

STATIO CONFERENCE

TO HEAL WOUNDS ... TO WARM HEARTS

By Sr. Irene Dabalus, OSB

[1] “A People’s Pope”

This conference has turned out to be a conference on an all embracing spirituality inspired by the life of Pope Francis. I preface it with a poem by Fyodor Dostoyevsky on love which compenetrates all of creation and all being, foremost of which is the human being whom Pope Francis sets at the core of his ministry. I see in this poem the spirituality and praxis of Pope Francis, everyone’s Pope – the spirituality of a universal love.

*Love all creation,
The whole of it and every grain of sand,
Love every leaf
Every ray of God’s light
Love the animals
Love the plants
If you love everything
You will perceive
The divine mystery in things
And once you have perceived it
You will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly
More and more everyday
And you will at last come to love the whole world
With an abiding universal love.
(Fyodor Dostoyevksy)*

[2] “A Big Heart Open to God”

“A People’s Pope!” “A Pope for the Poor!” “A Pope for the forgotten!” “A Pope for the forsaken!” “A Pope for everyone!” These were the accolades Pope Francis drew from TIME magazine in its issue of July 2013, five months after his election into the papacy. In the same vein AMERICA-NCR featured a Nobel Prize nominee in Argentina, John Carr, who was intent on “Bergoglio-izing” his church and country. John Allen of NCR also recognized an “insta-hagiography” here which happens to Popes at the start of their ministry, but not as dramatic as this one of Pope Francis here.

So, what is this Pope really about? He has turned his back on the pomp accorded a prince of the Church, on papal protocol and the liturgical Byzantine finery of past popes, and on the lifestyle of a celebrity accruing to his rank. Instead, he looks out for face-to-face encounters with people, leaving his papal limo to hobnob with the simple folks, touching the poor and the pilgrim, the sick and the prisoner with the tenderness of a brother. His image is one who is willing to accept people of other beliefs and persuasions in an “ecumenical embrace.”

Francis Bergoglio now Pope Francis, 76 years of age, is the big surprise that appeared on the stage of the papacy at our time and age. The first non-European pope, the first Latin American pope and the first Jesuit pope was elected to the See of Peter on March 13, 2013. His gestures mark him as another St. Francis, humble and gentle, whose first words on the balcony of St. Peter was to say to thousands of the faithful, “Pray for me!”

All of these gestures would be buttressed by his preaching that is unprecedented in its appeal for Christians to have “a big heart open for God” and to make the Kingdom of God alive in the great and small practical tasks at hand. One programmatic message which accompanies his actions is expressed in a now famous line: “I see clearly that Church needs the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful.”

[3] Humanity and Humility

From his vantage point Pope Francis is fully aware of the fractured “jaded, hassled, overspent culture” in which we live. In his mind certainly play images of people suffering violence everywhere - the sufferings of Iraqi and Syrian Christians and other religions who are targeted by extremists and driven away from their homes and “forced to leave everything behind to save their lives”, the misery of women sexually exploited due to class, religion or ethnicity by Jihadists as well as by producers of porno films and websites in the media world for money. Nor is it lost to him that abortionists have killed more than 57 million babies every year and that the pornography industry has wrecked more marriages and families than never before. In the US, Hollywood alone makes 400 porn movies and \$13 billion dollars every year, let alone the porno industry itself which churns out 1,000 such stuff every month. Above all, he is conscious of our own threatened Church, eroded of its spiritual vigor and credibility by careerism, convenience and clergy abuse.

How does Pope Francis respond to these daunting and problematic realities? His programmatic message at every turn is the prayer for us Christians and world citizens to wake up with “our ability to heal wounds and to make hearts warm for God.” In other words, it is enjoined on us to take the path of mercy and compassion, the motto of his visit to our country.

He himself has been both criticized and praised for his messages and spontaneous actions to welcome and give all people a place called home in the Church.

Pope Francis’ preference is for a missionary Church - and still within that Church - his preference is for the people on the margins of life, in fact, for the poorest of the poor, at one time termed the “garbage heap of humanity.”

----- the gay world and its controversial and unconventional tenets.

----- the families, fractured and demoralized by diverging, even opposing human values in society.

----- the elderly people, the AIDS victims, and the sexually abused who are neglected in the business of daily living.

----- the poor, whose poverty is a result of the “greed of the market” and the neglect of governments.

----- victims of child abuse, who are violated and destroyed before their time.

----- victims of human trafficking which Pope Francis calls “a crime against humanity” Globally, children now comprise nearly one third of all detected trafficking victims. Out of every three child victims, two are girls and one is a boy. (Zenit article on analysis of human trafficking (Fr. John Flynn, Zenit Dec. 8 2014)

Federico Wals, his spokesperson since 2007, said: “He was especially concerned for those about whom society didn’t seem to care, such as single mothers, the poor, the elderly, the unemployed.” (NCR, April 5, 2013).

[4] Paths to the Healing of Wounds and Warming of Hearts

Surrounded as we are by the presence of so much violence in our scarred and hurting world – murders, wars, exploitation and injustice – Pope Francis has appealed for the awakening of our “ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful.” (NCR? Allen? Or Spidaro). From day one of his pontificate, he acted what this meant in unconventional gestures of forgiveness and tenderness towards the needy.

When he changed residence from the papal apartments to a room in the Guest House Sta. Maria of the Vatican, he indicated a resolve to cross the divide between him and his people to live close to them.

When he washed the feet of a Syrian woman, an imprisoned non-Catholic felon, at the liturgy of Holy Thursday, he pointed to the direction of a healing of gender and religious conflicts.

When he tended the poor and hungry people in the environs of Rome by sending them material goods, and the like, through an unknown “emissary” he warmed their hearts more than any millionaire could with his wealth.

When he spoke with non-judgmental respect about gays in an interview, he reached out in humanity to their often discriminated lot.

When he kissed a man with a disfigured face in the crowd at St. Peter’s, he crossed the divide between the loved and the unloved in our society.

When he road an Italian coastguard vessel to the forlorn island of Lampedusa to preach to both Christian and Muslim immigrants he showed comfort to people who braved the passage to this island in the hope of getting to the mainland for better livelihood.

When he made sexual abuse of the clergy and abuse of minors transparent in the investigations of the Church, he injected himself into the context of justice and injustice, embracing for victims and victimizers in a question that dogged the Church for decades now.

Yet, all of this was not just “a matter of style” to attract people to the Church once again. I agree with John Allen of NCR who believes that the way of doing things of Pope Francis is a paradigmatic display of his type of ministry – truthful, open, humble, simple, but above all, human.

Indeed, this is what he would expect of our Church, of bishops and clergy and faithful alike – a pastoral ministry of humanity and humility in the imitation of Christ. (NCR, April 5, 2013.) Pope Francis’ view of urgency for action in our world today is akin to that of a field hospital. During his interview with Fr. Spadaro, (*La Civiltà Cattolica*, published in *America* on 9-19-13), he said, *“I see clearly, that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugar! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.... And you have to start from the ground up... How are we treating the people of God?”*

He continued: *“I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin. The structural and organizational reforms are secondary—that is, they come afterward. The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.”*

[5] Paths to a Healing of the Heart and Compassionate Ministry

If you think Pope Francis could meet you today, what do you think he would say?

Perhaps he would say as he did in the interview with Fr. Spadaro:

“Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent. The ones who quit sometimes do it for reasons that, if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage.”

Our immediate experience in family, Church and society points to a conglomerate of irregular cases which carry open wounds and where we are asked to respond with understanding and humanity - the divorced and remarried, same-sex couples, victims and victimizers in sexual abuse and other complex situations. Spadaro asks: “What kind of pastoral work can we do in these cases? What kinds of tools can we use?”

Pope Francis responds not on the level of the application of psychology or the social sciences but on the level of the spiritual and the personal encounter, without belittling all that human knowledge can offer. I will quote him here, because what he says is the credo of a Christian man or woman at the service of the Kingdom.

“We need to proclaim the Gospel on every street corner,” the pope says, “preaching the good

news of the kingdom and healing, even with our preaching, every kind of disease and wound. In Buenos Aires I used to receive letters from homosexual persons who are 'socially wounded' because they tell me that they feel like the church has always condemned them. But the church does not want to do this. During the return flight from Rio de Janeiro I said that if a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am no one to judge. By saying this, I said what the catechism says. Religion has the right to express its opinion in the service of the people, but God in creation has set us free: it is not possible to interfere spiritually in the life of a person.

"A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: 'Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?' We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to accompany them with mercy. When that happens, the Holy Spirit inspires the priest to say the right thing.

"This is also the great benefit of confession as a sacrament: evaluating case by case and discerning what is the best thing to do for a person who seeks God and grace. The confessional is not a torture chamber, but the place in which the Lord's mercy motivates us to do better. I also consider the situation of a woman with a failed marriage in her past and who also had an abortion. Then this woman remarries, and she is now happy and has five children. That abortion in her past weighs heavily on her conscience and she sincerely regrets it. She would like to move forward in her Christian life. What is the confessor to do? "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time. "The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow. "I say this also thinking about the preaching and content of our preaching. A beautiful homily, a genuine sermon must begin with the first proclamation, with the proclamation of salvation. There is nothing more solid, deep and sure than this proclamation. Then you have to do catechesis. Then you can draw even a moral consequence. But the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives. Today sometimes it seems that the opposite order is prevailing. The homily is the touchstone to measure the pastor's proximity and ability to meet his people, because those who preach must recognize the heart of their community and must be able to see where the desire for God is lively and ardent. The message of the Gospel, therefore, is not to be reduced to some aspects that, although relevant, on their own do not show the heart of the message of Jesus Christ." (9/19/13 A Big Heart Open to God americamagazine.org/print/156341 8/13)

[6] THE CHALLENGE TO HEAL WOUNDS AND WARM THE HEARTS OF THE FAITHFUL

Based on his words, what is the challenge of Pope Francis to everyone of us wherever we find ourselves – at home or at work, alone or community, as the rank and file or in government?

What is it like to pray in this spirit of healing wounds and warming the hearts of the faithful?

What do we see in Mary that can make us strong in the struggle to transform power from domination to service?

What is the characteristic contribution of our missionary Benedictine charism to the mission of mercy and compassion as envisioned by Pope Francis.

In the here and now what for me are the practical tasks at hand to fulfil a ministry of “healing wounds” and “warming hearts” in my own world?

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