

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Easter, Rising from the Ashes

As we traverse the final days of Lent, we immerse ourselves in the profound love of God for us.

With the RCIA catechumens and candidates, preparing for entrance into the Catholic Church, we strive to evermore be joined to the paschal mystery of the Lord – his dying and rising.

It is in the remarkable mystery of the dying to ourselves, in union with the Lord's sacrifice on the cross, that we give birth to more abundant life – saturated with God's love and mercy.

My prayer is that all of us in the Diocese of Des Moines consciously dedicate ourselves to this journey, especially during Holy Week, so that we can once again in greater depth experience the incomparable joy the new life that Easter brings.

Pope Francis Grows in Popularity

Pope Francis celebrated the second anniversary of his election as the Successor of Peter on March 13. It is remarkable how this relatively obscure Argentinian Archbishop has captured the hearts of the world's citizens. Among Catholics, according to Pew Research: 95 percent of those who attend Mass regularly rate the Pope favorably; 86 percent of the total Catholic population give the Pope high marks; and 70 percent of U.S. adults regard the Pope with supportive sentiments. Frequently, Protestants and even those with no religious institutional affiliation report to me that "Francis is our Pope, too."

The Pope is not one to issue pious platitudes to tickle the ears of listeners. He challenges and pushes us to be reformed or transformed by the Spirit of the Gospel.

The Holy Father addressed the Roman Curia at Christmas time with words which can easily be applied to all of us as we seek to exercise the role of Christ's Body in the world. Institutionally, we can wander from the Gospel, the Pope intimates and become a closed corporation. He warned us as an institution we can be self-serving, giving into a culture which breeds gossip, indulgence, and is lacking enthusiasm and energy. We can turn in on ourselves. Thus, we can be counterproductive in our mission of evangelization. At every level of Church institution, we need to take this caution to heart.

One of the Pope's most incessant messages is that we have to move from the sacristies and pews of our Churches to the world – bringing the mandate of love and compassion to the poor. In a society that he describes as "throw-away" when it comes to people at the margins, he challenges

us to see these people individually, each made in the image and likeness of God and most worthy of respect.

The Pope extends the consideration of aiding the poor beyond our personal outreach or that of our local institutions such as Catholic Charities to the broader economy. Herein enters the notion of social justice whereby the instruments of the economy promote justice – insuring basic human rights and, in particular, providing jobs and work for all who are able.

The Pope, since assuming the role as leader of the Catholic Church, has worked tirelessly for peace. He advocates the coming together of certain political positions in compromise to achieve the common good. Where conflict has erupted, in ever too many places in the world, he insists on a three-fold process.

We are urged to encounter those who hold positions different than our own. In the broader geopolitical world, it means reaching out to those countries or organizations which are categorized as enemies or opponents. From such engagement we move to pursue dialogue – exposing differences but more importantly what we hold in common. From these efforts emerge beneficial relationships as has been the case, for instance, with Germany and Japan and the U.S., since the Second World War.

Pursuing a conciliatory path to address the issue of illegal immigration and the waves of border children seeking entrance to the United States emerges as an example of trying to find solutions to separation. It is imperative to face root causes – which in this case are the scourge of the utilization of drugs in the United States and Western Europe, the mining/extractive industry's penchant to undertake operations that are destructive to the environment and to local communities and finally trade agreements like the Central American Free Trade Agreement which advance the interests of the United States more so than that of Central American countries.

As Pope Francis exercises his ministry, it becomes ever more clear that he has at heart the interest of each individual in one's identity as a son or daughter of God. He reaches out with truth, derived from the Gospel, to situations both macro and micro to achieve justice with compassion. Moreover, the justice and attention is to include a personal component. The Pope insists this ministry be that of Jesus, executed with tenderness.

The Holy Father obviously has struck a positive chord with a large majority of the human family. Because people like him, they are open to his influence. Our prayers and support reach out to Pope Francis. May the Gospel which is core to his discipleship of Jesus be ever more dominant in our lives.