

Signs of the Times: A Franciscan Response to the Pope's Encyclical

by Joseph Rozansky, OFM | November 4, 2015 |



The essay below is the first in a series of reflections by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province's response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the U.S.

These essays are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations aimed at creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. It is hoped that this initiative will generate dialogue among friars; all friars are encouraged to provide

comments about the content of this and all essays in this series. These essays do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.

Pope Francis's recent encyclical and his visit to our country surely have challenged the Church in the United States, and Franciscans in particular, to review our approach to living the Gospel. Commentary before, during and after the publication of "Laudato Si'" and the papal visit makes it clear that many, both inside and outside the Church, see these events as highly significant.

In the encyclical, the pope lays out various themes that he has espoused from the beginning of his papacy, and which he highlighted during his stay in the U.S.: that all people and all creatures have inherent value; that our common home is falling into serious disrepair; that we need a new dialogue about how to shape the future of the planet; that there is an inseparable bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, interior peace and commitment to society; that we must seek new ways to understand the economy and progress; that technological development must be accompanied by development in human responsibility, values and conscience; and that we must seek a new lifestyle, one that is not dominated by wasteful consumerism, but by a concern to live simply and frugally so that all God's creatures might live with dignity.

In his visit to the U.S., the pope not only laid out the themes that he considers important for living the Gospel in today's world, but also presented attitudes and habits that will help promote the changes necessary to face the challenges of our time. To the bishops, he spoke of the need to reach people with the power and closeness of love, while avoiding harsh and divisive language. To Congress, he encouraged a spirit of caring for all, especially for the poor, the vulnerable and the excluded, for immigrants, and for our common home, and admonished our representatives to avoid vitriolic excess that undermines the work of politics and causes polarization. To all of us, he addressed an invitation to create a culture of dialogue, where we



Pope Francis addresses Congress during his visit to the United States. (Photo courtesy of [USCapitol/Flickr](#))

are able to listen to one another and speak constructively about the pressing issues of our times in the light of the Gospel.

Addressing Major Problems

Pope Francis did not shy away from concrete questions that Catholics in America are facing. He spoke about promoting the family, abolishing the death penalty, immigration, the arms trade, victims of abortion, climate change and care for creation. In addressing these issues, Pope Francis reminds us that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to an inclusive spirituality, one that embraces all our relationships: with God, with ourselves, with others, with society and with creation itself. He used the phrase “seamless garment,” harkening back to the approach of Cardinal Bernadine, which calls for emphasis on all issues related to life. In so doing, he was calling us to be reconciled to one another as one Body of Christ so that we can be “salt and light” for our nation and our world.

Reactions to the pope’s encyclical and his visit have been varied. Many have been inspired and impressed by his message and his openness, while others have been critical. Some have called him a Marxist; others insisted that he is not a scientist, but rather a tree-hugger; some raised the old complaint that the Church should stay out of politics. We need to take time to consider our initial, gut reactions to Pope Francis’s message. It calls not only for reflection on the issues, but for decisive action to address the major problems that we face in our common home, which has fallen into serious disrepair.

Changing the Way We Live

Kenneth Hackett, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, recently stated that the accusation that the pope is a socialist is naïve. He astutely noted that the pope does not hate capitalism but rather its excesses. For many, the pope’s message is difficult because it calls for change in the way that we live and do business. While acknowledging the benefits of technology and progress, Pope Francis reminds us of the values that lie behind any approach to life and politics: the dignity of all creatures, the common good, and care for the excluded and the most vulnerable.

As he did in his address to Congress, Pope Francis invites us to renew our commitment to the basic values we profess as Americans: liberty; racial justice and inclusion; social justice and the priority of the poor; and the capacity of openness to God and dialogue with others. In commenting on the role of the U.S. and the U.S. Congress in today’s world, he added: “Now is the time for courageous actions and strategies, aimed at implementing a culture of care and an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time, protecting nature. We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology, to devise intelligent ways of ... developing and limiting our power, and to put technology at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral.”

How can we respond to the challenges of Pope Francis to us as Americans, as Catholics and as Franciscans?



— Fr. Joseph, the Province’s director of post-novitiate formation, led the Order’s Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation from 2005 to 2015.