

POPE FRANCIS' PROFOUND PERSONALISM AND POVERTY

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Introduction

This book is not intended as a scholarly presentation of Pope Francis' thought. Nor is it presented as a scholarly analysis of the philosophy of personalism. Rather, it is an attempt at sharing how and why Pope Francis' insights have inspired me and, I am certain, countless others. The book is personal, very much a presentation of my reactions and enthusiasm for Pope Francis, but I hope not private. It represents an attempt at reflecting on Pope Francis' insights and emphases in the hope that my reflections will help readers appreciate more fully the Pope's vision, and so live the Gospel with the joy that the Holy Father encourages. Francis' insights into the human person are profound, exciting, and inspiring. Never does the Holy Father speak or write about the mystery of person from an ivory tower removed from the day-to-day struggles that are part and parcel of every person's life. Francis' faith illuminates his own understanding of personal existence and his faith challenges us, not only to reflect deeply on who we are, but to incorporate into our lives, as honestly and courageously as we can, the most profound meaning of the mysteries of God, self, and neighbor. While the philosophy of personalism presents beautiful, almost mystical, insights into personal existence, Francis relentlessly, but lovingly, challenges

our consciences and urges us to live differently, to incarnate personalist insights into our relationships with God and with others.

Two Types of Poverty

It is almost impossible to read a story about Pope Francis that does not mention that he emphasizes the needs of the poor. Many religious leaders have spoken about the poor, about our obligation to be concerned about the poor and to help them, but somehow Pope Francis' message seems to be having a special impact. The attractiveness and appeal of the Pope seem to help greatly in conveying his message. I believe that one way to enter more deeply into the Holy Father's vision of humanity is to reflect on two meanings of poverty that shed light on Francis' profound understanding of human nature, on his grasp of world problems, and how to solve those problems.

One meaning of poverty I describe as poverty in being, the other I call poverty in having. Every human person is poor in being. To be finite is to be fragile and limited. We are fragile physically, psychologically, and spiritually. None of us is God. We have no choice about being poor in being. This is how we find ourselves; this is how God made us. We are created for a loving relationship with God, and with our brothers and sisters, and nothing less will fulfill us. On this side of heaven not even those loving relationships will totally fulfill us.

Poverty in having is not to have sufficient goods and possessions to live a decent human life. One third of the human race is poor in having. Because that portion of the human race does not have enough to eat, many are

starving to death. Billionaires are not poor in having. It may be that some billionaires are so rich, they do not even know how much money they have. However, on the level of being, billionaires are as poor, as fragile, and as finite as the rest of us. If a billionaire does not know that he or she is as poor in being as the rest of us, that person's life might turn out to be a spiritual disaster. Such a person might implicitly think they are "quasi-divine," in no need of any kind of help from anyone, including God. Such a person might not believe that he or she needs redemption. In her novel *Wise Blood*, Flannery O'Connor satirized this view when she had the main character, Hazel Motes, announce, "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified. . ." ¹

Perhaps one reason that Jesus talks so much in Scripture about the "poverty in having" is that the experience of physical poverty might help them to be aware of how needy they are in being. I suspect that this is one reason that members of religious orders take vows of poverty. The vow of poverty should free those who take it from any inordinate attachment to possessions. For those who take a vow of poverty, the illusion that our society promotes, namely that things are going to free us, save us, and redeem us, that our value as persons can be seen by what we possess, should be exposed as an illusion.

Reflecting on our poverty in being can help us see more deeply into God's love for us. Not one of us had the right to be created. Each one of us is created from nothing by God's love. All of creation is a product of Divine

¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, (New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1949), p. 113.

Chapter One

The Pope's Interview

I cannot recall any time that any Pope has spoken that caused as much discussion as the first official interview that Pope Francis gave. The interview took place in three meetings in August of 2013, but was not released until September in sixteen Jesuit magazines across the world. The interview was conducted in person by Father Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor-in-chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit journal. The editorial teams of several Jesuit journals around the world prepared questions that were sent to Father Spadaro, who organized them for the interview.

In addition to hearing comments about the interview from many people I have spent time with since the interview, I have read several essays about the interview. One of the best was written by Father James Martin, S.J. Noting that when he read it he knew that the interview was “spiritual dynamite,” Father Martin wrote the following:

“The Pope touched upon almost every area of concern for modern-day Catholics from the role of women, to the need for reform in the Vatican curia, to tensions between traditionalists and progres-

*sives; he also spoke about his own spiritual journey with great feeling and his own failings with brutal candor.”*⁵

In *America*, the Jesuit weekly in which the interview appeared, the editor, Father Matt Malone, S.J., wrote the following:

*“Other popes have given interviews, of course, and while they have been insightful and often spirited, they have also been didactic and formal. I suspect that this interview, along with the pope’s extended remarks on the return trip from Rio de Janeiro last July, represent a new genre of papal communication, one that is fraternal rather than paternal. A spirit of generosity, humility and dare I say, deep affection is evident in these pages. . . . Pope Francis speaks to us as our brother; his we actually means, ‘we,’ not ‘I.’”*⁶

Father Malone has touched on some of the key elements in the interview, and I think that the interview provides evidence as to why so many Catholics have been enthusiastic about Pope Francis’ papacy. However, I learned that not everyone was happy about the Pope’s remarks. I asked a priest friend what he thought of the Pope, and he remarked, “He shoots from the hip.” I think the comment meant that Francis answers questions too quickly, that perhaps he should be more careful in his statements because he might be misunderstood or even misquoted. Because some of the statements of the Pope are so striking, I can understand my friend’s concern, but I have to believe that

⁵ James Martin, *Time*, September 20, 2013, online.

⁶ Matt Malone, *America*, September 30, 2013, p. 2.

the Pope, aware of the media coverage that his remarks will receive, says exactly what he wishes to say. I strongly encourage readers of this book to read his interview. New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan described the interview as a “breath of fresh air.”

Francis: Prophet of Hope

Asked a question about the Church, Pope Francis emphasized that the Church is a community; that no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. He said the following:

“And the church is the people of God on the journey through history, with joys and sorrows. Thinking with the church, therefore, is my way of being a part of this people. And all the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display this infallibilitas in credo, this infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together. . . . When the dialogue among the people goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. . . . We should not even think therefore, that ‘thinking with the church’ means only thinking with the hierarchy of the church.”⁷

How Francis’ papacy is leading the Church is both interesting and important. He has emphasized that we must never forget the poor. His statements about the poor have already disturbed my conscience and probably the consciences of many. It is easy to forget those who may not be part of our daily experience, but I do not think Francis is going to allow us to do that. Why

⁷ Pope Francis, *America*, September 30, 2013, p. 2.