

Pope Francis: Building Bridges in the New Evangelization

Matthew Halbach



The last article I wrote for *Catechetical Leader*¹ addressed the need to recover the important practice of “pre-evangelization”² in order to effectively move forward with the new evangelization — something Sherry Weddell mentions in her widely read book: *Forming Intentional Disciples*.³ In addition,

I highlighted Pope Francis as a living example of one who pre-evangelizes; that is to say, this pope makes clear his understanding of human nature as a continuum. In light of this, the Pope demonstrates the prime importance of building positive relationships with others, meeting people where they are spiritually, emotionally, culturally, and intellectually. This is a critical first step in the new evangelization effort. My homage to Francis continues in this essay, wherein I explore his *pontifical bridge building prowess*. Say that three times fast!

THE FRANCIS EFFECT

Let me begin on a personal note by saying that Francis has greatly disabused me of the lingering notion that the gospels should be interpreted as a composite of lofty ideals that people must rise up to meet. Having succumbed to the “Francis effect,”⁴ I have adopted more fully the understanding that the gospels portray the radical, lavish love of God, breaking in upon the world from on high; and that this mighty love was embodied in Jesus, who strove to bring himself ever lower, taking the form of a slave⁵ — even dying and entering into the “underworld” — in order to be the servant of all and, so, lift up humanity, heal it, and divinize it.

For Francis, it appears that the gospel is ultimately about the joy that comes from the experience of being raised up from

one’s own poverty (and there are various kinds of poverty)⁶ and that which comes from helping to lift others out of theirs. This leads me to think that if there is, in fact, a “Jacob’s ladder”⁷ which all must ascend to reach heaven, then it is in reality a *human ladder*, formed by those who are willing to shoulder the burdens of others and lift them up higher than themselves so that *they* — our loved ones, our neighbors, and even our enemies — can climb up to God. And no doubt Christ forms the first “rung.”

Thinking about ladders led me to thinking about bridges, and bridges led me to thinking about Francis. Indeed, Francis is the embodiment of his (unofficial) papal title *pontifex maximus*, which literally means “greatest bridge builder.”⁸ This title, incidentally, began with Octavius “Caesar” Augustus⁹ to whom scholars (not to mention the Romans themselves!) credit the ushering in of the *pax romana* — the longest period of peace and prosperity in the history of the Roman Empire (27 BCE - 180 CE). Let us all hope that peace is on our horizon with this pope, a peace that will be shared more eagerly across the institutional boundaries of the church.

KEEPER OF THE KEYS

But the connection between these two leaders is not merely found in their bridge building but in their “key keeping” as well. Francis is not only a bridge builder. As St. Peter himself (*tu es Petrus*), he is also the *keeper of the keys*.¹⁰ Interestingly, one “key” to Francis’ papacy, and to understanding the man himself, was also possessed by Augustus: both men, though holding the highest office within their respective Roman institutions, chose to make trimming the institutional “fat” and giving a voice to those far removed from their royal retinues¹¹ the focal points of their administrations.

1 “New Pope, New Evangelization, New Return to Old (but Good) Ideas.” Available at www.ncl.wildapricot.org.

2 National Directory for Catechesis (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), 49. Pre-evangelization “ordinarily builds on basic human needs, such as security, love, or acceptance, and shows how those basic human needs include a desire for God and his word.”

3 Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 126.

4 See the New York Post for December 4, 2013; Cf. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette for December 22, 2013. To the contrary, see the Pew post titled “No Clear ‘Pope Francis Effect’ Among U.S. Catholics.” Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/25/no-clear-pope-francis-effect-among-u-s-catholics/>.

5 RSV, Phil 2:7

6 Compare Lk 6:20 and Mt 5:3.

7 Gen 28:10-17.

8 This term also signified Augustus’ role as the “high priest” of the Roman Empire, the leader (and oftentimes object) of Roman religion.

9 Anthony Everitt, *Augustus: The Life of Rome’s First Emperor* (New York: Random House, 2007). See also, Richard J. A. Talbert, “Augustus and the Senate” in *Greece and Rome*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (April 1984).

10 Mt 16:18.

11 See Pope’s comments in *La Repubblica*. Available at: http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/10/01/news/pope_s_conversation_with_scalfari_english-67643118/?ref=HREA-1.

Though viewed as a god and a true monarch, Augustus made great strides towards rehabilitating the Roman Republic. Pope Francis, though obviously not God, yet a true monarch, has sought to begin the rehabilitation of the Curia by encouraging greater collegiality among the bishops and their respective conferences and, thus, promoting a more decentralized (less Eurocentric) church.¹² This is all to say that in their own way, both Augustus and Francis adopted the view that dialogue, consultation, and the *vox populi* or “voice of the people,” has a rightful place in their respective administrations.

A striking example of this new style of papal administration occurred at the end of 2013, when the pope called for lay participation in the preparation for the 2014 Synod on Marriage and Family, which resulted in the publication of the questions for the *lineamenta* in the form of an online survey. Though the questions could have been made more accessible to the laity, it was an incredible first step towards . . . wait for it . . . not democracy but lay consultation.

The church, though indeed the People of God, remains still a communion hierarchically ordered.¹³ That being said, Francis’s recent articulation of the church and the sacraments as “open doors”¹⁴ is challenging this hierarchical communion to become more transparent, more accessible at all “levels,” heavier on the communion side than the hierarchical side if you will. The pope’s metaphor of “open doors” calls each of us to consider the church in terms of *service to God through others*. In this light, the church is viewed primarily as a *communion*

of servants and secondarily as a communion of ordained and laity, as all are “ordered”¹⁵ to the love and worship of God and to the service of neighbor by virtue of their baptism. Consequently, all are *ordered* to holiness.¹⁶

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Putting the idea of “open doors” and the ecclesiology of Vatican II together (though admittedly this is oversimplifying things), it is clear that the church is replete with “ordinary” and “extraordinary” servants (disciples), each supporting the other in varied ways with differing gifts, and with the ultimate aim being the amelioration and salvation of humanity, of all creation, through the word preached and lived. But I digress.

Let me be clear, both Augustus and Francis are far from perfect¹⁷ and comparing the two is a stretch of the imagination. For instance, Augustus would not have been fond at all of the idea of likening his office to that of a shepherd, having the “odor of the sheep”¹⁸ all over him. That being said, Augustus, like Francis, demonstrated an uncanny ability for administration reform and for rallying the

12 Russell Shaw, “Pope Francis: A New Look at Collegiality?” Available at: http://www.the-tidings.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3731.

13 *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter III.

14 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 46-49. Available at: www.vatican.va.

15 I do not use this term to mean “conscripted” but “called to” and “equipped for.”

16 *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter V.

17 Antonio Spadaro, SJ, “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis” American Magazine Online (September 30, 2013). Here, Francis refers to himself first and foremost as a “sinner.” See also, footnote no. 5. Everitt writes (p. 324-325) the following about Augustus’ personality: “In his capacity as *princeps*, selfishness and selflessness coexisted in his mind. While fighting for dominance, he paid little attention to legality or to the normal civilities of political life. He was devious, untrustworthy, and bloodthirsty. But once he had established his authority, he governed efficiently and justly, generally allowed freedom of speech, and promoted the rule of law. He was immensely hardworking and tried as hard as any democratic parliamentarian to treat his senatorial colleagues with respect and sensitivity. He suffered from no delusions of grandeur.”

18 Pope Francis, *Christ the King Homily* (March 28, 2013). Available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale_en.html

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support of the people. One cannot help but think that this is so precisely because, ultimately, both set their administrations on the idea of building bridges. Augustus sought to expand his empire and Francis is looking to expand the Kingdom of God.

Let us turn our attention again to the “Francis effect” I mentioned earlier. In my opinion, this effect stems not from any new ideas or teachings from Francis; rather, the dubbed effect stems from *how* Francis thinks and teaches and, ultimately, *how* he lives his life. Thinking on this, I was reminded of Franco Zeffirelli’s made-for-TV-movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*. In it, Joseph of Arimathea, ably played by James Mason, goes to listen to Jesus preach, after which he makes the comment that much of what Jesus said has already been said by other prophets before him, *but not quite in the same way*. And it is Jesus’ new way of thinking and speaking that inspires Joseph. Similarly, about Pope Francis, Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto recently made the observation that “Francis is saying what the Church and previous popes have always said. But style, tone and emphasis make all the difference.”¹⁹

Francis is not just talking about his desire for collegiality and transparency, option for the poor, and wider lay consultation; he is also trying to model the behaviors that would bring these desires to fulfillment. And much like his papal namesake, Francis prefers to set down the whisperings of his heart no matter what the cost rather than strategize for a rhetorical victory or for political gain or greater notoriety. In addition, it is no surprise that there are those who are uneasy with the free-wheeling style of this new pope who seems to give an interview more readily than some Hollywood A-listers. In an institution which prizes tradition and which moves at a glacial pace, it seems likely that having a pope like Francis, who is a creative thinker and a barrier breaker, and who prizes charity above all else, is bound to draw at least some criticism.

When examining Francis’ papal style in light of the gospels, the thought occurred to me that Jesus probably drew the attention of so many detractors and defamers not only because he claimed to be the messiah, but that as the messiah he would actually desire to interact and relate with so many “undesirable” people — a rather “out of the box” idea for such a rigid religious system at the time. Like Jesus, Francis is exceeding the commonly held expectations of his office. He is presenting a fresh face of God to the world, one who is eager to embrace

any who might approach; yet who, like the father of the prodigal son, also seems apt to forego waiting for us to come to him and, instead, dashes out to meet us.

Indeed, through the words and actions of Pope Francis, who seems to embody the teachings and reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Catholics today are beginning to awaken to the notion of *Deus provider*: that “God provides.” God’s grace and presence, though “subsisting in”²⁰ the church, are not confined to it and, thus, not limited by it. The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism made it clear that there exists outside of the church various sanctifying “elements” (e.g., the sacred Scriptures, grace, gifts of the Spirit, and other “visible elements”).²¹ These, the Council teaches, belong to the church. However, the Council also affirms that there exists outside the church the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love — and these belong to God.²² And we all know that the greatest of these virtues is love.²³ Thus, as the hymn goes, “where love exists there God is”: *ubi caritas et amor deus ibi est*.

In my opinion, the “Francis effect” is proof that the church is not the monopolizer of love but its servant; and Francis is demonstrating this truth with his words, his actions, his life. Here are Pope Francis’ words regarding the necessity and “augustness” — pun intended — of charity, which are taken from his general audience of November 6, 2013. It deserves to be quoted in full:

And we come to the third aspect of communion in holy things, that is, *communion in charity*, the unity among us that creates charity, love. The gentiles, observing the early Christians, said: how they love each other, how they wish one another well! They do not hate, they do not speak against one another. This is the charity, the love of God that the Holy Spirit puts in our hearts. The charisms are important in the life of the Christian community, but they are always a means for growth in charity, in love, which St. Paul sets above the charisms (cf. 1 Cor 13:1-13). Without love, in fact, even the most extraordinary gifts are in vain; this man heals people, he has that power, this other virtue...but does he have love and charity in his heart? If he does then all is well, but if he does not he is no servant of the Church. Without love no

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19 Sandro Contenta, “Pope Francis’ Reform Recipe: New Wine in Old Bottle.” Available at: http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/12/21/pope_franciss_reform_recipe_new_wine_in_old_bottle.html.

20 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8.

21 Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 3.

22 Ibid.

23 1 Cor 13:13.

gift or charism could serve the Church, for where there is not love there is an emptiness that becomes filled with selfishness. And I ask myself: if we all were egotistical, could we live in communion and peace? No, it's not possible, that is why it is necessary that love unite us. Our smallest gesture of love benefits everyone! Therefore, to live out unity in the Church and communion in charity means not seeking one's own interests but sharing the suffering and the joy of one's brothers (cf. 1 Cor 12:26), ready to carry the weight of the poorest and the weakest. This fraternal solidarity is not a figure of speech, a saying, but an integral part of the communion among Christians. If we live it, we are a sign to the world, the "sacrament" of God's love. This is what we are one for another and what we are for all! It is not just petty love that we can offer one another, but something much more profound: it is a communion that renders us capable of entering into the joy and sorrow of others and making them sincerely our own.²⁴

What I've said about Pope Francis the bridge builder is not to disparage the papacies of prior popes. Each man followed the light he was given. Though comparisons are inevitable, it is not at all a matter of "which pope is better." Rather, what matters is whether each pope has bettered the church; and most of them have, each in their own way. Even the worst popes,²⁵ whose personal lives ran completely contrary to the gospel, in a sense even they have contributed "positively," though indeed inadvertently, to the betterment of the church, acting as catalysts for future ecclesial reform and renewal.

The legacy of this pope is yet to be known. However, what can already be said about Francis' bridge building is that his words

24 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20131106_udienza-generale_en.html.

25 Russell Chamberlin, *The Bad Popes* (New York: Dorset Press, 1986).

and actions have an incarnate center, rooted in Christ, such that transcendence is slowly becoming the new imminence, the margin is becoming the new center, and "left and "right" are becoming anachronisms.²⁶

Being the bridge builder he is, Francis, in a short amount of time, has already extended himself across some very deep divides. He has spoken sincerely and with charity about such issues as homosexuality, abortion, poverty, the ills of capitalism run amuck, the need for greater ecclesial transparency and curial reform, wider lay consultation. And he has spoken about each of these issues within the context of the gospel, which he clearly presents as a *gospel of possibilities*, a *gospel of hope*. And because Francis speaks about these divisive issues with such gentleness, hope, and compassion, one cannot help but believe that God is truly deeper, wider, more inclusive, and more resilient than our wildest imaginations could ever conceive. And as secularism²⁷ continues unabated throughout much of the world, people need to believe now, more than ever, that God's plans are far superior than their own; and that God, indeed, has built such a mighty and magnificent bridge in Christ that the divine word will, indeed, not return to God void.²⁸ In Christ, all things are possible!

Blessings as you go build bridges! ■

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26 Gal 3:28.

27 John Feister "Cardinal Timothy Dolan On the New Evangelization." Available at: <http://www.americancatholic.org/samo/Feature.aspx?articleid=120&IssueID=41>. Here, Cardinal Dolan succinctly describes secularism as ". . . when you seek your ultimate values in the here and now and not in the beyond. Secularism is when you seek personal worth in what you have or what you do instead of who you are."

28 Is 55:11.

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