

It is helpful for our emotional equilibrium and spiritual wellbeing to keep alive the memory of the positive feelings and constructive thoughts generated by the six day pastoral visit of Pope Francis to the United States, September 23-28, 2015. The constant barrage of negative news that dominates the contemporary world can distort our perception of reality and increase our anxiety level. To maintain psychic balance in the digital age, we need a spirituality that is proactively paschal, which means being especially attentive to the victories, large and small, of grace over evil.

We can cultivate this postmodern spirituality by creating a dialogue with positive memories in various ways: periodically recalling major events that were totally unexpected such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the election of Nelson Mandela; saying prayers of gratitude each day for positive developments in our own lives; and including in our examination of conscience not only our sins but also our spiritual progress.

As an exercise in memory dialogue, we can recall some of the inspiring moments when a remarkable pope interacted with a receptive American audience. In his historic address to the Joint Meeting of Congress, Pope Francis, speaking deliberately in accented English, reminded law makers of their duty “to protect, by means of the law, the image and likeness fashioned by God on every human face.” With a brilliant rhetorical move, he raised up the “historical memory” of four Americans: Abraham Lincoln, a great defender of liberty; Martin Luther King, an eloquent spokesman for the dream of justice; Dorothy Day, the social activist dedicated to care for the poor; and Thomas Merton, the contemplative advocate for dialogue and peace. The reference to Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton drew great praise from Catholics, who see these two inspirational figures (not always appreciated by the United States bishops) as models of a distinctively American spirituality. Veteran observers of Congress reported that they had never seen the members so attentive and moved by a speech of any president or visiting dignitary. The Catholic Speaker of the House, John Boehner, who invited the pope, was visibly moved. Jewish and Protestant senators joined Catholics in glowing praise of Francis as a great moral leader. Caught up in the emotion of the day, some commentators suggested the address would help create a more harmonious and less divisive atmosphere in Congress. Although there is little concrete evidence to support this expectation, it seems important to hold in memory the immediate positive response to the pope as an ongoing reminder of how politicians with real philosophical differences could cooperate for the common good.

Invited to address the 70th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, Pope Francis used the occasion to highlight the importance of healthy families and greater educational opportunities for women. He deplored the “modern scourges” of terrorism, human trafficking, the narcotics trade and the proliferation of weapons, which harm “real men and women.” He praised the peacekeeping efforts of the UN and indicated his approval of the Iranian nuclear agreement. Echoing his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the pope gave special attention to ecological problems created by “the thirst for power and material prosperity.” He spoke of a “true right of the environment” based on the fact that humans “live in communion with it” and the conviction that every creature has “an intrinsic value.” Arguing his point, Francis noted that all religions believe “the environment is a fundamental good” and that the monotheistic religions believe in a Creator who calls us to respect creation. Applying his fundamental conviction that environmental and human concerns are essentially connected, the pope also spoke out against “the exclusion of the weak and disadvantaged,” who are victims of a growing “culture of waste.” Mindful of his “grave responsibility” as a religious leader, Francis expressed hope that the international community would make real progress in protecting the environment, starting with the upcoming Paris Conference on Climate Change.

There are indications that Francis has changed some minds on environmental issues. The Yale Project on Climate Change Communication released a report on *The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming*, indicating that 17 percent of Americans and 35 percent of American Catholics report that Francis influenced their view on global warming. Surveys conducted in March before the release of *Laudato Si'* and in October after the pope’s visit to the United States indicate that more Americans

now say global warming is happening (plus 4 points for all Americans and 10 for Catholics); more are now worried about it (plus 8 for all and 11 for Catholics); and more now agree with the pope that global warming harms the poor (plus 12 for all and an amazing 20 point rise for Catholics from 42 to 62 percent). The report does admit that other causes may be at work but claims that some of these changes must be attributed to Francis.

The pope's UN speech drew praise from religious and secular sources: Pax Christi USA commended Francis for his "eloquent, simple and direct words" supporting peace through nonviolence; and the Washington Post described him as "an inspiration and unrelenting motivator" for protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development.

In introducing Pope Francis to the UN General Assembly, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon referred to his "remarkable global stature as a man of faith among all faiths." With the death of Nelson Mandela, it seems that Francis is now recognized by many as the premier moral leader in the world. The positive response to his UN speech suggests persons of all faiths as well as non-believers are open to perspectives of a religious leader. Remembering that the Pope actually changed some perceptions and attitudes on a crucial topic strengthens our hope that progress can be made on other issues as well.

All of the pope's speeches had points worth remembering. His speech on religious liberty before Independence Hall in Philadelphia, for example, encouraged Hispanics to treasure their religious heritage and to never be ashamed of their cultural traditions. Delivered in Spanish with great spontaneity and enthusiasm, it revealed the pope's deep compassion for immigrants and can serve as an ongoing reminder of our own responsibilities to the growing number of refugees in our war-torn world.

During his visit, Francis not only interacted with the powerful but also with homeless persons in Washington, the children of immigrants in New York, and prisoners at a correctional facility on the outskirts of Philadelphia. In those settings he seemed to come alive and find new energy. His face lit up and his gestures were more animated. He was at home with the kind of persons he served as a priest and bishop in Argentina. To about 100 young inmates, the pope presented himself as a pastor, "but above all as a brother." His comments were organized around the Last Supper scene in John's Gospel where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The journey of life leaves its mark on all of us. We all need cleansing. Jesus wants to heal our wounds, to wash us clean, to restore our dignity, to help us resume the journey and "come back to the table" spread for all. Insisting that "confinement is not the same as exclusion," the pope expressed his personal displeasure with prison systems that "are not concerned to care for wounds" and with those who do not realize that the pain of inmates is also the pain of society. Seeing the world through the eyes of Jesus, we are moved "to create new opportunities for the inmates and their families; for correctional authorities and society as a whole." In a pointed liberating instruction, Francis insisted that Jesus saves us from "the lie that says no one can change."

After his talk, Francis went and greeted each one of the young inmates, blessing some and embracing those who rose from their chairs. Throughout, he exuded a warm inclusive compassion that clearly touched most, if not all, of the inmates.

It is difficult to know what real effect the prison visit of Francis will have. The United States, which has about five percent of the world's population, has 25 percent of the prison population, about 2.2 million persons incarcerated. Those passionate about prison reform found great encouragement in the pope's comments. After the papal visit, the Justice Department announced an early release for about 6,000 inmates from federal prisons in an effort to reduce overcrowding and to provide relief for drug offenders who received harsh sentences over the past three decades. Although this decision was made independently of Francis, it is in accord with his emphasis on new opportunities for offenders. In early October, a number of senators, including some Catholics, introduced a criminal justice reform bill designed, in part, to reduce sentences for low level, non-violent drug offenders. In supporting the bill, Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami, representing the American bishops, cited statements of Pope Francis on prison reform. As our country continues to discuss prison reform, some of us should make sure that the example and teaching of Francis is part of the public debate.

Many of us have images stored in our memory of Francis interacting with children, mingling with the homeless, and embracing disabled persons. We remember them as authentic gestures of a genuine human

being, a compassionate priest, and an edifying pope who sees himself as a servant of the servants of God. On days when we are tempted to remain imprisoned in our own egocentricity, it may be helpful to recall these images as a stimulus for reaching out to those in need.

The pastoral visit of Pope Francis to the United States dominated the news cycle for a good week, lifting our spirits and expanding our horizons. Recalling those days can help us achieve a more balanced spirituality based on a dialogue of memories which helps us see negative news from the perspective of God's more powerful grace.