

## **Pope Francis: A Breath of Fresh Air?**

**Matthew Fox**

I recently wrote a book on Pope Francis, or better a book *to* him, entitled *Letters to Pope Francis*. The book was released in Italian on Thanksgiving Day. In it I challenge him to live up to his purposefully chosen namesake and that people would hold his feet to the fire because no other pope had ever taken up that name, ikon that it is, and that most people do know what St Francis of Assisi stood for: Ecology and non-chauvinistic relationships to the plant and animal worlds; a preferential option for the poor; and (this may be slightly less acknowledged) an admirable and almost startling balance of gender justice and consciousness. In his celebrated poem, “Brother Sun, Sister Moon,” he moves back and forth, back and forth, between masculine and feminine names for the sacred.

People who care about such matters recognize fresh consciousness in the pope's refusal to move into the palatial headquarters known as the papal apartments; in his refusal to drive in limousines and his call for bishops and cardinals to follow suit; his trips to embrace embattled refugees on islands off southern Italy; his visits to favelas or slums in Rio de Janeiro as well as his work in the same in Argentina over the years. These actions, plus his strong words denouncing the “idols” and “gods” of the marketplace together seem to be framing a story of a different kind of pope and papacy from anything we have had since Pope John Paul I who was (most probably) murdered after thirty-one days in the office some thirty-four years ago. It raises hopes in the minds and hearts of activists and progressive Catholics many of whom have left the church behind but still recognize its potential power as a source for good in many parts of the world.

Theologically, Pope Francis is speaking the radical language of Vatican II abandoned by his two predecessors, that the church is NOT the hierarchy but “the people” whose “*sensus fidelium*” actually matters. The effort to poll parishioners about such subjects as birth control, abortion, women's rights and homosexual unions is a first (though quite lame effort as the survey was unprofessionally done asking for essay answers and not direct answers and in many cases has been ignored by the bishops who are simply filling in the blanks according to their own theological whims).

One sign that Pope Francis is being heard is the steam emerging from people who do not want to hear about justice, economic equality or church as people of God. (Rush Limbaugh, for example, had lots to complain about and did so loudly regarding the pope's recent take on Wall Street calling the pope's words “pure Marxism.”) But right-wing catholic nay-sayers are caught in something of a trap. It will be interesting to see how they emerge and this includes stalwart power brokers like the four right wing

Catholics on the Supreme Court, all of whom voted for “Citizens United”—Scalia, Thomas, Alito and John Roberts. (Throw in Kennedy, another Catholic though not so extreme right for his scandalous vote in favor of Citizens United.) Then there is Newt Gingrich, a new convert to Catholicism (under pope Ratzinger); aspiring presidential candidate Paul Ryan (whose philosophy owes much more to atheist Ayn Rand than to the Gospels or papal pronouncements but who still claims to be a stalwart Catholic); Rick Santorum; John Boehner. How these politicians dance around this pope's pronouncements on economic justice will be a spectacle that deserves watching. (Recall how the Catholic bishops under Pope John Paul II were instructed not to give communion to Catholic politicians who advocate for the right to abortion and how this cost Kerry the election in 2004. Will the same threats obtain for Catholic politicians who deny rights of the poor? And who are shills for the interests of the “deified market” (the pope's words) and “a “new tyranny” (the pope's words) of current day capitalism? Stay tuned.

The pope has essentially told the shrill right wing Catholics who received such support under the previous two popes, to chill out and to cease reducing theology to “a condom” or a set of rules and to get moving on social and economic justice. There are currently Catholic writers who have made a living denouncing social justice such as George Weigel and it will be interesting to watch them squirm also with this new pope. Weigel is famous for complaining about Catholics who take some of the teachings of the church and leave others out. He did the same with: 1) the war in Iraq (both popes he so admires were against it)—he was and is a committed neocon who has never apologized for getting us into Iraq and 2) economic alternatives to Wall Street rape of Main Street, i.e. consumer capitalism. Yet he constantly trumps his version of Catholicism, which is really papalism, as the only way. “The truth of what is taught by the pope and the college of bishops is not a matter for debate” (61) he tells us in his most recent (and scariest) book, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Church*. Will he continue to invoke papalism after reading what this pope is preaching?

How is it then that Weigel supported the invasion of Iraq when two popes opposed it? Why did he run from papal teachings on distributive justice? And from their teachings on the death penalty? When it comes to seminary training, Weigel says it should begin with the Catechism and only then move into Biblical studies which “should build upon this solid foundation so that each candidate has a deep understanding of what the Church teaches—and why.” He says this is the way one learns to think “with the Church” as if the Church is the maker of catechisms—not the people of the world or the carrier of Sacred Scripture. (By the way, the great idea for a catechism came from none other than the pedophile champion, Cardinal Law, as I make clear in my book, *The Popes War*.) Yes, we will soon learn what really constitutes the theology of our hard right Catholic propagandists and I suspect for

many if not all of them Wall Street will trump the Vatican.

But beyond the Catholics squirming in and out of political office, there are the larger issues that the pope is addressing to the capitalistic system itself at this time of history. Being the first pope from what we call “the third world,” Pope Francis can be expected to understand the tides of history and of economic oppression differently from being the recipient of years of abuse than from being the source of it. I end my letters to the pope suggesting that he and the Dalai Lama make a world tour together hitting most continents to speak to the “Revolution in Values” that our times call for. This is not because change comes primarily from the top down but because a few at the top whom the media will be almost required to report about can, by speaking out together, put wind in the sails of those millions and indeed billions who pray for and/or work for a saner world. Together they could speak to the obvious and real moral issues of our day: Economic inequality based on a system of avarice not only at the top but in the consumer bottom and middle; gender injustice (something the Catholic Church has to address internally as well); ecological destruction; unemployment, especially among the young; the pressing need for religious and spiritual interfaith or deep ecumenism; the necessary and desired marriage of science and spirituality (as opposed to silly fundamentalism either by religion or by science).

The young could be deeply inspired by such a road show and I have no doubt that the two principals would themselves learn from one another. This pope has displayed a refreshing humility and eagerness to learn from other religious leaders as in his book of dialogs with Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Argentina (who is also a PhD in science). It is a fine book and they got together over a two year period to produce it.

Teachings of Pope Francis that stand out include some of the following.

1. A walking of his talk of simpler lifestyle. Pope Francis was well known in Argentina for taking public transportation to work and refusing any limousine-like service which so many prelates take for granted. He has done the same in his new position as pope where he chooses not to live in the papal apartments but in a far more modest guest house or hotel in the Vatican. He drives a Ford Focus in Vatican city. Might he give over the apartments to Rome's homeless? He has also drawn some press recently for sneaking out at night from the Vatican in the simple priestly garb of black suit and color and hanging out with homeless in the streets of Rome. One senses he is trying to walk the talk and follow his own preaching about simplification. And he is

putting pressure on other prelates to do the same.

2. As for his talk, he tends to mince no words when speaking of the divergence of wealth and poverty today. He speaks to globalization this way: “The globalization that makes everything uniform is essentially imperialist...it is not human. In the end it is a way to enslave the nations.” (Fox, 24)<sup>1</sup> Is globalization enslaving the nations? Serious words worthy of a serious discussion.
3. He says: “Christianity condemns both Communism and wild capitalism with the same vigor” and one needs to reject the “wild economic liberalism we see today” and “seek equal opportunities and rights and strive for social benefits, dignified retirement, vacation time, rest, and freedom of unions.”
  4. He praises St Francis because “he brought to Christianity an idea of poverty against the luxury, pride, vanity of the civil and ecclesiastical powers of the time” and for this reason “he changed history.”
  5. He takes on the neocon preoccupation with “world terrorism” and the fear such language arouses when he declares that “human rights are not only violated by terrorism, repression or assassination, but also by unfair economic structures that create huge inequalities.” How important is that? To equate economic structures with terrorism? Yes, Wall Street terrorizes. Ask any Main Street citizen.
  6. He denounces the “flight of money to foreign countries” as a sin because it dishonors “the people that worked to generate” that wealth. He also condemns those who hide their wealth in off-shore accounts to avoid paying taxes that are so important for the common good.
  7. Pope Francis has said: “The option for the poor comes from the first centuries of Christianity. It is the Gospel itself.” And he remarked that were he to preach sermons from the first fathers of the church on the needs of the poor he would be called a “Maoist or Trotskyite.” (119)
  8. He critiques clericalism as a “distortion of religion” and says priests should not declare “I am the boss here” but listen to the community. “The Catholic Church is the entire people of God” he declares a la Vatican II—not words the previous two popes were at all home with. (85)

---

1      subsequent citations are from Matthew Fox, *Letters to Pope Francis* (South Orange, NY: LevelFiveMedia, 2013

9. "Human rights are violated by...unfair economic structures that create huge inequalities." (71)
10. On Holy Thursday Pope Francis washed the feet of young people in jail including the feet of some women, one of them being Muslim. It is a custom to do this ritual after the memory of Jesus who also did it—but the Catholic right wing is up in arms about his daring to wash women's feet and those of a Muslim woman!
11. He endorses the concept of small communities over what he calls "hierarchical mega-institutions" because these better "nurture their own spirituality" and after all the "origin of Christianity was 'parochial and later organized into small communities.'" (94)
12. "Repair my church in ruins" he said on taking over the office of the papacy. He seems to get it. The schismatic church of John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) has left a Catholicism which the young have abandoned en masse. They left a church in ruins run by fascist leaning opus dei cardinals and bishops all over the world. One Catholic paper in India declared "there is a civil war in the church." I for one do not believe this pope or any pope could return Catholicism to its previous state—or should. As I concluded in my book, "The Pope's War," I see the destruction of the Catholic Church as we know it the work of the Holy Spirit. It is time to simplify the message and the presence of those who follow a Christ path. It is time to travel with backpacks on our backs, not basilicas. The pope's work will not bring Catholics "back to the church" but hopefully it will inspire Christians and non-Christians alike to consider the basic teachings of Jesus around compassion and justice and start acting accordingly.
13. Says Pope Francis: "The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any human goal." We need, he says, a "balanced social order that is more humane" and that resists consumerism. "Money has to serve and not rule." It is a "savage capitalism" that teaches "the logic of profit at any cost" and exploitation of people.
14. Says the pope: "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security." Structures can "give us a false sense of security" and "rules makes us harsh judges...while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us, "give them something to eat." He wants to decentralize the church for "excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the church's life

and her missionary outreach.”

15. Unfettered capitalism is a “new tyranny” “Today we are living in an unjust international system in which 'King Money' is at the center.” This “throwaway culture discards young people as well as its older people.....A whole generation of young people does not have the dignity that is brought by work.” A “diminishing of the joy of life” is the result of such idolatry (125f) and interestingly he chose a parallel phrase, the “Joy of the Gospel” for the title of his most recent pronouncement.

In his recent document entitled “The Joy of the Gospel” Pope Francis speaks bluntly as all the prophet do. He says No—as all the prophets do. He denounces “trickle-down” economics as “never having been confirmed by the facts” and being built on a “crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power....Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting.”<sup>2</sup> Following are some of his No's presented in his own words:

1. “No to an economy of exclusion....An economy of exclusion and inequality kills....Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.”
2. “No to the new idolatry of money....While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few.....Self-serving tax evasion has taken on worldwide dimensions. The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits....Whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a defied market, which becomes the only rule.”
3. “No to a financial system which rules rather than serves. Ethics is seen as counterproductive, too human, because it makes money and power relative. It is felt to be a threat, since it condemns the manipulation and debasement of the person....

Money must serve, not rule! The Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor. I exhort you to generous solidarity and a return of economics and finance to an ethical approach which favors human beings.”

4. “No to the inequality which spawns violence. [Violence happens not]simply because inequality provokes a violent reaction from those excluded form the system, but because the

---

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Blake, “Pope Francis denounces 'trickle-down' economics, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 26, 2013. Subsequent citations are found in this article.

socioeconomic system is unjust at its root. Just as goodness tends to spread, the toleration of evil, which is injustice, tends to expand its baneful influence and quietly to undermine any political and social system, no matter how solid it may appear....Evil crystallized in unjust social structures...cannot be the basis of hope for a better future.”

Pope Francis speaks out against an “education that would tranquilize the poor, making them tame and harmless.” And he defines injustice as “evil.” He has invited liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez to the Vatican and the word is out that he will canonize Archbishop Romero. A different kind of papacy? Surely from the past two popes; much more like Pope John XXIII. Does that mean we go back to papalolatry? Absolutely not. But it does mean that it is good that a person in the public eye is keeping his sights on values that matter and speaking up for the kind of people of conscience who read and act on the values that Tikkun represents.

When it comes to issues of women, Pope Francis has much to learn (including how women were leaders in the early church). But I think he is capable of learning. On homosexuality, he has uttered a telling line, “Who am I to judge?” that certainly distances him from the previous two popes. On issues of abortion, at least he has spoken to the need to care about the women involved. Pope Francis is not perfect—none of us is—but he is an ally to all those seeking a world of justice and therefore peace.