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Could Pope Francis fit a popular progressive poem?

by Sharon Abercrombie

NCR Today
Pope Francis

When DignityUSA posted Jan Phillips' essay, "If I Were Pope," early last week in its March news bulletin, I chuckled and shouted, "Yes!" Since Pope Benedict XVI retired last month, there has been no shortage of papal job descriptions appearing in newspapers and on the Internet. Progressive Catholics, environmentalists, social activists and ordinary people on the streets have poured forth their hopes, dreams and expectations for his successor with deeply felt passion.

But there is something extra special about Phillips' take on the papacy. I had first read the essay last year. It originally appeared in her latest book, *No Ordinary Time*, a book of hours for those "walking the path of spiritual intelligence and evolutionary creativity," as described on her website. It was published in April 2011.

For those who are unfamiliar with her work, Phillips grew up Catholic, entered a religious order for two years, then took off with her camera on a motorcycle pilgrimage across the United States to find her place in the universe. Now the author of many books about women's empowerment and spirituality, Phillips also works as a photographer, songwriter and retreat leader.

During a reread of "If I Were Pope," I had this gut feeling that an unseen co-author, a spirit, was hovering around Phillips' computer. You know, that capricious Trinity character sometimes known as Sophia (wisdom). She has been known to flip set-in-stone beliefs and customs on their graying, old pates.

"If I Were Pope" provides specific, common sense "to-do" examples around Catholic progressives' hopes and dreams with characteristic Jan Phillips wittiness.

"If I were pope ... I'd buy farms in rural places and dedicate each one to organic farming and cooperative,

sustainable, community-based agriculture." That's only the beginning.

Jan Phillips as pope would be very busy. She would auction off the wardrobe trappings of her privileged job, that one-of-a-kind ceremonial ensemble -- "my skullcap, my mozetta cape and my darling red shoes" -- to the highest bidder then send the money to Haiti to build schools and health centers.

Mystics, so often frowned upon or silenced in the past, would be cherished. They would not want for work. Phillips would hire them to write poetry all day long to be read at next Sunday's Masses.

And like any woman who moves into new digs, she would redecorate: "I'd hire a thousand displaced workers to construct a new Sistine Chapel and cover it with mirrors instead of male images."

And one of her first official acts would be to launch a contest for 10 new sacraments that celebrate peacemaking, justice, and interfaith creations. That's our Pope Jan.

Infallibility would have to go. After this piece of housecleaning, she would invite half the bishops and cardinals to replace themselves with a thoughtful woman, then proceed to "complete their ministries in a prison or homeless shelter." Phillips has plenty more to say about gays, priesthood, Catholics who have left the church, and homelessness. For her observations, go to the DignityUSA newsletter for March.

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I was just about to post this blog on Wednesday afternoon when an Oakland, Calif., friend Skyped with the news that we had a new pope. His name was Francis.

Who was this man? Would he mesh with some of the requirements in Jan Phillips' papal job description? I decided to wait a few days to find out.

His story is now beginning to unfold with unprecedented speediness. However, like most progressives, I have mixed feelings. I worry about his conservative stance on birth control and gay marriage. As of this writing, he has said nothing about women's ordination.

Ah, but Francis' championing of the poor prompts grateful tears, does it not? For the last 20 years, he has hung out with garbage collectors, poor single mothers and recovering drug addicts in the "misery villages" of Buenos Aires. He has shared herbal tea from a common cup and straw with them. Hmmm. Perchance, could John Boehner and Paul Ryan, those pro-corporate, rich establishment Catholic politicians, be feeling a tad uncomfortable upon hearing this news?

Francis' personal simplicity continues to amaze. What cardinal has ever taken public transportation instead of having a chauffeur? I suspect the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio would be completely at home on the 38 Geary bus line in San Francisco. Each day, this chaotic vehicle is packed to the gills with frail Chinese grandmothers toting shopping bags overflowing with greens, young Hispanic mothers with their babies in strollers, and shabbily dressed senior citizens in wheelchairs.

So far, in these early days of his papal reign, Francis has bypassed fancy medieval embroidered robes for a simple white cassock. He refuses to wear those "darling red shoes."

Francis has mingled with the Roman crowds, stopping to speak with people. He has asked us to pray for

him. On Saturday, when Alessandro Forlani, a visually impaired journalist, approached the pope with Asia, his seeing-eye dog, and asked Francis to bless his family, the new pope is reported to have added a blessing for the man's canine helper.

These are encouraging signs. But now come the hard questions. How far will he venture on issues of gay marriage, married priests, contraception and ordination of women?

Will this simple man who cooks for himself be willing sit down at the kitchen table and share his meal with a woman who knows her life's work is to be a comforter of souls by becoming a Catholic priest? Will he find it in himself to invite a gay couple to sit across that same table and share a common cup of herbal tea with them? Will he listen with an open heart to the stories of heartbreak and rejection they have suffered from a church they still love but refuse to leave? Will he be able to walk with compassion in the shoes of these three guests and realize, "Yes, I finally see. I understand."

Will he be willing to take Jan Phillips' advice, buy up some rural farms, and turn them into organic community-based agricultural havens?

Will he decide to be totally outrageous by selling the red shoes he refuses to wear in order to finance schools and health care centers in Haiti?

Jan Phillips has received most of the attention here for her ideas. But Rocky Kistner, a reporter for The Huffington Post, deserves a well-deserved nod as well. In a March 15 Huffington Post article, Kistner filed his job description for the new pope.

"Let's hope that Pope Francis ... adopts an aggressive stance on fighting climate change around the world, a growing scourge on the world's poor that the UN estimates is killing 1,000 children a day and costing the global economy \$1.2 trillion a year. That's a toll that will rise to unfathomable levels if we don't cut our addiction to dirty fuels.

"Now more than ever we need Church leaders' help to push for clean energy solutions to support a sustainable planet, one that is growing increasingly hostile for billions of inhabitants. We may well need divine intervention," he wrote.

Perhaps, just perhaps, it has arrived. Perhaps Sophia is alive and magic is afoot. Meanwhile, we can only trust, ride with the wind, and hang on for dear life.

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