

Mass in Thanksgiving for the Election of Pope Francis

I. Introduction

Last Wednesday, the eyes of the world were focused on the Vatican awaiting word of whom the College of Cardinals had chosen to be the 266th Successor of St. Peter and Vicar of Christ. Speculation in the media was rampant and even among informed observers had narrowed the likely candidates to a few, including several from North America.

Working through the College of Cardinals, the Holy Spirit surprised almost everyone. Soon after white smoke billowed from the Sistine Chapel chimney, there stood before us for the first time in history a Holy Father from the Western hemisphere, a Pope from South America, a member of the Society of Jesus, a native of Argentina and thus an avid soccer fan . . . the first Holy Father to take the name of Francis, after the beloved 12th century saint who led a life of simplicity and poverty and whose witness to Christ helped to rebuild and reinvigorate the Church.

St. Peter's Square was jammed with people - yet as the cameras scanned the crowds it looked like a World Youth Day. Young people from all over the world were in St. Peter's Square that evening, including many young religious sisters, priests, and seminarians - as if to say, 'the Church is young' - 'the Church is alive' - 'the Church is expectant.' "*Buona sera!*" the new Pope began, as if it could have been anything other than an evening that was good!

II. Coming to Know Our New Holy Father

The worshipping community gathered here at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen though large, not quite as large as the throngs in St. Peter's Square, yet we are gathered with the same vitality and joy to pray for Pope Francis as he begins his service as shepherd, as pastor, of the Church throughout the world. Because we sense our deep spiritual connection with the Holy Father, we naturally want to know all about him; we want to know what he is like. And we are looking for reliable sources!

A couple from my former diocese is good friends with our new Pope. They've known for years what many people are just finding out – that the Holy Father really is a man of humility and prayer. He is a priest and bishop who sets the course of his life and ministry not in response to external pressures or out of a desire to make a name for himself. Rather, he acts out of a deep life of prayer, a life truly united to Christ crucified. Another acquaintance of mine described meeting the future pope in Buenos Aires. After an hour long conversation marked by candor and good humor, then-Cardinal Bergoglio clasped my friend's hand, looked him in the eye, and said: "Please pray for me!" – and my friend knew that he truly meant it. So when Pope Francis stood before the crowd in St. Peter's and asked them and all of us to pray for him – he was doing what he had always done: he really is asking us to pray for him!

With the strength that comes from knowing and loving Christ, our new Pope has taught & borne witness to the Church's teaching on faith & morals. In the light of Christ, he has defended authentic dignity – whether speaking out for the unborn child, or upholding the traditional family for the sake of children and young people, or serving the poor and defending the oppressed or defending religious freedom. Now as Pope Francis he will do this globally: a voice of faith, of truth, and of reason in a world where the light of faith and reason seems often to be flickering.

Understandably we are captivated by media images of Pope Francis yet today's reading from St. Paul to the Philippians takes us beyond the elements of style to the realm of substance; to quote St. Paul: "I consider all things as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" Much is made of the new Holy Father's simple life style – such as his taking the bus to work when he was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. In the spiritual and apostolic life, however, one opts for simplicity and poverty so as to remove any and all obstacles to knowing and loving Christ. Blessed John Paul II taught seminarians, priests, and bishops to value an evangelical simplicity of life ... he urged us to live in such a way that we make clear that Christ matters most. He urged us to be unencumbered so that we might have the interior freedom to be close to Christ, to be his friends, & to place our lives at the service of the Church.

Coupled with courageous faith and simplicity of life is genuine pastoral charity. It is all too easy for a bishop or priest to manage charitable and pastoral programs but

then to find himself too remote to engage directly in loving and serving people, most especially those who are most in need. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Bergoglio was known simply as “Fr. Jorge” - because he did the work of a priest, he served people directly and lovingly, whether it was ministering to the sick or visiting parishes or sitting in the back pew of his Cathedral making himself available to all. Here is a charity that bears witness to the Gospel; here is a charity that evangelizes.

Interior union with Christ crucified through prayer, the primacy of the spiritual life, strength and courage as a teacher of the faith, a spirit of apostolic poverty and pastoral love ... these are the building blocks of the New Evangelization, the materials, as it were, through which the Church is continually rebuilt & buttressed as she continues her journey through history. With only a few words and gestures, Pope Francis has called us to unite in walking—in bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth - in building—even re-building the Church in a challenging time - in professing—not a Christ of our own choosing but Christ crucified. “When we walk without the Cross,” he said, “we are not disciples of the Lord...”

III. Authentic Reform

Whenever there is a transition in the life of the Church, and surely this is an extraordinary moment in the life of the Church, the spotlight focuses, quite uncomfortably, on the problems and challenges which the Church throughout the world is facing. It is an opportunity for some to speak the truth in love, to offer thoughtful analysis, and for others to opine and even to vent their anger. Many are the calls for reform in the life of the Church and not one of us envies the challenges that our new Holy Father will confront.

Yet, if we take our cue from today’s Gospel, we will not let ourselves imagine that any program of reform will be a panacea. When the Scribes and Pharisees accused the unfortunate woman caught in adultery and demanded that she receive the death penalty for her crime, Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground. We don’t know what he wrote but one by one her accusers went away. Perhaps they sensed that the Teacher knew their sins and failings. How instructive for all of us at this moment in the Church’s life. Once Mother Teresa was asked by an interviewer, “What would you most change about the Church” and she answered, “You and I.” Authentic reform in the life of the Church hinges in the first instance not on policies,

programs, or procedures but on the integrity & holiness of believers.

Addressing the Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel the day after his election, Pope Francis issued a call to conversion and reform that should reach our ears and our hearts this Passion Sunday: “I would like that all of us, after these days of grace, might have the courage— the courage—to walk in the presence of the Lord—with the Cross of the Lord: to build the Church on the Blood of the Lord which is shed on the Cross, and to profess the one glory, Christ crucified. In this way the Church will go forward.”

Dear friends, let us offer Pope Francis our love and our loyalty first and foremost by responding to the insistent call of the Church this Lent and every Lent: “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” In this way we will walk with our Holy Father, profess with him the name of Christ Crucified, embrace with him the primacy of prayer and the interior life, stand side by side in defense of human dignity, stoop down with him in serving the defenseless and poor in charity, and work him day by day in rebuilding the Church through the works of the New Evangelization!

God bless our Holy Father Pope Francis! God bless our Church! And may God bless us and keep us always in his love!