

Editorial: A lesson to be learned from Francis

September 24, 2015

In America's imagination, nothing spells C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N quite like P-O-P-E.

During the middle of the past week, you couldn't turn on a TV, pick up a newspaper or click on a website without seeing images of Pope Francis visiting the United States for the first time. Technically, the pontiff toured Washington, Philadelphia and New York, but his presence was everywhere.



Editor Marv Knox If U.S. Protestants—especially pastors—went to confession, they probably would be told to do penance for all the jealousy they felt during the pope's trip. How could one guy get all that attention? What are we, theological chopped liver?

Of course, the fabulous focus Francis received is a product of distillation. Globally, Roman Catholics outnumber all other Christians by about 1.2 billion to anywhere from 800 million to 950 million. And the pope is the personification of the entire Catholic universe, while all other Christians divide their attention among tens of thousands of groups; the numbers range from 34,000 to 43,000.

So, as the spiritual leader of about 20 percent of the world's population, he's easily the most identifiable person on the planet.

Even Baptists and other Christians who have dissented from Catholicism for 400 to 500 years looked upon Francis' U.S. visit with eager anticipation. After all, it's almost impossible not to like this pope. He's humble (lives in a normal apartment, wears those old black oxfords, rides around in a tiny Fiat). He's down to earth ("Who am I to judge ...?" Well, the *pope*.). He's compassionate (washing prisoners' feet, kissing sick babies, eating lunch with homeless people).

Bridging huge political chasms

Francis is so popular, the advent of his arrival bridged huge political chasms. Two opposing examples: Republican House Speaker John Boehner, a Catholic, said: "The pope ... appeals to our better angels and brings us back to our daily obligations. The best thing we can all do is listen, open our hearts to his message and reflect on his example." Democratic President Barack Obama, a Protestant, praised the pope effusively, particularly for "shaking us out of complacency" and "our conscience from slumber."

Despite all the popular excitement, official pageantry and political nice-making, media pundits focused on Francis' opportunity to peeve both sides of America's polarized populace. Depending on how you look at him, he seems like a liberal conservative or a conservative liberal.

For example, progressives resonate with the pope's stands on income inequality, immigration, capital punishment and climate change. Meanwhile, conservatives applaud his opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage.

He's certainly not as liberal as progressives sometimes believe him to be. They project their wishes onto his pastoral comments about homosexuality and divorce, but he gives no solid indication he has deviated from traditional Church teaching. But he has consternated conservatives with his

comments about capitalism and poverty and destruction of the environment.

Following the Bible

What he's doing—and a person doesn't have to be a Catholic or a Protestant to try this—is follow the Bible, all of it, as he reads it.

Now, lay down your Baptist hackles. I can see them from here. And they're all raised and twitchy for two reasons.

First, some of you don't like it when Baptists say nice things about a Catholic, much less a pope. We have our theological and doctrinal differences. They existed long before Francis assumed the Holy See, and they'll exist long after he joins his predecessors.

Second, some of you don't like it because you don't like half of what Francis says. Either you think he's correct on abortion and same-sex marriage and wrong on all that other stuff, or vice versa. But you don't have to agree with him to give him his due: The pope is trying to be consistent with his faith and his reading of Scripture.

Endeavor for consistency

How different the world would be if all Christians endeavored for such consistency. We wouldn't agree on all points of doctrine, nor would we even agree on all social and moral issues. But we would disagree authentically. And we would find the ground we hold in common is vastly larger, and more important, than the turf over which we divide.

Perhaps that would lead us, as it has Francis, to humility, good nature, generosity and a greater concern for others than for winning.

The world, whatever your denomination, would more closely resemble the kingdom of God.