

“Smelling Like the Sheep”
Priesthood and Ministry in the Mind & Heart of Pope Francis

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I wish to share a meeting I had earlier this winter as I met with senior journalists at the ABC Television Network in New York City on behalf of the Holy See Press Office. During our conversation about Pope Francis, the senior producer of the ABC evening news who had headed up the network’s coverage of the Papal Transition two years ago remarked: *“Look, Fr. Tom, whether one is Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Muslim, left or right, or nothing at all, for many of us for whom the Church was on a distant horizon, we have all been brought into the heart of the Church and the Gospel and find the story incredible, fascinating and inviting.”*

Incredible, Fascinating and inviting: three words that sum up well what many of us are experiencing as we try to unpack the profile and mission that Pope Francis is entrusting to us as priests and to tell the story of the Church and the current Bishop of Rome to the world around us.

September 23, 2015
St. Matthew’s Cathedral
Address to Bishops of the USA

“It is not about preaching complicated doctrines, but joyfully proclaiming Christ who died and rose for our sake. The “style” of our mission should make our hearers feel that the message we preach is meant “for us”. May the word of God grant meaning and fullness to every aspect of their lives; may the sacraments nourish them with that food which they cannot procure for themselves; may the closeness of the shepherd make them long once again for the Father’s embrace. Be vigilant that the flock may always encounter in the heart of their pastor that “taste of eternity” which they seek in vain in the things of this world. May they always hear from you a word of appreciation for their efforts to confirm in liberty and justice the prosperity in which this land abounds. At the same time, may you never lack the serene courage to proclaim that “we must work not for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures for eternal life” (Jn 6:27).”

“Shepherds who do not pasture themselves but are able to step back, away from the center, to “decrease”, in order to feed God’s family with Christ.

Who keep constant watch, standing on the heights to look out with God's eyes on the flock which is his alone. Who ascend to the height of the cross of God's Son, the sole standpoint which opens to the shepherd the heart of his flock."

"Shepherds who do not lower our gaze, concerned only with our concerns, but raise it constantly toward the horizons which God opens before us and which surpass all that we ourselves can foresee or plan. Who also watch over ourselves, so as to flee the temptation of narcissism, which blinds the eyes of the shepherd, makes his voice unrecognizable and his actions fruitless. In the countless paths which lie open to your pastoral concern, remember to keep focused on the core which unifies everything: "You did it unto me" (Mt 25:31-45)."

"And yet we are promoters of the culture of encounter. We are living sacraments of the embrace between God's riches and our poverty. We are witnesses of the abasement and the condescension of God who anticipates in love our every response.

Dialogue is our method, not as a shrewd strategy but out of fidelity to the One who never wearies of visiting the marketplace, even at the eleventh hour, to propose his offer of love (Mt 20:1-16).

The path ahead, then, is dialogue among yourselves, dialogue in your presbyterates, dialogue with lay persons, dialogue with families, dialogue with society. I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialogue fearlessly. The richer the heritage which you are called to share with parrhesia, the more eloquent should be the humility with which you should offer it. Do not be afraid to set out on that "exodus" which is necessary for all authentic dialogue. Otherwise, we fail to understand the thinking of others, or to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain. Harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing."

"Consequently, only a Church which can gather around the family fire remains able to attract others. And not any fire, but the one which blazed forth on Easter morn. The risen Lord continues to challenge the Church's

pastors through the quiet plea of so many of our brothers and sisters: "Have you something to eat?" We need to recognize the Lord's voice, as the apostles did on the shore of the lake of Tiberius (Jn 21:4-12). It becomes even more urgent to grow in the certainty that the embers of his presence, kindled in the fire of his passion, precede us and will never die out. Whenever this certainty weakens, we end up being caretakers of ash, and not guardians and dispensers of the true light and the warmth which causes our hearts to burn within us (Lk 24:32)."

St. Patrick's Cathedral
September 24, 2015

"In the hope of helping you to persevere on the path of fidelity to Jesus Christ, I would like to offer two brief reflections.

The first concerns the spirit of gratitude. The joy of men and women who love God attracts others to him; priests and religious are called to find and radiate lasting satisfaction in their vocation. Joy springs from a grateful heart. Truly, we have received much, so many graces, so many blessings, and we rejoice in this. It will do us good to think back on our lives with the grace of remembrance. Remembrance of when we were first called, remembrance of the road travelled, remembrance of graces received... and, above all, remembrance of our encounter with Jesus Christ so often along the way. Remembrance of the amazement which our encounter with Jesus Christ awakens in our hearts. To seek the grace of remembrance so as to grow in the spirit of gratitude. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves: are we good at counting our blessings?

A second area is the spirit of hard work. A grateful heart is spontaneously impelled to serve the Lord and to find expression in a life of commitment to our work. Once we come to realize how much God has given us, a life of self-sacrifice, of working for him and for others, becomes a privileged way of responding to his great love.

Yet, if we are honest, we know how easily this spirit of generous self-sacrifice can be dampened. There are a couple of ways that this can happen; both are examples of that "spiritual worldliness" which weakens our commitment to serve and diminishes the wonder of our first encounter with Christ.

We can get caught up measuring the value of our apostolic works by the standards of efficiency, good management and outward success which govern the business world. Not that these things are unimportant! We have been entrusted with a great responsibility, and God's people rightly expect accountability from us. But the true worth of our apostolate is measured by the value it has in God's eyes. To see and evaluate things from God's perspective calls for constant conversion in the first days and years of our vocation and, need I say, great humility. The cross shows us a different way of measuring success. Ours is to plant the seeds: God sees to the fruits of our labors. And if at times our efforts and works seem to fail and produce no fruit, we need to remember that we are followers of Jesus... and his life, humanly speaking, ended in failure, the failure of the cross

Another danger comes when we become jealous of our free time, when we think that surrounding ourselves with worldly comforts will help us serve better. The problem with this reasoning is that it can blunt the power of God's daily call to conversion, to encounter with him. Slowly but surely, it diminishes our spirit of sacrifice, renunciation and hard work. It also alienates people who suffer material poverty and are forced to make greater sacrifices than ourselves. Rest is needed, as are moments of leisure and self-enrichment, but we need to learn how to rest in a way that deepens our desire to serve with generosity. Closeness to the poor, the refugee, the immigrant, the sick, the exploited, the elderly living alone, prisoners and all God's other poor, will teach us a different way of resting, one which is more Christian and generous.

Gratitude and hard work: these are two pillars of the spiritual life which I have wanted to share with you this evening. I thank you for prayers and work, and the daily sacrifices you make in the various areas of your apostolate. Many of these are known only to God, but they bear rich fruit for the life of the Church. In a special way I would like to express my esteem and gratitude to the religious women of the United States. What would the Church be without you? Women of strength, fighters, with that spirit of courage which puts you in the front lines in the proclamation of the Gospel. To you, religious women, sisters and mothers of this people, I wish to say "thank you", a big thank you... and to tell you that I love you very much."

What is Pope Francis' vision for the priesthood – how are our priests and future priests to serve their people most faithfully and fruitfully? Here are

ten key concerns which have emerged from both Pope Francis's spoken words and also the witness of his own priestly ministry.

1. The strength of a priest depends on his relationship with Christ. Pope Francis has said that the touchstone of how deeply a priest is living his vocation is the extent to which he seeks Christ in his daily life. In a typically direct question, Pope Francis asked a gathering of Rome's priests at the beginning of Lent, "At night, how does your day end? With God, or with television?" At the heart of any priest's ministry must be a living relationship with Christ, so that the priest sees as Christ sees and loves as he loves. It took the disciples time to really "become Christ" to others so this is not a given at ordination. For this to happen, the priest needs to continue to grow in union with Christ through prayer and intimacy.
2. Just as he must be close to Christ so the priest must be close to the people he serves. In his first Chrism Mass homily, Pope Francis famously spoke of how priests must be "shepherds living with the 'smell of the sheep'" If priests truly are to be pastors rather than administrators they need to "go out to meet the people," especially the lost sheep. The pastor who stays behind his computer in the presbytery, he declared, is not an "authentic pastor." Pope Francis praised one priest for knowing his parishioners so well that he knew not only their names, but also their pets' names! In an age in which so many priests, bishops and curial officials are enslaved by administrative tasks, Pope Francis is summoning them to reprioritize toward the Church's evangelical mission.
3. As Pope Francis emphasized in the homily of his inaugural Mass, a priest's authority must be linked to service, especially to the care and protection of the poorest, weakest, the least important and most easily forgotten. This means that priests have to leave their comfort zone and have "real contact with the poor and the marginalised." Francis, who was known as the "slum bishop" in Argentina because of his work among the poor, has said reaching out to those on the margins of society was "the most concrete way of imitating Jesus". His own first visits after moving to the Vatican were to a jail for juveniles and to the southern Italian island of Lampedusa to pay tribute to impoverished immigrants who have died trying to get to Europe.

4. The priest must be a minister of mercy. Pope Francis told a group of ten newly-ordained priests that the most important advice he could give them was simply, “Be merciful.” His motto *Miserando Atque Eligendo* (“Chosen Through the Eyes of Mercy”) highlights that his own vocation was born in an experience of God’s mercy, when as a 16-year-old boy he went to confession on the feast of the St Matthew, the great convert. Pope Francis’ reminder in his first Angelus address that God never tires of forgiving us is a clear call to priests never to tire in faithfully dispensing that mercy, both sacramentally and in their daily living.
5. The priest is called to a simplicity of life. Diocesan priests do not take a vow of poverty, but commit themselves to a simple lifestyle. Pope Francis has repeatedly criticised priests who give in to vanity and worldly ambition. During his years in Buenos Aires, Cardinal Bergoglio’s example of living in a small apartment rather than an episcopal palace, taking public transportation rather than a car with a driver and cooking for himself (all of which we see mirrored in his new life as Pope) was a clear challenge to his fellow priests to examine the sincerity and authenticity of their own spiritual poverty.
6. The priest must be a model of integrity. There can be no place in priests for a haughty clericalism, any kind of abuse of their position or a concern to climb the ecclesial career ladder – Pope Francis is calling and requiring priests to understand that their authority derives not from worldly power but from personal integrity and humility in imitation of Christ. Paying his pre-conclave bill at the priests’ residence personally immediately after his election was not just a nice gesture indicating a total absence of a sense of privilege, but it was a real sign that no priest should consider himself exempt from the demands of ordinary accountability. Otherwise priests can “become wolves not shepherds”.
7. Finally the priest is to be a source of blessing for his people. The anointing which he receives at his ordination is not meant just for himself – it is to flow through him to those he serves. As Pope Francis said at his first Chrism Mass, “A good priest can be recognised by the way his people are anointed... when our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news.” This was also very much

the theme of his second Chrism Mass homily – the priest is “anointed with the oil of gladness so as to anoint others with the oil of gladness.” In his preaching, in his prayer, through being truly present to his flock in the realities of their everyday lives, the priest is to help them “feel that the fragrance of the Anointed One, Christ, has come to them through the priest.”

8. The Priest is an agent of the New Evangelization. A priest by his very nature is an evangelizer, one who announces the good news through word and action. One of the greatest obstacles to the work of evangelization has always been routine or habit, which eliminates the freshness and persuasive power of Christian missionary outreach and witness. We must direct our efforts courageously and naturally at today's modern Areopagus that is present in culture, in the mass media, politics and the economy. We must give special attention to those who suffer, to the poor and marginalized. We can no longer wait for those no longer practicing the faith to return to the Church on their own: we must seek them out. We do not hesitate to reach out by taking to the streets and public squares, by entering supermarkets, banks, schools, universities and colleges and wherever people can be found. Our missionary zeal must carry us "to the ends of the earth.

Let me quote one of the most well known lines of Blessed Paul VI from paragraph #41 of his 1975 Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Nuntiandi,” “On the Evangelization of the Modern World”:

“...for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal. As we said recently to a group of lay people, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

9. The Priest is a Translator of Holiness. Jesus made his own the call to holiness already addressed by God to the people of the old covenant: "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy." He repeated it continually by word and by the example of his life. Especially in the Sermon on the Mount he left to the Church a code of Christian holiness. Jesus exhorted his

followers to a perfection modeled on that of God himself: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Since the Son reflects most fully this perfection of the Father, Jesus can say on another occasion, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9).

The Church is the "home of holiness" and holiness is our most accurate image, our authentic calling card, and our greatest gift to the world. It describes best who and what we are and strive to be. Holiness is a way of life that involves commitment and activity. It is not a passive endeavor but rather a continuous choice to deepen one's relationship with God and to then allow this relationship to guide all of one's actions in the world. Holiness requires a radical change in mindset and attitude. The acceptance of the call to holiness places God as our final goal in every aspect of our lives. This fundamental orientation towards God even envelops and sustains our relationship with other human beings. Sustained by a life of virtue and fortified by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, God draws us ever closer to Himself and to that day when we will see him face to face.

Human beings become vehicles and instruments of God's holiness for the world. This holiness is the fire of God's Word that must be alive and burning within our hearts. It is this fire, this dynamism, that will burn away the evil within us and around us and cause holiness to burst forth, healing and transforming the society and culture surrounding us. Evil is only eradicated by holiness, not by harshness. Holiness introduces into society a seed that heals and transforms. The priest models this holiness and bears it to the world.

We must never imagine that it is ourselves alone, in new-found power and privilege, who accomplish saving actions. It is Jesus, the Christ, who baptizes and preaches and spreads the feast of His body and blood and provides for the helpless and heals the hurt and grants us peace. He does it though weak, human beings like you and me. Who of us can ever be worthy of such a great calling? To victims, we must be an advocate; for the aimless, we must be shepherds; for the disheartened, heralds of good news; for sinners, disturbers of conscience; and for the guilty,

forgivers. Let us take heart and be encouraged by the witness of the apostles and martyrs of the Early Church and the contemporary Church and never be afraid of giving our lives whole-heartedly to the Lord of the harvest, to Him who came to serve and not be served, to the one who laid down his life for us, his friends. May we do the same for others.

10. The Priest is a Bearer of Joy The great English Catholic apologist, G.K. Chesterton speaks about joy in the conclusion of his masterful work "Orthodoxy." He writes:

"Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. ...The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth."

The joy of the priesthood finds its origin in the heart and mind of Christ. Before taking leave of the Apostles on Holy Thursday Jesus said to them: "I tell you this that my joy may be full!" Certainly this wish is not addressed only to the priest, but is ratified and confirmed in the heart of a priest. The priest experiences Christ when He is received with faith and served with love, as a fount of inexhaustible and unalterable joy!

I have often wondered why we don't depict Jesus smiling or laughing. So many of our images of Jesus dwell on the rather bleak, serious and sad images of Christ that are reflective of the

late Middle Ages- a period when black plagues and death ravaged Europe. While it is true that the New Testament is silent about Jesus smiling, laughing, or enjoying himself and those around him, the Scriptures are not afraid to tell us that he did express other human emotions. We know that he wept bitter tears at his friend Lazarus' death. He was not afraid to show his anger in the Temple when people turned it into a shopping mall. He expressed irritation at the traps being set for him by some religious leaders of his time. How many times did he get frustrated with his disciples' inability to grasp the situation and meaning of his words, parables, predictions of the passion and imminent departure from them? We must ask ourselves: how is it that the Scriptures don't mention anything about Jesus smiling or his humorous responses to his slow disciples? How could he not have laughed and smiled when he was swarmed by children who obviously loved his company?

What did Jesus look like when he stared at Zacchaeus hiding in that Jericho sycamore tree? I am certain that there were smiles, laughter, and humor. When the crowds took leave of him on that Galilean hillside, having eaten their fill... how could Jesus not have smiled in relief? There are many in the Church today who have difficulty with the image of a smiling happy Jesus. They would prefer a stern, dour, tragedy-stricken figure who leads people into deep depression and doesn't seem to offer much hope!

Why should priests be joyful? Why must we be joyful? Because it is in our DNA as priests to be bearers of joy! Each day we perform miracles of changing bread and wine into our Lord's body and blood, forgiving sins in his name, and representing him to others. No wonder why the frail, curé of a little French village would take a lost little boy by the hand and show him the way to heaven! No wonder Lacordaire could exclaim, "My God, what a life!" No wonder Maximillian Kolbe could answer the Gestapo commandant with such tranquility, "I am a Catholic priest". No wonder people expect us to be men of joy. No wonder why a young Jerzy Popieluszko would preach the Gospel with such fervor under Martial Law in Poland, and

continue until his martyrdom. Of what and of whom should we be afraid?

Pope Francis has called on the world's priests to bring the healing power of God's grace to everyone in need, to stay close to the marginalized and to be "shepherds living with the smell of the sheep." Those priests "who do not go out of themselves" by being mediators between God and men can "gradually become intermediaries, managers," he said this past year on March 28 during the Chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica.

When a priest "doesn't put his own skin and own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks" from those he has helped."

"This is precisely the reason why some priests grow dissatisfied, lose heart and become in a sense collectors of antiquities or novelties — instead of being shepherds living with 'the smell of the sheep.'"

"This is what I am asking you," he said with emphasis, looking up from his prepared text, "be shepherds with the smell of sheep," so that people can sense the priest is not just concerned with his own congregation, but is also a fisher of men.

Pope Francis said: "The precious sacramental oil is not intended just to make us fragrant, much less to be kept in a jar, for then it would become rancid and the heart bitter."

"A good priest anoints his people with the oil of gladness, by preaching the Gospel with unction," that is with the soothing, comforting words of God. If people leave Mass "looking as if they have heard good news," then the priest has clearly done his job well."

"...We need to 'go out,' then, in order to experience our own anointing, its power and its redemptive efficacy: to the 'outskirts' where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight, and prisoners in thrall to many evil masters."

Ministers do not encounter God through "soul-searching or constant introspection. Even though "self-help courses can be useful in life," he said, living by them will only lead people to become "pelagians," that is to falsely

believe that good will and strenuous effort without divine aid may overcome sin.

Weariness can be a “gift” or a “temptation”. Francis went on to list three forms of weariness that priests should guard against: first of all, “the weariness of people, the weariness of the crowd”: “the Lord never tired of being with people. On the contrary, he seemed renewed by their presence.” “And how beautiful it is! People love their priests, they want and need their shepherds! The faithful never leave us without something to do, unless we hide in our offices or go out in cars with tinted windows. There is a good and healthy tiredness.” “It is the exhaustion of the priest who wears the smell of the sheep... but also smiles the smile of a father rejoicing in his children or grandchildren. It has nothing to do with those who wear expensive perfume and look at others from afar and from above. Then there is the “weariness of enemies”: “The devil and his minions never sleep and, since their ears cannot bear to hear the word of God, they work tirelessly to silence that word and to distort it.” “Here we need to implore the grace to learn how to “offset”: to thwart evil without pulling up the good wheat, or presuming to protect like supermen what the Lord alone can protect.” “And finally, lest you be wearied by this homily itself!” the Pope joked, there is also “weariness of ourselves”. “This may be the most dangerous weariness of all.” “I like to call this kind of weariness “flirting with spiritual worldliness”,” the Pope continued. This is a bad kind of weariness. “Only love gives true rest. What is not loved becomes tiresome, and in time, brings about a harmful weariness.”

Blessed Oscar Romero: a role model for us

Pope Francis had strong words on October 30, 2015 for individuals within the church who “defamed” the assassinated Archbishop of San Salvador Oscar Romero. Going off script during a meeting with 500 pilgrims from El Salvador, Pope Francis said, “The martyrdom of Msgr. Romero was not fulfilled at the moment of his death—it was a martyrdom of witness, of prior suffering and prior persecution, up to his death. But even afterwards, following his death—I was a young priest and a witness to this—he was defamed, slandered, his memory despoiled, and his martyrdom continued also by his brethren in the priesthood and in the episcopate.

“This is not hearsay, but rather things I have heard. Or perhaps it is best to see it thus: a man who continues to be a martyr. After having given his life,

he continues to give it by allowing himself to be assailed by all this misunderstanding and slander.”

Perhaps reflecting on his own condition as the target of much direct and implied criticism, Pope Francis added, “This gives me strength. Only God knows the stories of those people who have given their lives, who have died, and continue to be stoned with the hardest stone that exists in the world: language.”

The pope remembered Romero as a “good pastor, full of love for God and close to his brothers who, living the dynamism of the Beatitudes, gave his life in a violent way while celebrating the Eucharist, the supreme sacrifice of love, sealing with his own blood the Gospel that he announced.

“From the very beginning of the life of the church, Christians have always believed that the blood of martyrs is a seed for Christians, as Tertullian said. “Today too, in a dramatic way, the blood of a great number of Christian martyrs continues to be shed on the field of the world,” Pope Francis said, “with the certain hope that will bear fruit in a rich harvest of holiness, justice, reconciliation and love of God. But we must remember that one is not born a martyr.” The pope remembered how Archbishop Romero had remarked, “We must be willing to die for our faith, even if the Lord does not grant us this honor.””

But “giving life does not only mean being assassinated,” he said. “Giving life, having the spirit of martyrdom, means offering it in silence, in prayer, in the honest fulfillment of one's duty; in this silence of everyday life, giving life a little at a time.’

“Indeed, the martyr is not someone relegated to the past, a beautiful image that adorns our churches and which we recall with a certain nostalgia. No, the martyr is a brother, a sister, who continues to accompany us in the communion of saints and who, united with Christ, does not ignore our earthly pilgrimage, our sufferings, our anxieties.”

Conclusion

On the late afternoon of March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio received the call to go, rebuild, repair, renew and heal the church. There are those who delight in describing the new Pope as a bold, brazen revolutionary sent

to rock the boat. Others think he has come to cause a massive shipwreck. But the only revolution that Pope Francis has inaugurated is a revolution of tenderness, the very words he used in his recent major letter on "The Joy of the Gospel." [Evangelii Gaudium #88]

And the second revolution he has inaugurated is the revolution of normalcy. What he is doing is normal human, Christian behavior. These are the revolutions at the heart and soul of Pope Francis' ministry. This Bishop of Rome demands a lot while preaching about a God of mercy, by engaging joyfully with nonbelievers, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and those sitting on the fences of life- many who thought that Christianity has nothing left to add to the equations of life.

I go back to those words of my colleague, Eric, at the ABC network: "We have all been brought into the heart of the Church and the Gospel and find the story incredible, fascinating and inviting." We need the Francis revolution of tenderness, mercy and normalcy now more than ever before. We need it for our own lives and ministries. We need it for our Church. And the whole world needs to see it at work in us.