



Changing The Conversation

By REV. LARRY SNYDER, MDiv, MPA

Within less than one year after his election, Pope Francis was named *Time* magazine’s “Person of the Year” and received top media coverage around the world. His @Pontifex accounts in nine languages on Twitter total more than 14 million followers, and a recent survey reported that he is more widely retweeted than any other world leader — meaning he beats them all in terms of reach and what social media experts call engagement.

All of which is to say that Francis has people talking. No matter what venue I find myself in, professional or casual, religious or not, the pope seems to pop up in the conversation. For those of us who are Catholic, it’s nice to know it is seen as an asset once again.

I suspect the impact of Pope Francis will continue to be a topic for a long time to come. He is charting his own path, and he is not letting others’ expectations define his papacy. Though we are still getting to know him, I believe he already has changed the conversation. And, though every day at his morning Mass he gives us gems upon which to reflect, he has changed the conversation without saying a word.

I can say this because I suspect that when people think of Pope Francis, the first things that come to mind are images burned into memory because of their messages’ sheer power: Pope Francis washing and kissing the foot of a young Muslim woman in a detention center; Francis fully embracing a man with extreme deformities; Francis playfully placing a mischievous young boy on the papal chair, as a doting grandfather might; Francis riding in an open car because he refuses the popemobile’s bulletproof glass enclosure, labeling it a sardine can that walls him off from people. These are the things people bring

up when they talk about the pope, and everyone has a favorite.

Still, with images such as these, Pope Francis teaches us and challenges us. Images such as these force us to reflect on what the mission of the church is supposed to be and what it means to call oneself a disciple. It has been awhile since we have had such discussions.

At the center of his teaching and concern are the poor. Has anyone tried to count the times that Francis has specifically referenced the poor, or referred to his idea of a church of and for the poor? Has he ever spoken about social or economic realities without his point of reference — how the poor are faring? Without a doubt, he holds each

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Illustration by Roy Scott



and every one of them in his heart. In choosing the name Francis, he gave us a clear signal of the direction and priorities of his papacy. Francis of Assisi was the voice of reform in the church in his day, speaking even to the papacy of the need to stand with the poor and to care for all of creation. This endeared him to every generation since, but until now, no pope had chosen to identify with such a simple yet demanding interpretation of discipleship.

A recurring theme for this pope is the responsibility of the economy to respond to the cries of the underprivileged who struggle to survive and of families to provide a future of hope and opportunity for their children. To this end, Pope Francis holds all of the world's economies accountable. For those of us who are privileged to live lives of comfort, these words can make us uncomfortable. Some have said that his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* is a critique of capitalism. In fact, the word capitalism never appears in the document. Rather, it holds every economic system to the same standard: How are the poor among you faring?

But to stop there would be to miss a greater message. The overarching, more encompassing theme in Francis' teaching is inclusion. In his per-

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son, all those who find themselves relegated to the margins of society are pulled into the center of the church's concern. In Francis' thought, the church is the antidote for social exclusion. Those deemed worthless or thrown away are held up as being of inestimable value. They are the poor. But they also are those who are mentally challenged, those who are physically disabled, those who are in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. Like the prophets who so long ago spoke messages that are still relevant and necessary today, Pope Francis measures our society by how we treat the least among us.

Pope Francis reminds us that the Gospel message is one of paradox. The last shall be first. If you want to be great, you must be a servant. Blessed

are the poor. Ultimately, the Gospel message is one of transformation. The reality of this world must be transformed by the principles of dignity and respect for all people and must be working toward the common good.

We see it in Francis' actions: bringing together world leaders to pray when the hope of diplomacy is almost gone. Praying for the desperate emigrants from Africa who, seeking a better life, board overcrowded, rickety ships for the dangerous crossing to Lampedusa, an Italian island between Tunisia and Sicily. After a 2013 disaster in which hundreds were drowned during such a sea journey, Francis castigated "global indifference" to the emigrants' plight.

But mostly we see it in the pope's acceptance and embrace of individuals who are excluded or who are in need of God's mercy.

I have lived now under seven popes. Each has brought his own unique gifts and style to the papal office. The last three have given us a dramatic contrast in what constitutes papal leadership. Pope St. John Paul II was a charismatic leader who commanded a place on the world stage. He was able to touch the hearts of the youth of the world and was the first pope to attain "rock star" status as he filled stadiums with cheering faithful.

Pope Benedict XVI, on the other hand, is a man whose life has been anchored in academia. He is a theologian who taught us through scholarly encyclicals. He appears to be as much of an introvert as his predecessor was an extrovert.

And then there is Francis.

Every morning he gives us reflections on the Scripture passages of the day. But his most powerful teaching is by his actions. He shows us what the Gospel calls us to do by giving us an example. He both affirms and challenges us. He goes where no pope has gone before and bids us to follow him. It is here that we see his vision of a church fully engaged in the messiness of life. The mission of the church must be to bring the message of God's mercy to where it is needed most: the brokenness of human life. This is a personal responsibility, but Francis holds social and economic systems just as accountable.

Some people conjecture that Pope Francis is leading the church in a new direction, that there is a break with the teaching of previous popes. Although this pope's style may be different, the



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substance of his thought is not new. I would suggest that those who do not see this should read Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. And then they should read Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

Those documents contain a clear line of thought that connects the plight of the poor with social and economic systems. Pope Francis is continuing a social commentary that began with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, through many encyclicals, including Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*. The church has stood with the poor from the time of the Gospel. Pope Francis embodies that aspiration in his very being.

It is probably good to point out that Pope Francis is not a politician. When he speaks and acts, he does so out of the church's prophetic tradition. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets were agents who announced a vision of how God wished society to function. They gave us some of the most beautiful visions in the Bible of society and people

living in harmony and accord. They also gave us some clear condemnations of ignoring the will of God, especially as it relates to the poor. Over and over again, they remind us of the plight of the widow, the orphan and the stranger in our midst. And they tell us that the measure by which our society will be judged is how these three groups are faring.

As we look at our society today, what is the face of the poor? Women, children, immigrants. Things have not changed much. And Pope Francis' words and actions continue that line of prophetic thought, which will not let us set the poor, marginalized or excluded aside.

Pope Francis is causing a lot of talk throughout the world. Much of it focuses on his actions that show him to be a shepherd who smells like his sheep. Much of it focuses on his message of God's mercy and compassion, rather than simply on God's judgment.

The true test of his impact will be on how much all that talk turns into action, on changing systems so that all people receive dignity and respect and opportunity.

Pope Francis is changing the conversation — and he's changing it for good.

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