

Learning As We Go: The Pope Models the Change the Church Needs

Francis Sullivan 12 November 2015

Ever since the conclusion of the recent Synod in Rome, I have been thinking about the signals of change that Pope Francis is sending. He does it in words and by his disposition.

Observers at the Synod frequently commented on the informal and casual style of the Pope. He mixed easily and readily with participants. He didn't stand on ceremony and was eager for a chat - more a "first among equals" than some sovereign ruler.

This in itself is a marked difference from previous popes. He personifies what he extols: openness, inclusion and "learning as we go."

It's not hard to see how such a disposition pays dividends in a world in which the search for truth and meaning can seem so clouded and even crowded out with competing voices, philosophies and ideologies. The fact that Francis doesn't purport to "have it all sorted" only deepens his appeal to the rest of us who struggle at times to find certainty and a sure path in life.

Pope Francis has a mantra. He speaks often of the mercy of God, not divine judgement. He wants to remind us of the importance of the human heart, the innate urge to feel for others, understand their plight and seek to help. He wants us to see this as the first and most important of the human responses. This is a disposition that builds bridges and heals wounds; a perspective that seeks to restore relationships, nourish people and promote harmony, not division.

Only this week [he spoke of a Church](#) unafraid to question itself, live with doubts and the discomfort of interrogating its assumptions; a place of dialogue, with a willingness to embrace the new and the awkward. A church that seeks to reform through becoming unsettled, unsure but close to people, their circumstances, sense of isolation and travail. A church more like a meeting square than a brick bastion.

This reminds me of what Simone Weil meant by *paying attention*. She said that in order to get a sense of what is true we need to suspend our own agenda and concerns and shift the focus of our attention on to that we encounter. In so doing, the truth of that encounter, that dynamic within the dialogue, will be revealed.

This is similar to the maxim that listening is the first step towards wisdom. To listen well is to be aware of the voices in ourselves that try to understand another person long before we have actually heard them. Letting go of preconceived perspectives, attitudes and even understandings is the challenge for a pilgrim church if dedication to truth is to be its hallmark.

The irony is that, in becoming disturbed or, as the Pope puts it, "uncomfortable" - maybe even knocked off course - we are strangely on a pathway more to do with God than any human construct of the Divine.

At one level, we should not be surprised to hear a pope speak and act like this. The fact that we are surprised speaks volumes for the institutional persona the Church has cultivated in many quarters these days.

Critics see the Church as being harsh on human nature, uncompromising with its take on the truth and immovable in its attitudes. In its response to child sex abuse, the Church too regularly failed the test of moral leadership, hid behind institutional protectionism and sought to excuse itself as just another institution with some "bad eggs" in the basket.

It spent too long exhausting institutional resources to justify, contextualise and even rationalise away the problem, rather than in humbly admitting its failures as far up the line as they went. The upshot has been in collapse of trust and the consolidation of the public image of a Church that not only speaks of arrogance and indifference, but that also fails to "feel with" those abused and disenchanted.

Too often Church officials wanted understanding before they expressed mercy. We didn't get the problem before it became a tsunami. We didn't get what victims and their families were saying and the reach of the tentacles of abuse within the Church. We didn't get the imperative to cry out in shame and seek atonement. And when we did, it looked too late.

God have mercy!