

In Brazil, Francis teaches by repetition

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 27, 2013 NCR Today
World Youth Day 2013
Rio de Janeiro

It's a commonplace among Vatican-watchers that popes teach both by words and by gestures, that is, by what they say and what they do. Watching Francis in action, it may be necessary to add a third element to that list: Popes also teach by what they repeat.

When a pope says something once, maybe it's a fleeting idea or something an aide prompted him to include. When a pope returns over and over again to the same theme, like a composer weaving a leitmotif through a piece of music, then you know it matters.

Today is day six of Francis's seven-day swing through Brazil, and it's possible to spot three themes to which Francis has returned over and over again, making them unmistakable pillars of the message he came here to deliver.

A Culture of Encounter

In his homily this morning for a Mass with bishops, priests, religious and seminarians taking part in World Youth Day, Francis once again urged the church to foster what he called a "culture of encounter," over against what he described on the papal plane en route to Brazil as the dominant "throw-away culture" of the times.

This morning, Francis said that human relations in our age seem to be regulated by two "dogmas," efficiency and pragmatism. As a result, he suggested, whole categories of people perceived to lack practical value — the poor, the elderly, the unwanted child — are basically tossed aside.

The pope urged his audience this morning to "have the courage to go against the tide," drawing strong applause.

"Encountering and welcoming everyone, solidarity and fraternity: these are what make a society truly human," he said.

Solidarity is obviously a pillar of his vision; during his visit to a Rio slum on Thursday, the pope said it's become "almost a dirty word" in some circles, calling for a revival of the virtue of solidarity.

Out into the World

Any keyword search of Francis's verbiage during his stay in Brazil would doubtless find that the term "mission" is high on the list of most-used terms, reflecting the pope's vision that the church must be in a state of "permanent mission."

Over and over again, he offered some version of what may be his core pastoral idea: that the church has to get out of the sacristy and into the streets, meeting people where they live.

When he urged bishops, priests and religious this morning to get out and "walk through the door", he again drew applause.

"It is not enough simply to open the door in welcome, but we must go out through that door to seek and meet the people!" he said during the Mass.

To be sure, Francis added, "We do not want to be presumptuous, imposing "our truths." What he seems to be calling for is not aggressive proselytism, but rather a relentless commitment to service and presence, of discerning what's happening in people's lives and positioning the church in that space.

Francis delivered another version of the same point during a session with youth from Argentina on Thursday, urging them to make some noise.

"I want you to make yourselves heard in your dioceses, I want the noise to go out, I want the church to go out onto the streets, I want us to resist everything worldly, everything static, everything comfortable, everything to do with clericalism, everything that might make us closed in on ourselves," he said.

"The parishes, the schools, the institutions are made for going out ... if they don't, they become an NGO, and the church cannot be an NGO."

Within that thrust to move out into the world, Francis clearly perceives a special preference for the poor and others at the margins. This morning he quoted a line from Mother Teresa to the effect that "it's the in the *favelas*, the *barrios*, the *villas miseria*, that one must go to seek and to serve Christ."

Option for the Elderly

Although Francis is in Rio for World Youth Day, in some ways it's been his comments about people at the other end of life, the elderly, which have been more interesting.

It began on the plane, when he laid out a vision for World Youth Day that sees young people not "in isolation," but inserted into society, "principally with the elderly."

Youth, the pope said, "have the strength, and things move forward because they do the carrying." Older people, however, "are the ones who give life's wisdom."

He's returned to the theme over and over, with his sharpest language coming on Thursday during his session with Argentinian youth in Rio's downtown cathedral - the same space in which he celebrated Mass this morning.

Speaking of the elderly, Francis used uncharacteristically sharp language: "You could easily think there is a kind of hidden euthanasia, that is, we don't take care of the elderly," he said.

"But there is also a cultural euthanasia, because we don't allow them to speak, we don't allow them to act."

"I ask the elderly, from my heart: do not cease to be the cultural storehouse of our people, a storehouse that hands on justice, hands on history, hands on values, hands on the memory of the people. And the rest of you, please, do not oppose the elderly: let them speak, listen to them and go forward," the pope said.

He came back to the theme at Mass this morning, mentioning the elderly among those society too often casts aside.

John Paul II is remembered, among other things, as the 'Pope of Youth' because he launched World Youth Day and inspired legions of young believers around the world. Without dialing down that commitment to the young, Pope Francis may already be profiling as the 'Pope of the Elderly.'

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