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New Mayor de Blasio: the best of 'spiritual but not religious'

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NCR Today

On New Year's Day, I joined hundreds of shivering New Yorkers and others in front of City Hall for the inauguration of Bill de Blasio as mayor of New York City. I traveled to New York with Dolly Pomerleau of the Quixote Center.

We both know Bill personally and worked with him in the late 1980s to end the Reagan wars in Central America. He started his work for economic justice and peace at the Quixote Center, so we were proud to hear his clear message of economic justice in his inaugural address as the new mayor.

His central concern (one that ought to be a deep concern of every American, not just New Yorkers) is economic inequality. He pledged to end what he dubbed "the tale of two cities" during his campaign and mold the five boroughs into one New York. He promised to stem the tide of hospital closures, expand paid sick leave, and offer full-day pre-K education through a new tax on the wealthiest New Yorkers. (However, that requires action by the state legislature in Albany, and there will be obstacles. New taxes are not the most popular item one can propose, even for such a noble purpose.) He noted that the new tax would come to less than \$3 a day for the wealthy, or the cost of a soy latte.

Where does de Blasio get his ideals? When asked, he describes himself as spiritual but not religious. That's an often-heard self-description these days, but in de Blasio's case, it is enhanced by his experiences at the Quixote Center and in Central America. He has noted to several news outlets that he has been influenced by liberation theology, the great theology born in Latin America that calls us to act for economic justice in the tradition of the prophets and Jesus. I know that was a frequent topic of conversation at the center in the 1980s, especially when our Jesuit friend Bill Callahan was talking about it, as he frequently did.

Something else that struck me: When Dolly Pomerleau and I had a couple minutes with De Blasio in the receiving line, the one person of faith he mentioned was Pope Francis. No surprise -- both men's messages of economic justice are very similar.

Now we will get a chance to see if de Blasio can enact that agenda of economic justice in his new position as the 109th mayor of New York City. May the Spirit be with him!

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