

Paeans from Paraguay



The overwhelming sensation of someone who has attended a papal event on this Paraguayan visit (and I have been present at three) is one of huge, excited crowds, chants and shouting, climbing up to get a better view, and the waving of flags and balloons.

It is also, for those few who are close enough, stretching out to touch the man whose goodness and compassion is so much greater than their own, in the hope that something will rub off. I will never read the gospels in the same way again.

Pope Francis' warm embraces of young people at the Costanera rally in Asunción were moving and drew cheers from the crowd. Both male and female, they felt comfortable in going right up to him and putting their arms around him, and he responded, so that it was like looking at Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

It was the same with the children. A group ran up to him on his arrival at Asunción airport with whoops of joy, and he embraced and blessed as many as he could all together. Actions like this speak louder than words.

He ends every discourse with the exhortation, "Don't forget to pray for me." And what man would not need prayers to avoid the temptations that have to lurk behind such a degree of mass adulation? At the meeting of popular movements in Bolivia, he added: "And if any of you can't pray, with all respect I ask you to think well of me and to send me good vibes [me mande buena onda]."

The addition was not only a chiming-in with young people's slang, but a significant illustration of his open-mindedness. This was seen again in the Civil Society meeting in Asunción, when he said that "diversity is not just good: it is necessary".

The Pope elaborated on this approach: “The point of departure cannot be, ‘I’m going to dialogue but he’s wrong.’ No, no, we must not presume that the other person is wrong. I dialogue with my identity but I’m going to listen to what the other person has to say, how I can be enriched by the other, who makes me realise my mistakes and see the contribution I can offer.”

Gay activists were specifically invited to the Civil Society meeting in Asunción – something that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. The Pope’s openness and lack of dogmatism was evident in the way that he did not come to preach but to listen, and the first words were always given to the local people, with his discourse then an extended response. This happened in Paraguay at the Civil Society meeting, in the Bañado, and in the youth rally.

At Bañado Norte, a reclaimed swamp by the Paraguay River where most of the 100,000 inhabitants survive by collecting and selling rubbish, two women told Francis they face the threat of eviction from their land. The Pope praised the highly organised community that shares food and clothing, and has created complex forms of monetary redistribution that allow the sick to buy medicines and talented young people to further their studies. He said “faith and solidarity” is the message the poor of Paraguay need to communicate to the poor outside.

Specifically for Paraguay, three points stand out. One is that Francis’ frequently repeated theme of the Paraguayan woman as “the most glorious of America” has now reached a wider audience. He linked the women with his devotion to the Virgin, who in the sufferings of her life – in the stable, in the Egyptian exile, and at the foot of the Cross – must often have wondered, “Where is God now?”

Paraguayan women, the Pope said, would have asked themselves the same question as they confronted the devastation of their country and the massacre of their population – reduced by 70 per cent – in the Triple Alliance War, which Paraguay fought between 1864 and 1870 against Argentina (the Pope’s home country) and its allies, Brazil and Uruguay.

Although Paraguayans generally feel that Argentinians look down on them as their poor neighbours, they knew that Francis is on their side when he said: “The Virgin is Paraguayan, from Caacupé, and there is no Paraguayan who does not love her. You know that in all America the Paraguayan woman is the most glorious, not because she studied more than others ... but because she knew how to take on a country defeated by injustice and international interests. And in the face of this defeat she took forward the motherland, the language and the faith.”

A second point is that the cause for canonisation of Chiquitunga (María Felicia Guggiari Echeverría), who died in 1959 at the untimely age of 34, is likely to race ahead. A Discalced Carmelite, she was more widely known as a lively spirit in Catholic Action, giving catechesis and attending to the poor, the sick and the elderly. Francis referred to Chiquitunga in the prepared speech for the Costanera rally that was published but not actually delivered.

A third point is the quote that both Paraguay's major newspapers chose to splash across their front pages on Sunday morning: "Corruption is the gangrene of the people". Paraguay is the second most corrupt country of South America according to the non-governmental organisation, Transparency International. The ABC Color newspaper commented on the Pope's words: "For decades, politicians of the different parties have committed themselves to struggle against corruption, but with each day that passes the cases that are reported or discovered are more scandalous. Rather than diminishing, corruption is advancing under the protection of the politicians."

Thunderstorms had been forecast, but in the end the only abundance of water at Nu Guasú Mass was in the 650,000 bottles of mineral water that were distributed, and that most people did not drink so that they could return home with water blessed by the Pope. Paraguay has indeed been showered with blessings in this visit, and Francis showed himself to be truly what the posters claimed – a "Messenger of Joy and Peace".

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