

Pope Francis five years on



This Tuesday 13 March marked five years since Cardinal Jorge Maria Bergoglio was elected Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and stepped out onto the balcony at the Vatican as Pope Francis I. I am sure we all remember that breath of fresh air that seemed to sweep into the Church that day as this humble man, taking the name of Francis of Assisi, the *poverello*, the man of humility and love for all of God's creation, asked the world to bless him. Many of us looked appreciatively and admiringly at this new pope as he shunned the papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace, preferring to live where he can be with people and welcome them freely. He opted for simple garb, letting go of some of the lavish items of attire so favoured by the previous pope. He declared that he wanted 'a poor church for the poor' and we heard stories of his simple lifestyle as Bishop of Buenos Aires.

Within a few weeks of becoming Pope, we saw him, on Holy Thursday, kneel to wash the feet of the inmates of a prison, breaking tradition, not least by including a young Muslim woman. One of his first official visits was to Lampedusa, the Mediterranean island which is the arrival point for many migrants undertaking that particular perilous journey from the African coast in rickety boats, desperately seeking refuge in Europe. From the very start of his papacy we saw him visiting the sick, those who are disabled and the poor, including the favelas of Rio de Janeiro during World Youth Day. The whole world, Catholic and beyond, was surprised and exhilarated at this unexpected change of style and language and so many of us felt a deep joy within as we saw a man who seemed to not only know about the Lord but appeared to be a man who

walked with Him and in his footsteps. In those heady days we were flooded with many such stories and we wondered what lay ahead for this struggling church as we watched this bright and cheerful man, radiating joy and warmth, as he undertook the responsibility of his office.

What might we say about Pope Francis today? As the years have passed he has continued to attract media attention and it is true to say that he is of profound relevance in our world. His is a familiar voice in the conversation on all that is of concern to life – all life. His is a prophetic voice that calls out and challenges anything that might be life-denying, anything that might be described as a mean-spirited and self-serving approach to human concerns. In this Francis is radically faithful to the Judaeo-Christian prophetic tradition, to the life and teachings of Jesus and to Catholic Social Teaching. He has a perceptive eye and heart - nothing escapes his penetrating gaze and his insights both challenge and comfort us. He has the admiration of Catholics, though not all, the wider Christian community and people of other Faiths and indeed of none. Francis attracts anyone who knows anything at all of the weakness, foibles, needs, pain and longings of humanity.

Pope Francis' critics within the Catholic Church are at both ends of the Catholic spectrum. When he became Pope there was much speculation about whether he would change some of the Church teachings, particularly those relating to the hot-topic moral issues of abortion, contraception, extra-marital sex and homosexuality. But Francis said that Church teaching is clear and he also stated that he is a 'son of the Church'. It appeared then that he did not intend to give in to popular opinion on these issues. In the face of much contemporary criticism of these teachings, Francis has indeed remained firm on these matters relating to the sanctity of life and the sanctity of relationships, and he is also maintaining the consistency of those underlying principles as they are expressed in a number of ethical issues. But while those particular teachings have not changed, what he has focused on is the pastoral approach to *people*. This has led to criticism from both those who would wish Church teaching on such issues might change and from those who fear that his pastoral approach is softening those teachings and blurring them. The latter say he is leading the Church in the wrong direction. There are those who criticize him too for insufficient rigor and decisive action in response to the sexual abuse scandal in the Church. Many of his critics say he is more style than substance.

The question to reflect on, however, is just how deeply that style is indeed substance? In everything he says and does Francis both proclaims and embodies the substance of the One he loves and serves. His first gesture is to welcome people. All are welcome to this banquet of life, this fullness of life of which Jesus himself spoke. That doesn't mean he lets us off the hook! There is a hard-hitting core to his diagnoses of human endeavors and, in his gentle manner, he does require a significant level of self-awareness and honest self-evaluation. He does not mince his words when he names sin as he sees it and he is not afraid to speak right into the

heart of matters. Francis always reminds me of Jesus speaking to the woman who was caught in adultery and was about to be stoned for her transgression. The Law required such a punishment and the pious upholders of the Law had condemned her and were ready to mete it out. But Jesus did not condemn the woman. He did, however, name her action for the sin it was and he enabled her to understand the wrong she had done: “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (Gospel of John).

In encouraging self-awareness and ‘reform’ Francis is certainly giving us substance. It is the substance of the Gospel - Good News for all.

On this fifth anniversary of his papacy, I share with you an extract from an article on ‘Pope Francis’ unique turns of phrase’. Enjoy, be touched, be challenged and above all be inspired, uplifted and drawn by this Good News!

By Carol Glatz
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — A native-Spanish speaker who grew up with Italian-speaking relatives in Argentina, Pope Francis has a striking way with words.

Bringing a background in literary themes and devices with him to the papacy five years ago, the pope has shown himself to be a master of metaphor and allegory.

His cross-cultural and eclectic knowledge of literature and cinema has supplied him with numerous visual elements that he mixes and matches with a religious message, creating such compound concoctions as “the babysitter church” to describe a parish that doesn’t encourage active evangelizers but only worries about keeping parishioners inside, out of trouble.

“Armchair Catholics,” meanwhile, don’t let the Holy Spirit lead their lives. They would rather stay put, safely reciting a “cold morality” without letting the Spirit push them out of the house to bring Jesus to others.

The Ignatian spirituality that formed him as a Jesuit also comes through many of his turns of phrase. Just as a Jesuit seeks to use all five senses to find and experience God, the pope does not hesitate to use language that involves sight, sound, taste, touch and smell.

And so he urges the world’s priests to be “shepherds living with the smell of sheep” by living with and among the people in order to share Christ with them, and he tells his cardinals that all Catholic elders need to share with the young their insight and wisdom, which become like “fine wine that tastes better with age.”

No chorus is as wonderful as the squeaks, squeals and banter of children, he once said before baptizing 32 babies in the Sistine Chapel, assuring the parents that the commotion and chaos of new life was not only welcome, but wonderful.

The pope's visual vocabulary dips into the everyday with sayings and scenarios from daily routines: like sin being more than a stain; it is a rebellious act against God that requires more than just a trip "to the laundromat and have it cleaned."

Even country living holds some lessons. He once told parishioners to bother their priests like a calf would pester its mother for milk. Always knock "on their door, on their heart so that they give you the milk of doctrine, the milk of grace and the milk of guidance."

Food and drink hold numerous lessons. For example, to convey the corrosive atmosphere a bitter, angry priest can bring to his community, the pope said such priests make one think, "This man drinks vinegar for breakfast. Then, for lunch, pickled vegetables. And, in the evening, a nice glass of lemon juice."

Christians must not be boastful and shallow like a special sweet his Italian grandmother would prepare for Fat Tuesday, he has said. Explaining how it is made from a very thin strip of pastry, the crunchy dessert bloats and swells in a pan of hot oil. They are called "bugie" or "little lies," he said, because "they seem big, but they have nothing inside, there's no truth, no substance." Pope Francis' frequent focus on the evils of living a hypocritical or superficial life has meant employing descriptions such as showy as peacocks, frivolous as an over-primped star and fleeting as soap bubbles. "A soap bubble is beautiful! It has so many colors! But it lasts one second and then what?"

To explain the kind of "terrible anxiety" that results from a life of vanity built on lies and fantasy, the pope said, "It's like those people who put on too much makeup and then they're afraid of getting rained on and all the makeup running down their face."

Pope Francis does not shy away from the gory or gross, calling money — when it becomes an idol — the "devil's dung" and saying the lives of the corrupt are "varnished putrefaction" because, like whitewashed tombs, they appear beautiful on the outside, but inside they are full of dead bones.

For the pope, who sees Christ as a "true physician of bodies and souls," there is no shortage of medical metaphors.

Of the most well-known, the pope pines for "the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds."

Speaking elsewhere about people who have done evil and know it, Pope Francis said, they live "with a constant itch, with hives that don't leave them in peace."

The consequence of pride or vanity, he warned on another occasion, "is like an osteoporosis of the soul: The bones seem good from the outside, but on the inside they are all ruined."

Another medical problem afflicting souls diagnosed by Pope Francis is "spiritual Alzheimer's," a condition that renders some people incapable of remembering God's love and mercy for them and, therefore, unable to show mercy to others.

If people were to get a “spiritual electrocardiogram,” he once asked, would it be flatlined because the heart is hardened, unmoved and emotionless or would it be pulsating with the prompting and prods of the Holy Spirit?

And whether people recognize it or not, God is their true father, he has said. “First of all, he gave us his DNA, that is, he made us his children; he created us in his image, in his image and likeness, like him.”

Meeting with cardinals and the heads of Vatican offices for an annual Christmas greeting, the pope explained the reform of the Roman Curia as more than just a face-lift to rejuvenate or beautify an aging body, but a process of deep, personal conversion. “Sometimes”, he said the next Christmas, reform “is like cleaning an Egyptian Sphinx with a toothbrush.”

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