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Francis delivers some bracing truth in Brazil

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World Youth Day 2013

Rio de Janeiro — Well before Pope Francis ever visited Brazil, commentators had compiled a standard checklist of descriptors to capture his style: simple, humble, warm and close to the people. Certainly nothing that's happened over the last seven days has dislodged those perceptions.

Given the last 48 hours, however, we probably need to add another phrase to the set: "bracingly honest."

On Saturday, in a speech to the bishops of Brazil, Francis bluntly acknowledged the reality of massive defections from Catholicism in recent decades, both to mushrooming evangelical and Pentecostal movements and to religious indifference, and he prodded the bishops to do some soul-searching.

The pope also expressed confidence that people can be won back by a church that meets them where they live, projects warmth and speaks out of "the grammar of simplicity."

On Sunday, the pope delivered another dose of plain talk to the coordinating committee of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM). Although he was speaking about the situation in Latin America, Catholics in other parts of the world may well find much of what Francis had to say recognizable in their contexts, too.

The pope began with a standard trope -- the importance of changing the paradigm in the church from maintenance to mission. Pulling that off, he argued, requires both internal renewal and dialogue with the "world around us," learning to speak its various languages.

It's critical, the pope argued, the church's language not come off as "merely prescriptive, distant and abstract."

The heart of the speech came as Francis ticked off a series of "temptations" that run counter to this missionary enterprise. He identified three categories of temptations, describing each with a degree of candor unusual in papal oratory.

1. Turning the Gospel message into an ideology

Francis said the quest for a way of reading the Gospel that comes from outside the Gospel itself is as old as the church, and it's alive and well today.

There is no such thing as a neutral point of view, the pope said. He applauded the "see-judge-act" model of discernment pioneered by the Young Christian Workers in the early 20th century, but said its Achilles' heel is that what one sees is always influenced by one's point of view.

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He sketched four points of view Sunday that, he said, distort the missionary perspective.

- "Social Reductionism": Seeing the Gospel through the lens of the social sciences, as a merely this-worldly undertaking. He said versions of this instinct run from "market liberalism" to forms of Marxism.
- "Psychological Reductionism": Seeing the Gospel as a self-help exercise, an outlook that, he said, one can often find "in courses of spirituality, spiritual retreats, etc. " Francis said this way of seeing things generally leads to an "immanent, self-centered approach."
- The "Gnostic Proposal": Found primarily in "groups of elites," Francis said, this outlook is based on the presumption of "spiritual superiority" and often leads to turning the church into a debating society. He said it's especially common among self-styled "enlightened Catholics."
- The "Pelagian Proposal": This instinct, he said, is based on a longing to restore the past -- obsessed with discipline, seeking "to restore outdated manners and forms which, even on the cultural level, are no longer meaningful." He said one can find this effort to roll back the clock among "small groups" and "some new religious congregations" who want a merely "doctrinal or disciplinary" kind of safety. At the core, he said, this instinct "seeks to 'recover' the lost past."

Francis does not provide specific examples of these points of view, but anyone familiar with the Catholic landscape, whether in Latin America or anywhere else, probably wouldn't have a hard time summoning their own.

2. Functionalism

Another category of temptations, the pope said, sees the church largely in terms of institutions and business management, and he called its influence in Catholic life today "paralyzing."

"More than being interested in the road itself, it is concerned with fixing holes in the road."

"A functionalist approach has no room for mystery," he said, "it aims at efficiency."

Using a favorite turn of phrase, Francis said functionalism converts the church into a nongovernmental

organization in which "what counts are quantifiable results and statistics."

The pope said this is basically a form of the "prosperity Gospel," a concept associated with forms of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity that suggest God will reward believers with this-worldly blessings.

3. Clericalism

Clericalism refers to the idea that the answers to all the church's problems have to come from the clergy, which Francis describes as "a very current temptation" in Latin America.

The pope said there's often a "sinful complicity" involved in that a pastor will succumb to clericalism and the laity encourage him to do so "because in the end, it's more comfortable."

Clericalism, the pope said, "explains in large part the lack of maturity and Christian freedom among a good part of the Latin American laity."

On the other hand, Francis said, there's also a healthy form of lay liberty in Latin America's tradition of popular piety as well as "Bible study groups, ecclesial base communities and pastoral councils."

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In opposition to these temptations, Francis urges an outlook of "missionary discipleship," which he said naturally leads Christians "away from the center and toward the peripheries."

The pope said the church best fosters its missionary capacities when it sees itself as a "facilitator" of faith, not the "controller" of the faith.

The church's pastoral programs, he said, too often come off as "without closeness, without tenderness, without a caress."

Speaking directly to the bishops, Francis said they should "conduct" the church's missionary and pastoral efforts without "dominating" them.

"Bishops must be pastors," he said, "close to the people, fathers and brothers, with great gentleness, patient and merciful."

Bishops must be "men who love poverty, both interior poverty, as freedom before the Lord, and exterior poverty, as simplicity and austerity of life," he said. "Men who do not think and behave like 'princes.' Men who are not ambitious, who are married to one church without having their eyes on another."

In another dose of painful truth, Francis concedes that isn't always the case.

"I would simply add," he said, "including myself in this statement, that we're a little behind."

Elsewhere in the speech, Francis called bishops and pastors to encourage lay participation in "consultation, organization and pastoral planning," especially through diocesan and parish-level pastoral and financial councils.

It remains to be seen what Catholics make of the diagnosis Francis offered them Sunday and what they'll do about it. For now, this much is certain: When the final evaluations of his first overseas journey are in, nobody can fault this pope for pulling his punches.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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