridentine Mass will no longer be viewed as an adequate pastoral plan for the 21st century as certain recently appointed bishops in the U.S. seem to think. Pope Francis clearly understands that the Church's credibility requires today ? as it has always required ? standing with the poor and for the poor, sharing their burdens, receiving the gifts they have to offer the rest of us because of the privileged place they hold, not the bishops, in the kingdom of God.

Poverty, of course, is not only about material poverty. St. Francis evidenced a poverty of spirit, what we normally call humility, that allowed him to reach people and touch their consciences in ways that others in the scandal-ridden Church of his time had failed to do. I was hoping the new pope might expand upon this sense of poverty in his talk to the journalists. I could not have hoped ? really it was stunning ? that he would so clearly evidence this humility by acknowledging at the end of the meeting that many of the journalists were not Catholics or even believers and, so, respecting their consciences but mindful that they are all children of God, he would offer the traditional papal blessing in silence. This shows a generosity of spirit that is as welcome as it is infrequently encountered. I suspect many journalists felt touched in a way a traditional, spoken blessing might not have touched them.

Of course, the new Pope will proclaim the Gospel, which is more than just what we read in the four scriptural accounts. Different Catholics want different things from what we all sense will be ?change? in this new pontificate. What is emerging, though, is an invitation to follow this man. His simplicity and easy affability make it easy to do so. Hope is stirring in the hearts of the faithful. Cardinal Comastri captured some of this when he spoke to the new Pope at the conclusion of Mass yesterday, the idea that something of the spirit of Bethlehem had been awakened in these past few days. And, the babe born in humble and simple circumstances went on to lead a challenging life and a painful death. As Pope Francis reminded us, too, a Christian who ignores the Cross is no longer following Christ. I hope that all Catholics will listen to this new pope and allow themselves to be challenged by him, not to be disappointed by anything he says that does not conform to their prior hopes for change but, instead, to say to themselves ? if this man, so humble, so simple, so engaging, can think in a way that I do not, perhaps there is more for me to learn. In short, his humility should evoke a similar humility, not an agenda, from us.

Tomorrow's Mass will be interesting. So, too, will the new curial appointments. Even more, it remains to be seen if Pope Francis' personal simplicity will be translated into not only policy but personnel selections also. Will newly appointed bishops be cut out of the same humble cloth? Or will we continue to get culture warriors who alienate their flock? These are not small questions. But, for now, it is nice to feel the wind at our back again as Catholics, and to entertain the hope that, like the passage in the Gospels, we know the wind is from the Holy Spirit, indeed the wind is the Holy Spirit. We know not whence it came nor whither it goes, and only see it rustle the leaves of the trees. Let's hope it rustles us too.

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