**THE YEAR OF FAITH: SPRINGTIME FOR THE CHURCH**

**POPE FRANCIS, FIRST JESUIT POPE**

**HOMILY, ST. IGNATIUS FEASTDAY**

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**Ateneo de Manila High School Covered Courts**

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Eversince he silently gazed upon the crowd, looking almost bewildered, and asked for their blessing, the world has been enthalled by Pope Francis.

Today, July 28, 2013, is only his 131st day as supreme pastor of the Roman Catholic Church, and yet so much has already been written about his person and style—perhaps because his impact on the Church, wearied and disillusioned, has already been so profound.

This afternoon, allow me to highlight three characteristics of his person and style, which have already been written about and analyzed. However, allow me to share some reflections about our attraction to these three attributes of Pope Francis; that is, what they reveal about us—our hopes and yearnings, our true identity and vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The three attributes of Pope Francis that I wish to reflect upon are, first, his simplicity and humility; second, his commitment to the “person”, the poor especially; and third, his openness to the transcendent.

1. **SIMPLICITY AND HUMILITY**

First, simplicity and humility. After his election in the Sistine Chapel, the new pope, instead of sitting on the papal throne, opted to stand to receive the greetings of his fellow Cardinals. Afterwards, instead of riding the papal car, he chose to take the bus with the rest of the Cardinals. The following day, he stopped by the hotel where he stayed during the conclave and, to the astonishment of the receptionist, paid his bill.

A few days after his election, Pope Francis called the owner of a newspaper stand in Buenos Aires to inform him that he was cutting his subscription. Daniel Del Regno, the son of the owner picked up the phone.

“Hi, Daniel, it’s Cardinal Jorge.” Daniel thought a friend was pulling a prank, so Pope Francis had to reiterate, “Seriously, it’s Jorge Bergoglio, I’m calling you from Rome.”

Daniel related to the Argentine newspaper *La Nacion*, “I was in shock, I broke down in tears and didn’t know what to say …. He thanked me for delivering the paper all the time and sent best wishes to my family.” Before hanging up, Daniel ended, the pope asked him for his prayers. (*Pray for Me*, Robert Moynihan, 25-26)

We glean his humility in his first encounter with Adolofo Nicholas, Superior General of the Society of Jesus. Fr. Nicolas recounts:

At the personal invitation of Pope Francis, I went to the Santa Marta House…. He was at the entrance and received me with the usual Jesuit embrace… he insisted that I treat him like any other Jesuit… so I did not have to worry about treatments, ‘Holiness’ or ‘Holy Father’…. At the end [of my visit] he helped me with my coat and accompanied me to the door…. A Jesuit embrace, again, is a god way to meet and send off a friend.” (*In All Things*, James Martin, SJ, March 19, 2013)

Why are we drawn to Pope Francis’ simplicity and humility?

I think this attraction to his simplicity and humility reveals to us a nagging interior restlessness and emptiness, which we attempt to silence by our pursuit of riches and prestige, by our penchant for self-promotion and self-aggrandizement.

However, the pope writes: “The Lord has made us restless to seek Him, to find Him, to grow. But if the treasure is a treasure that is not close to the Lord, that is not from the Lord … our heart is tired, it is never filled … it becomes sluggish … a heart without love” (from his homily in his residence, Vatican Radio, June 21, 2013)

How can the new pope be so simple and remain so humble? From where does this simplicity and humility emanate? My guess is that Pope Francis is a man so rooted in Christ, which we are not, or not yet, but strive to be. And because Jesus Christ is his all, he has no need for anything else.

Addressing his fellow Cardinals in his first mass with them on March 14, Pope Francis spoke about the need to be anchored on Christ:

The Church herself could be washed away … if she is not based on Christ, if she seeks any other basis, even the basis of good works. Only when based on Christ can she stand secure. Otherwise she crumbles away under the pressures of the world.” (First Mass and Homily to His Fellow Cardinals, March 14, 2013 in *Pray for Me*, 42)

1. **COMMITMENT TO THE PERSON, ESPECIALLY THE POOR**

What draws us to Pope Francis is that he walks the talk.

During the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro which ends today, the Vatican Radio reports:

Pope Francis’ time spent in the Rio favela of Varginha is likely to be remembered as the longest and most touching (both emotionally and physically) papal walkabout in history.

When Pope Francis said he wanted to “meet the people”, few of his collaborators realised he was speaking quite so literally. One pope-watcher who tried to count the number of babies he kissed, gave up after reaching around 138….” (Vatican Radio)

With regard the poor, Pope Francis declares, “The poor are the treasure of the Church and we must care for them. If we lose this vision of things, we will have a lukewarm, weak and mediocre Church…. We cannot adore God if our spirit does not include the needy.” (*On Heaven and Earth*, 172-73)

And yet he himself admits of his own struggles in committing himself to the poor: “It is terribly difficult for me to go to a prison because of the harshness of life there. But I go anyway, because the Lord wants me to be there in the flesh, alongside those in need, in poverty, in pain.” (*Ibid.*,168).

Pope Francis’ respect for the human person, moves him to minister not only to the poor but to all those marginalized.

As Archbishop of Beunos Aires,

he visited the deathbed of an ex-bishop, Jeronimo Podesta, who had married in defiance of the Church and was dying poor and forgotten by all. From that moment, Mrs. Podesta became one of his ardent supporters. He is a man who is able to seek out the poor, the ostracized, the abandoned.” (*Pray for Me,* 14-15).

“Every human being is worthwhile,” Pope Francis as Archbishop of Buenos Aires maintains (in his Annual Message to Educational Communities, Easter 2002, quoted in *In His Own Words*, 45). This commitment to every human person, the poor especially, propels us to become political but non-partisan. He explains that we have “the obligation to defend value…. We do not preach against anyone; we refer to the value that is in danger and that must be safeguarded.” (*On Heaven and Earth,* 143)

Concurrently, this commitment to every human being is a commitment to promote the Kingdom of God, marked by mercy and justice. Authentic worship, the then Archbishop explained, involves a commitment to justice, “an extremely creative justice” that “invents things: education, social progress, care [for] and attention” to every human being and the entire created world. (*Ibid*., 23)

What are the implications for us who are inspired by Pope Francis’ commitment to every human being, the poor especially?

Here is where the pope challenges us: He maintains that our work for the poor cannot be reduced to work that benefits the poor. Work for the poor calls for face-to-face encounters with the poor.

… this commitment must be person to person, in the flesh. It is not enough to mediate this commitment through institutions, which obviously help because they have a multiplying effect, but that is not enough. They do not excuse us from our obligation of establishing personal contact with the needy (*Ibid.*, 168).

In simple yet searing words, the pope declares, “Christian charity … can begin with aid, but it cannot stop at fundraising events … in reality, they are social-conscience calming activities.” (*Ibid.,*, 170)

Pope Francis does not spare clerics and religious from his call to solidarity with the poor. He tells the story of a newly-ordained priest who was criticized by fellow-priests for constantly wearing his soutane. Despondent, the young cleric consulted an older, wiser priest, “‘Is it wrong that I wear my cassock?’ The wise priest answered him: ‘The problem is not if you wear a cassock or not, but rather if you roll up its sleeves when you have to work for the good of others.’” (*Ibid.*, 25)

Pope Francis asserts, “I do not have any doubt that we must get our hands dirty” (*Ibid*).

Collectively and institutionally, the new pope summons us to tend the sheep, even to smell like sheep, as we care for the poor of this world.

From the moment of his election, we have come to know that commitment to and care for the poor would be a central thrust of his papacy:

In the moments after it became clear that Bergoglio would become Pope, while the votes were still being counted, [Cardinal Claudio] Hummes [former Archbishop of Sao Paulo], hugged him, kissed him and told him, “Don’t forget the poor.” “And those words entered here,” Francis told his audience of journalists, pointing to his forehead. “The poor, the poor. And then, right away, in relation to the poor I thought of Francis of Assisi…. Ah, how I’d like a poor church, [one that’s] for the poor” (“Pope Francis and Symbolism”).

1. **OPENNESS TO THE TRANSCENDENT**

Two anecdotes. First, many of us know that last Holy Thursday, March 28, 2013, instead of commemorating the Lord’s Supper in a large Church, Pope Francis chose to do so in a Roman prison for youthful offenders, *Casal del Mundo*. During the service, the pope washed and kissed the feet of 12 young inmates, two of whom were women—an Italian Catholic and a Serbian Muslim.

His deliberate decision to wash the feet of two women—against the prescription of canon law, has sparked much debate about the correctness of his gesture, for no pope, as far as we can tell, has ever washed the feet of women during the Holy Thursday service.

Second anecdote. Even as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, his behavior as a Catholic religious leader elicited strong reactions. He recounts an incident that caused an uproar among certain Catholic circles:

The first time the Evangelicals invited me to Luna Park, the stadium was full…. At one point the Evangelical pastor asked that everyone pray for me and my ministry … the first thing that occurred to me was to kneel down, a very Catholic gesture, to receive their prayer and the blessing of the seven thousand people that were there. The next week, a magazine headline stated: ‘Buenos Aires, sede vacante.’ The Archbishop commits apostasy.’ For them, praying together with others was apostasy.

Evidently our new pope has a way of stirring controversy. No one can remain neutral about Pope Francis. His actions elicit either approval or vehement disapproval, amazement or disenchantment. His non-conformity we either find refreshing or disturbing, liberating or unsettling. His own words may help us understand him better:

There are sectors within every religion that by highlighting the normative leave aside the human, they reduce religion to what has to be prayed in the morning, during the afternoon and at night and what is going to happen if one does not do it…. The authentic wants to be sought, but when that means only the normative, fulfilling regulations, it falls into the other extreme, into a purism that also is not religious. (*On Heaven and Earth*, 233)

Pope Francis presents himself to us as a Question, as a Challenge. Moreover, he invites us to open ourselves to the Transcendent which ever eludes our grasp. He explains this tension between the unchanging normative truth and the evolving historical Church, “[R]eligious truth does not change, but it does develop and grow….” (*Ibid*., 123) However, “To respond to the received inheritance to the new issues of today takes time and even more when the issues of conscience are concerned.” (*Ibid*., 26)

Pope Francis’ intellectual humility recognizes the import of encoding and formulating salvific truths and ethical norms, while recognizing the ineffability of the Absolute which transcends human understanding and language. The recognition of the elusiveness of God is an invitation to remain open to the future and docile to the Spirit at work in history: (*He explains*) “throughout history, religion evolved so much, why wouldn’t we think that in the future it will adjust to the culture of its time?” (*Ibid*., 226)

The humble recognition that we do not and cannot possess God invites us to respect the ‘other’ who, though non-Christian, also seeks the transcendent:

Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our hearts for their point of view, their opinion and their proposals. (*Ibid*., xiv)

In his published conversations with the Jewish rabbi Skorka, then, Arch. Bergoglia confessed, “Even with an agnostic, with his doubt, we can look up together to find transcendence; each one praying according to his tradition.’ (*Ibid*., 220-221)

Implications for us. Because God has come as close to us as possible in Jesus Christ, yet remains ineffable and incomprehensible, Pope Francis explains: “he that wants to be a leader of the people of God has to give God His space; therefore to shrink, to recede into oneself with doubt, with the interior experiences of darkness, of not knowing what to do … [which] is very purifying.” (*Ibid.*, 32)

Because God is ever beyond our grasp, because the understanding of eternal truths develops throughout history, we will need to constantly discern where God is leading the Church, how God is inviting us to bear witness collectively and institutionally to the Gospel. Clearly, Pope Francis’ openness to the Transcendent and call for constant discernment of the Spirit’s promptings are influenced by his Jesuit identity and spirituality.

**EPILOGUE: THE YEAR OF FAITH: ENCOUNTERING GOD**

In these three attributes of the person and style of Pope Francis, I detect a Trinitarian and Ignatian wellspring:

His simplicity and humility manifest his rootedness in Jesus Christ, the Son. Similarly, Ignatius understood his vocation as an invitation to accompany Jesus carry His Cross and his mission as a call to serve under the Standard or Banner of Christ.

His concern for every human being, the poor especially, expresses the Father’s love for all His children. Similarly, Ignatius spoke of God the Father laboring in the world, which for Ignatius redounded in tirelessly ministering to the poor and marginalized of his time.

His openness to transcendence discloses a discerning heart and mind and a docility to the Spirit. Similarly, Ignatius prayed for the grace to become more and more familiar with God in order to be able to discern daily during the Examen God’s will for him.

These three attributes of Pope Francis that suggest a Trinitarian origin stem, if I may speculate, from a life-altering encounter with God:

[O]n the Feast of St. Matthew, September 21, in the year 1953, the young Jorge Mario Bergoglio experienced, at the age of seventeen years, in a very special way, the loving presence of God in his life. Following a confession, he felt his heart touched and sensed the descent of the mercy of God, who with a look of tender love, called him to the religious life, following the example of St. Ignatius of Loyola….

Why is Pope Francis so simple, so genuine, so evidently filled with the love of Christ? Part of the answer may be because God actually filled him with his love….

St. Ignatius … after having been gravely wounded in battle, had a vision that seems to have been an encounter with God … an experience that enabled [him] to ‘find God in all things’ ….So the Jesuit Pope Francis … after confession and absolution, also experienced something extraordinary. For Ignatius, it was vision; for Pope Francis, it was ‘the descent of the mercy of God.’ And nothing ever after was the same for him (in *Pray for Me*, Robert Moynihan, 81)

On this Year of Faith, we pray that we be graced with a profound encounter with God whom we seek, but who paradoxically, from our inception, has been seeking us, renewing us, and leading us to His eternal Spring. Pope Francis writes:

I would say that one encounters God walking, moving, seeking Him and allowing oneself to be sought by Him… there is our path that seeks Him, driven by that instinct that flows from the heart; and after, when we have encountered each other, we realize that He was the one who had been searching for us from the start (*On Heaven and Earth*, 2).

As Pope Francis beautifully bears witness to simplicity and humility, genuine concern for the poor, and openness to the transcendent, we pray for the grace to emulate him. On this Year of Faith, may we encounter You, O Lord, in a personal and profound manner as St. Ignatius and Pope Francis have, may we be transformed and conformed more closely to Your Son, and may we revel in this personal and collective Springtime, this joyful and hope-filled Springtime of renewal.