

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
September 21 & 22, 2013

All Saints Church
Rev. Fred Daley

“A Big Heart Open to Find God”

The press has been very busy over the last few days commenting on the interview with Pope Francis, so today I'd like to reflect on portions of that interview and consider what it might say to us as Catholic Christians, as individuals, and as members of our All Saints parish.

The interview with the Pope took place in August over the course of three sessions, with Father Antonio Spadaro, S.J., Editor-in-Chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit Journal. He represented several major Jesuit journals from around the world, including *America* the Jesuit weekly published in the U.S. The editorial teams of each of the periodicals prepared questions and sent them to Fr. Spadaro who consolidated and organized them. The interview was conducted in Italian and an Italian text approved by the Vatican. *America* Magazine then commissioned a team of five independent experts to translate it into English.

Earlier in the week, I was able to get a copy to read for myself – to get a bit beyond the “spin” of the press. I've had time to read, reflect and pray on this amazing interview and want to share just some of its powerful content.

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The first question that Fr. Spadaro asked Pope Francis was point-blank: “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” “He stares at me in silence; I ask him if I may ask him this question. He nods and replies: “I am a sinner, this is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.” The Pope added, thoughtfully: “I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.” My brothers and sisters, this is good news for us! We, like St Paul, are *all* sinners – we do the things we wish we didn't and don't do the things that we know we ought to – but the Lord looks upon all of us! Each of us. And calls us to be his disciples! Our sins – our frailties – our weaknesses are not obstacles to our friendship with the Lord! Not valid excuses to stay uninvolved in his Mission! This is from the Pope!

The Pope and Fr. Spadaro (then) had a lengthy discussion on what it means to be a Jesuit and the Pope. The keyword that surfaced in the Pope's response is: *discernment* – a process of prayer to discover what the Lord is calling us to do in our day-to-day lives.

The Pope said: “Discernment is always done in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to the things that happen, the feeling of the people - especially the poor. My choices, including those related to day-to-day aspects of life, like the use of a modest car, are related to spiritual discernment that responds to a need that arises from looking at things, at people and from reading the signs of the times.” (It seems that the Pope drives a used 1984 Renault 4 with 186,000 miles on it, which was donated to him; and actually drives himself to various agencies and meetings around Vatican City!)

My sisters and brothers, this reflection on *discernment* is a reminder to us all that *as* disciples of Jesus, *as* a faith community, we too are called to read the signs of the time – as has been said: ‘to have a Bible in one hand and the New York Times in the other.’ Let’s use today’s Scripture reading as an example: in our 1st Reading today the Prophet Amos is furious at religious people who fill the synagogue and follow all the rituals exactly, but walk out of the synagogue and get rich on the backs of the poor. Amos says,

“Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land; you who will buy the lowly for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals, who even sell the wheat scattered on the floor! The Lord has said: ‘I will never forget what you’ve done.’ Shall not the land tremble because of this...?”

and Luke, in today’s Gospel, reminds us:

“No one can serve two masters, you will either hate one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

And what’s in the *New York Times* in our other hand? What does this mean for us sitting here today when:

1) The House of Representatives on Friday, passed a bill to cut billions of dollars from the Food Stamp Program, which will cut 3 million people from the program, that – according to the Census Bureau – has kept 4 million people from the poverty level and protected millions more from sinking deeper into poverty. The census data also shows that nearly 47 million Americans, in the richest nation in the world, are living in poverty – close to the highest number in two decades.

2) In this same week, the Internal Revenue Service reported that the richest 1% in our country has earned their biggest share of income since the 1920s. Last year, the income of the richest 1% rose 19.6% , while the incomes of the remaining 99% increased merely 1%. In the last 30 years, the income of the top 1% has increased 170%, while the income of the poorest 20% of the nation has actually *decreased* by 7.5%.

Today, as we gather here at Mass: 22% of the children and 9% of the senior citizens in our nation live in poverty.

My brothers and sisters, if we read the signs of the time through the lens the Gospel, it doesn’t take much discernment to realize that this isn’t a Democratic issue or a Republican issue, a liberal issue or conservative issue, it is an American issue, a moral issue and an ethical issue – And: it is a national scandal and, as Amos would say, it’s evil.

And so, in our discernment here at All Saints, we join together with other people of good will, doing the work of feeding the hungry: this morning - beginning at about 4:30 am! - our Caring Hands Committee came together to feed 150 homeless men at the Oxford Inn, having spent the better part of Saturday preparing salads, cooking casseroles, making sandwiches and packing lunches with food that many members of our parish community donated. And many of you came into church this morning carrying bags of nonperishable groceries to be donated to the Parkside Food Pantry - a mission we support on a monthly basis.

But, we must also work to change the immoral and unethical system that keeps the poor, poor; we must be willing to 'swim upstream' and change the structures that produce poverty. That's what our Parish Mission Statement calls us to when we "strive to live the Gospel call to holiness and loving service to all."

Another example of discernment is the visioning process that begins Tuesday night at 7 PM. Together we will pray, discuss, reflect, listen to what the Spirit is calling us to – to ensure that our Bishop Harrison Center might be used to serve the needs of our parish, neighborhood, greater community and, even, the global village.

Pope Francis gives us a sense of priorities. You know, his first responsibility is to be the Bishop of Rome and as Bishop of Rome he's addressed the use of closed buildings: schools, convents, monasteries. It has become the practice in recent years that when a church building becomes empty, it's turned into a four-star hotel to make money for the Church. Pope Francis' response to this practice:

"Empty convents and monasteries should not be turned into hotels by the Church to earn money. ... the buildings should be used to house refugees who must be embraced rather than feared." Why? "The church buildings are not ours they are for the flesh of Christ – which is what the refugees are."

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Father Spadaro asked Pope Francis "What does the Church need most at this moment." His response is striking and powerful and a beautiful vision for the universal church and for us here at All Saints:

"This Church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal Church to a nest protecting our mediocrity.

“I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful. It needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask an injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of her blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.....

“The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all.

“How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The Church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the Good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. ...

“...The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movement of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.

“Instead of being just a Church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent. The ones who quit sometimes do it for reasons that, if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage.”

Then Father Spadaro says: “I mentioned to Pope Francis that there are Christians who live in situations that are irregular for the Church or in complex situations that represent open wounds. I mentioned the divorced and remarried, same-sex couples and other difficult situations. What kind pastoral work can we do for these cases? What kind of tools can use?” Pope Francis responded:

“We need to proclaim the Gospel on every street corner, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing even with our preaching, every kind of disease and wound. in *Buenos Aires* I used to receive letters from homosexual persons who are ‘socially wounded’ because they tell me that they feel like the church has always condemned them. But the church does not want to do this. During the return flight from *Rio de Janeiro* I said that if a homosexual person is of goodwill and is in search of God, I am no

one to judge. By saying this, I said what the Catechism says. Religion has the right to express its opinion in the service of the people, but God in creation has set us free: it is not possible to interfere spiritually in the life of a person.”

Very powerful words, no?!

“A person once asked me in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: ‘Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person? We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to accompany them with mercy....”

And then the Pope went on to speak about Confession. (Remember that Sacrament that we used to have in the Church? ... that we’re not exactly lining up for these days...!) He says:

“The confessional is not a torture chamber, but the place in which the Lord’s mercy motivates us to do better. I also consider the situation of a woman with a failed marriage in her past and who has also had an abortion. Then this woman remarries, and she is now happy and has five children. That abortion in her past weighs heavily on her conscience and she sincerely regrets it. She would like to forward in her Christian life....

“We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter is clear, and I am a son of the Church, but it is not necessary to talk about the issues all the time.”

My sisters and brothers, these words certainly signal a change in tone.

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And, I cannot fail to mention the Pope’s comments on women! When asked: “What should be the role of women in the Church?” the Pope says:

“Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed. The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential to the church. Mary, a woman is more important than the bishops. ... We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. ... The feminine genius is needed wherever we make

important decisions. The challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church.”

(A point which brings to mind that all the places where the authority of the church has been exercised for the last 1700 years have been without the benefit of this “feminine genius...”!) Here at All Saints, our Women’s Task Force is coming together to explore these issues as they relate to our Parish, our Church and our society.

To the question: “What did the Second Vatican Council accomplish?” the Pope replied:

“Vatican II was a re-reading of the Gospel in light of contemporary culture. ... Its fruits are enormous. ... one thing is clear: the dynamic of reading the Gospel, actualizing its message for today – which was typical of Vatican II – is absolutely irreversible.”

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Finally, Father Spadaro asked Francis, the Pope, his preferred way to pray:

“I pray the breviary every morning. I like to pray with the Psalms. Then, later, I celebrate Mass. I pray the Rosary. What I really prefer is adoration in the evening, even when I get distracted and think of other things, or even fall asleep praying. ... I pray mentally even when I am waiting at the dentist... ”

“And I ask myself: “What have I done for Christ?
What am I doing for Christ?
What should I do for Christ?”

Amen!