

THE NEW BISHOP OF ROME

In a recent talk, I commented on the tenor in which Benedict XVI announced his retirement to the cardinals gathered in the Consistory. Today I wish to comment on the greeting given by Pope Francis to the faithful who were assembled in St. Peter's Square the night of his election.

The name, Francis, chosen by him already indicates quite a program. It is a program which corresponds, moreover, to what we know of his way of life as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. But, for the moment, I will keep to the words in the text of his speech.

First we note his good natured way of speaking. His first words are not said in a solemn or "hierarchical" mode, but they are the normal way we greet others: "Brothers and Sisters, good evening." He ends his brief discourse on a familial note: "Good night and have a good rest."

What is most striking is that from beginning to the end of his discourse, he situates himself as the Bishop of Rome, and he makes no allusion to his personal role with regards to the Universal Church. He simply mentions, in passing, that the Church of Rome, of which he has become the bishop, "is the one which presides over all the churches in charity." This bespeaks a theological vision of great importance.

Although the whole world has been speaking for weeks about the person who would be the new "pope", he makes it clear, from the first phrase in his speech that "the task of the Conclave was to provide Rome with a bishop. And afterwards, in a humorous remark on the fact that they went almost to the ends of the earth to find him, he adds: "This is where we have come. The diocesan community of Rome has its Bishop." His words are chosen. He does not speak about the diocese in abstract terms, but rather as the living reality of the "diocesan community of Rome". He also mentions the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, who is at his side on the balcony. And when he refers to his predecessor, to request prayer for him, he does not call him the "Pope Emeritus" according to the title which the curia had decided would be given him. He calls him: "our Bishop Emeritus, Benedict XVI."

These linguistic nuances are not without their importance. From the time when popes began to go on their world travels, the commentators often used the expression: "Bishop of the Universal Church". This was a theological error. The most traditional theology teaches that each bishop, even if he should be -in this instance- named for Rome,

receives his authority from God, and each bishop has, in his diocese, the same authority that the Bishop of Rome has for his own diocese. The Bishop of Rome, being the successor of Peter, to whom Christ has confided the mission to confirm his brothers in the faith, presides at the communion of all the Churches. Pope Francis says it in a way that is a bit different when he mentions, as I noted a moment ago, that it is the Church of Rome which presides over all the churches in charity. We find in that statement a probable basis for a major opening in the ecumenical movement.

Pope Francis was certainly aware that there were, at St. Peter's Square, numerous tourists from all corners of the world. And yet, the entire length of his speech, he addresses himself only to those of the diocese of Rome. And what is the first thing that Pope Francis does with his diocesan community? He does not preach long theological discourses or give them moral directives. He has them praying—praying for their Bishop Emeritus—using simply the prayer that comes straight from the Gospels, the *Pater*.

He then explains that he and they are beginning a journey together, which he wishes to be a journey of fraternity, love and trust. He invites them to pray for one another, and for the entire world that it may become a great fraternity.

Another important moment in this brief meeting between the pastor and his ecclesial community, is that he invites them to bless him by asking for him, in silence, the blessing of God—before he intercedes, himself, for God's blessing on his People. And he bows down a long time to receive the blessing. We find there, a very explicit recognition of the universal priesthood of the laity. It is the “faithful” Francis, who, even if he is Pope, receives the blessing from the other faithful.

At the beginning and again at the end, he thanks the crowd for their hospitality. These words, also, are not to be taken lightly. He does not consider himself as someone who has been established over the diocese of Rome or over the entire Church, either by God or by the Conclave. He considers himself rather as someone who has been “given” by the Conclave to the Church at Rome and that he is welcomed to the heart of this Church by the ecclesial community of Rome.

When he speaks of his “brothers the Cardinals” who have elected him, he also affirms episcopal collegiality. This collegiality was affirmed by Vatican II, but no pope since the Council has known how to put into practice. The universal Church Synods were to have been an exercise of this collegiality, but up to the present, have only been instances of reflection and consultation, rather than instances of collegial

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decision-making.

Only the future will tell us whether this Pope will travel the world over as his two predecessors have done. I would not be surprised if he would opt, instead, to travel by foot or by metro in the city of Rome as he has done in Buenos Aires. Will he hold the World Youth Days next summer in Rio? It's probable but not certain. If he decided not to go, it could have profound signification. It would permit him to find a new spirit in his encounters, by disassociating himself from the cult of the person of the Pope, which has more and more marked these encounters, and it would send the young back to their own proper shepherds.

It seems to me that we find ourselves fully in line with the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Let us pray that this pontificate brings a new impetus to the work of the Council in this, its 50th anniversary.

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