

Want to be like the pope? Try being nice

A normal priest for normal people



With the sometimes rabid exception of people at the ultra-traditionalist fringe of Catholicism who sputter at seeing him being respectful toward non-Catholics and acting “undignified,” Catholics are very pleased with Pope Francis. More notable, though, is the wild adulation he draws from those outside the Church, even more adulation, it appears, than he draws from Catholics.

Pope Francis has been named Time magazine’s Person of the Year. An international men’s magazine declared him best dressed, more for what he does not wear than for what he does.

The youth music channel MTV named him its man of the year, partnering him with a 17-year-old singer from New Zealand who was their woman of the year. The rock music magazine Rolling Stone featured him on its cover. A magazine focused on the interests of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered put the pope on its cover, as have many other unlikely publications around the world. Personally, I like the cartoon on the Christmas issue of The New Yorker showing Pope Francis making a snow angel. A graffiti artist in Rome has portrayed him as a superhero. I was recently at dinner with a mixed group of Catholics and Jews; the Jews spoke of the pope even more admiringly than we Catholics did.

The comparatively quiet satisfaction that Catholics have with Pope Francis is easy to understand. What he says and does is not very different from what we are used to seeing in our own priests.

Most of us priests have administered baptisms where the star of the show was more interested in being

fed than in being initiated as a Christian. Most of us, unless the architecture makes it impossible, have had small children escape their parents to join us at the altar. (I've asked them to "mind my chair" for me while I'm away from it, something they willingly do till they get bored, climb down and return to the pews.) Most of us have given a sympathetic hearing to people in pain and "bent the rules" on their behalf.

To put it simply, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, a.k.a. Pope Francis, is a normal Catholic, and therefore a normal priest. And it is his normalcy that surprises and attracts people.

With the exception of Pope John XXIII, Catholics have not seen popes as their priests: "The pope is the pope, and Father So-and-So is my priest." People accepted the difference, whether they were happy with it or not. Some lay folk and even some priests wanted priests to act more like popes than pastors. And, too many priests have been willing to oblige.

Now, we are seeing a pope who looks more and more like what most Catholics expect from a priest. And they like it. That is encouraging for those priests who strive to be good shepherds, companions and healers to the People of God.

But, what are we to make of the wild enthusiasm that Pope Francis has aroused among those outside the Church?

Clearly, the world is starved for normalcy and simple decency in our public figures, whether they be politicians, financial leaders, entertainers, sports stars or even religious leaders. We have come to expect scandal, corruption, egoism, selfishness, abuse of power, betrayal, manipulation, self-righteous hypocrisy, greed, pettiness, violence and a host of other less-than-inspiring characteristics.

That a man in a position of world leadership can attract so much attention and affection by simply being a decent human being is a sad commentary on our world.

And yet, the response of people to Pope Francis is a hopeful sign. We are fed up with the sort of men and women who usually get into the headlines and on the magazine covers.

Yet people have not given up hope that there might be men and women around who can take a stand against so much that the world considers "normal," not through confrontation, but by simply being sincerely interested in people and their good. The world still looks for goodness, for kindness and for common sense.

In other words, the world want normalcy.

That presents a challenge and an opportunity for Christians. Incarnating the Incarnation, living as a disciple of Christ, is the most normal thing a human being can do, because Jesus is the norm for humanity. For someone baptized into union with Christ, living otherwise presumably takes extra effort.

Pope Francis is showing how enthusiastically the world responds to a loving, caring, forgiving, friendly and good-natured believer.

One out of every three people in the world is a Christian, and half of those are Catholic. How might the world respond, how different would the news of the world be, if all of us simply acted normal?

The world is waiting, ready and even looking forward to finding out.

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