

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

“Rebuild My Church”

A question that would elicit a universal “No” across the human spectrum is: “On January 1, 2013 or thereafter, did you predict both that on or about February 11, 2013, Pope Benedict XVI would announce his resignation as Successor of Peter and that the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio would be elected Benedict’s successor as dusk and rain enveloped Rome on March 13, 2013?”

Isn’t the Holy Spirit amazing? The Providence of God sustains us and as Pope Francis stated in a recent interview, Our God is a God of surprises. God’s action in this case reminds us that it is His Church. He is in charge. The election of the new Pope also confirms that God’s blessings are without end.

With the election of Pope Francis we have been introduced to an awakening time, one which generates hope spurred on by a renewed vision. In what has been described as the post-modern and now even the post-Christian age came a Jesuit Cardinal who chose as his papal name, Francis. The mission entrusted to his namesake was now undertaken by Pope Francis, “Rebuild my Church.”

When this command was first committed to Francis of Assisi, he interpreted the command of the Lord literally. With tools in hand, he set about to rebuild the run-down building of San Damiano Church. It soon dawned on him that the Lord had given to Francis a far greater task. His calling was to lead the way in rebuilding the Body of Christ, the community of believers. His mission was to rekindle the love of God in his times and stir more deeply the Spirit in the hearts of women and men.

Francis of Assisi was blessed with a charismatic, winsome personality. He was well loved and very popular. “The whole world found refuge, the poor, the sick and the fallen being objects of his solicitude in a special manner.” (St. Francis of Assisi, Catholic Encyclopedia). People identified with him and chose freely to live with him in community. They were touched by his witness and were inspired to transform their lives into becoming disciples of Jesus. This transformation took hold over centuries. It opened the doors to God for so many and the way of Francis became a permanent fixture in God’s household. In the life of the Church this simple, radical lifestyle was embraced by thousands upon thousands. Because of Francis, the simplicity of the Gospel, poverty and care for the poor and protection of creation became commonplace.

The coming of Pope Francis on the world stage stirred the embers of faith and generated excitement around the globe. Similar to Francis of Assisi, he is direct, humble and simple in style. He is highly popular. When I was in Washington, D.C. recently, I met separately with three congressmen encouraging them to pursue the way of peace by avoiding bombing in Syria. When I referred to Pope Francis, each stopped me and spontaneously said: “You know, I really like the Pope.” Separately, an elector of the Pope, a resident cardinal in Rome said, “We must

have made the right decision. The crowds flocking to Rome for papal audiences and events are unprecedented.”

The paramount question becomes how does Pope Francis parlay this personal popularity into the service of the Church and the building up of the people of God, the same task that was given to Francis of Assisi?

The general situation that greeted the Pope as he assumed the role of Peter was very diverse. Europe, North America and Australia to varying degrees are in the throes of spreading materialism, individualism, atheism, agnosticism, among other “isms.” In contrast, the Church in Africa and Asia is growing rapidly sustained by abundant religious vocations. Latin America, home to an estimated 40% of global Catholics, is a key driver in the renewal being called for. It espouses an integral Christianity blending a deeply personal, expressive, spiritual faith with application of social justice and all the while being present to real people in real time.

Pope Francis in harmony with Francis of Assisi and in line with his five immediate papal predecessors maintains that Jesus Christ is the only adequate response to the plight and needs of today’s human family. In his introductory meeting with the College of Cardinals on March 15th in Clementine Hall, the newly elected Pope declared:

“I express my desire to serve the Gospel with renewed love, helping the Church to become increasingly, in Christ and with Christ, the fruitful vine of the Lord. Inspired also by the celebration of the Year of Faith, all of us together, pastors and members of the faithful, will strive to respond faithfully to the Church’s perennial mission: to bring Jesus Christ to mankind and to lead mankind to an encounter with Jesus Christ, the way, the Truth and the Life, truly present in the Church and also in every person. This meeting leads us to become new men in the mystery of Grace, kindling in the spirit that Christian joy that is the hundredfold given by Christ to those who welcome him into their lives.

As the papacy of Pope Francis unfolds, three themes have emerged which provide an early taste as to how the Pope envisions undertaking the task of the earlier Francis to “rebuild my Church.” The Holy Father chooses to communicate and witness not only in words but also in action.

The first theme is that of **mercy**.

- On Holy Thursday, the Pope visited youth in a Roman jail and washed their feet demonstrating God’s compassion and care for them.
- His first trip outside Rome as Pope was to the Italian island of Lampedusa where he embraced and welcomed refugees who are regarded callously by some as excess baggage on the high seas.

The second theme is that of **peace**.

- The Pope has resurrected the words of Pope Paul VI at the United Nations on October 4, 1965: “War Nevermore, Nevermore War.”

- Pope Francis gathered 100,000 people with five days' notice in St. Peter's Square on September 7th begging God for peace in Syria utilizing two classical practices: prayer and fasting.
- His recipe for resolving long-standing conflicts – dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

A third theme of his papacy has been renewed emphasis on the **preferential option for the poor**.

- His South American friend, Cardinal Hummes, was reported to have tapped Cardinal Bergoglio on the shoulder as election to the papacy seemed certain: “Jorge, do not forget the poor.”
- In Rio de Janeiro the Holy Father visited the favelas and paid the residents respect in these blighted neighborhoods demonstrating the sentiments of his heart – deep concern and faithful support.

The early months of Pope Francis and his papal ministry have given us but a taste of how he envisions implementing the call to “rebuild my Church.” In this mission, the Pope has urged all of us to become involved. Our participation in this undertaking is essential and fully expected by the Lord Jesus based on our relationship with Him and His Church.