

The papacy of Pope Francis has brought new energy and excitement to many in the Church. The Franciscan community gladly joins him in his call for a new evangelization. In this spirit, Holy Name Province has prepared a number of brief reflections on elements of Pope Francis' statements and writings, particularly "Evangelii Gaudium."

Francis, "A Man of Peace"

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At the time of his election one item that grabbed attention was the new pope's choice of name and explanation for why he chose it. In a press conference three days after his election he related that a cardinal sitting next to him at the time of his election, turned to him and hugged him and then whispered, "Don't forget the poor." The pope then said, "right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars . . . Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi."

Pope Francis identifies with Francis of Assisi in part because of his desire to promote and build peace. One of his earliest statements called for a global day of fasting and prayer for the cause of peace in Syria. He has made statements about the hope of reconciliation and peace in a number of countries, most recently Ukraine.

An extended statement of Francis's views can be found in his exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" ("The Joy of the Gospel"). In that statement he linked violence and inequality. "Until exclusion and inequality in society and between people are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence." And "Inequality eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve." For Francis, as long as there is dramatic inequality violence will break out again and again no matter how much military force is used to suppress it.

On New Year's Day Francis presented his message for the annual World Day of Peace. Harkening back to the spirit of Francis of Assisi and that saint's tendency to address people as "Brother" and "Sister," the pope entitled his message, "Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace." Peace, according to the pope, requires that we see other people "not as enemies or rivals, but as brothers and sisters to be accepted and embraced." Where previous popes like John Paul II and Benedict XVI used the word "solidarity" to convey the idea that we are all connected and interdependent, Francis chose "fraternity" to make a similar point. At the root of the problem of violence is the refusal to see the other as a fellow son or daughter of God, a brother or sister. Violence is enabled when we only look at the other as an enemy, a threat, a source of fear and, therefore, someone who must be subjected to violence in order to punish and deter.

Pope Francis offers a vital lesson to be remembered. More than ethical arguments about just wars and pacifism are needed. More than diplomatic negotiations over the arms race and disarmament are necessary. There is nothing wrong with these things, of course, but they are insufficient without "A conversion of hearts," that "would permit everyone to recognize in the other a brother or sister to care for, and to work together with, in building a fulfilling life for all." Francis of Assisi and Francis of Rome both call for a fundamental stance of fraternity and sorority in our outlook toward others.