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"See, I am doing something new!"

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The Catholic world continues to be intrigued by the person of Pope Francis. At this early stage, everyone is trying to interpret the small decisions he has made and discern greater significance in them. Already, some are voicing the fear that this breath of fresh Argentine air known as Pope Francis may limit his capacity for change to mere symbols, as if a symbol can ever be ?mere? to a Catholic.

It may be that the new pope?s decision, on the night of his election, not to wear the red mozzetta over his white cassock can be considered merely symbolic, the choice of whether or not to accessorize. The same can be said of his keeping his black shoes and dispensing with the red papal loafers that caused such a stir during Benedict?s tenure. But, other examples of a change of style suggest something deeper at work.

The choice of where to live is no symbol. The pope?s decision not to move into the grand papal apartments of the Apostolic Palace and instead continue residing at the Domus Sanctae Marthae, the Vatican?s version of a hotel for cardinals during the conclave and visitors the rest of the time, strikes me as deeply significant. It is not just reflective of a desire for simplicity, although it is that. The decision reflects a set of values, a way of being in the world: Pope Francis does not want to be isolated. He wants to be around people, around fellow priests and monsignori who work at the Vatican. He wants to celebrate Mass with his co-workers each morning, and not in splendid isolation. These desires tell us not only something about the man, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, but something about how he intends to govern. You can learn a lot about how an organization operates by asking questions at breakfast: So, what is on your agenda today? What is your job exactly? What are the difficulties you encounter?

The decision to celebrate Holy Thursday Mass at the Casal del Marmo, a prison for young people, is even more telling. One of the inmates reportedly told a social worker, ?At last I shall get to meet someone who

says he is my father!?" a comment that brought tears to my eyes. Just as the faith has grown dull and soft in the West where, amidst all of our affluence, it is difficult to hear the Gospel as it is, as good news for the poor, so too is it difficult for we who live amidst such abundant freedom to hear the Gospel as the proclamation of liberty to captives. We are not captive to anything, really, here in the U.S., except to our own culture. We have all the choices in the world and, sadly, a sense of entitlement to all the choices in the world that comes with that, a sense of entitlement that is not exactly fertile soil for the faith. Maybe Pope Francis is inviting all of us to examine the ways we imprison ourselves this Holy Thursday, the better to be able to honestly hope that we need our feet washed.

The other day I spoke with Derek Jeffreys, Associate professor of Humanistic Studies and Religion at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. Jeffreys has a new book that has just been released (and which is slated to be reviewed in NCR soon) called *Spirituality in Dark Places: The Ethics of Solitary Confinement*. Jeffreys told me that he has spent a lot of time worshipping with prisoners and that "it is difficult to ascertain the effect it will have on them." He noted that Bishop Ricken of Green Bay visits annually and that he also will be coming to the prison on Holy Thursday. "It is great to see that these inmates know that they are valuable enough to have their feet washed."

Is this all a mere symbol? Let's be honest. In our society, nobody gives a damn about prisoners. Find me the politician who has made a priority of ending overcrowded prison conditions a part of their campaign, or the need to focus on rehabilitation and not punishment, especially in those penal institutions that work with young people. One of my best friends works at a prison for youth and it is clear from the stories he tells me that efforts to help the inmates are often frustrated by the political need to appear tough by those who are in positions of authority. Yet, here comes the new pope, and he is going to be among the young prisoners in Rome and he will wash their feet. His titles bespeak the highest authority on earth, yet he will go and give a kid the joy that comes from finding someone who wants to be called his father. Perhaps the new pope is doing something more than a symbolic action here, perhaps he is inviting us all to reflect on what salvation means. Perhaps we all need, like the young inmate, to rediscover what it means to have someone who loves us with that unconditional love we discern in the person of Jesus Christ crucified, and in His Father, who raised Him from the dead. Perhaps the new pope is going to the prison to reacquaint the entire Church with the enormity of the claims at the heart of our faith.

Let me restate that last point: Our faith rests on some enormous claims. We believe that the Son of God came down from heaven, was born of a virgin, walked on the earth and attracted a grab bag of followers, suffered, died and was raised, and founded a Church to carry on His saving work, promising to be always with us when we gather in His name and, in a special way, when we celebrate the eucharist He left us. If we can believe that, are we prepared to believe the more difficult things? Are we able to believe that God does not want us spending money on luxuries while our brothers and sisters go to bed hungry? Can we believe that marriage really is a sacred institution, meant to be forever, a sacrament of God's grace? Can we believe that all of our laws ? our political laws and our economic laws and our social norms ? all stand under the judgment of the Cross? Can we believe that our faith is not just some set of customs and beliefs alongside others, but a faith that was revealed by God and, just so, something we must always struggle to better understand but something we cannot turn into our own plaything and make of it what we want?

Pope Francis has only been in office two weeks but already he is inviting us all to re-conceptualize the office of the papacy. Indeed, his predecessor got that ball rolling by tendering his resignation and, even more, in his own way, inviting the Church to ponder the questions I raised above these past eight years. I love Pope Emeritus Benedict too, but understand that I am a man of books, and my love for him was not shared by others. "I never liked the German," says the woman from Guatemala who sells me wine and cigarettes, "but I like this guy Francis." I think we should all resist the temptation to compare the two men whose gifts were very different but both of whom have abundant gifts. I do not begrudge the lady at the

corner store her impressions, but I resent the efforts by more learned Catholic writers to create invidious comparisons between Francis and Benedict that are designed only to cast aspersions on Benedict. The man who wrote *Caritas in Veritate* deserves better.

Nonetheless, Pope Francis is our pope now and, in his own way, is demonstrating a willingness, even an eagerness, to walk with us. The question for us is if we are going to walk with him, or if we are going to insist that he bow down before our agendas before we give him the thumbs up? I do not know where Francis will lead the Church. I hope I will have the grace to follow, no, not follow, to walk with him. This man is trying to teach us in ways that pastors teach, inviting us not to ignore theology, but to encounter the faith that undergirds theology. There is in his decisions to live at the Domus, to go to the prison, there is an invitation to us all in these acts. And there is, as well, something of Galilee in these decisions. The eternal newness of the Church is being witnessed again and as I read about Francis, I am reminded of the word of God to Isaiah that we heard on the Sunday after his election: "See, I am doing something new! Now, it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

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