

Why Francis favors reality over ideas

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You don't normally see the names Pope Francis and Robin Williams in the same sentence, but here goes.

Early in his career, the brilliant comedian and actor Robin Williams scored big with a performance called *Reality—What a Concept*. This wonderful play on words came to mind when I heard a few lines from one of Pope Francis' talks during his visit to the Philippines earlier this year. They gained little attention, but are critical to understanding how he wants to enliven the church and the world. "Reality," he told a large group of young people, "is superior to ideas."

The pope's insights were sparked by a formerly homeless girl, Glyzelle Palomar, who broke down in tears as she asked him, "Why is God allowing such things to happen, even if it is not the fault of the children?" The pope initially had no answer except to hug her. Glyzelle "is the only one who has put a question for which there is no answer," he told the crowd. "She couldn't put it into words but expressed it with tears." The heartbreaking, painfully honest scene was played many times, but what was missed was what Pope Francis then made of that moment.

While speaking to young people at Santo Tomàs University in Manila, Pope Francis switched to Spanish—a now familiar sign that he would talk spontaneously from the heart. Channeling that strong bond St. John Paul II forged with young people, Pope Francis said he wanted to talk with them about their "great work of renewing your society and helping to build a better world." He took as his guide Glyzelle and her tears.

"Certain realities of life we only see through eyes cleansed by our tears," he said. He spoke for some time about the harmony of using three languages of mind, heart, and hands: "think well, feel well, and do well." He apologized for not delivering his prepared text, and ended by saying, "but there is a phrase that consoles me: that reality is superior to ideas. The reality that you have is superior to the paper I have in front of me."

Reality is superior to ideas. That simple sentence is central to why this pope is rejuvenating so many inside and outside Catholicism. The excitement, now two years old since his surprise election in March 2013, recalls the first decade of St. John Paul II's papacy with its exciting newness, which we have forgotten: the first non-Italian pope in over 450 years, the first Polish pope, a vibrant pontiff taking the place of the worn-out Pope Paul VI at the end of his battered papacy. Then and now, there was a new pope intimately interested in hard realities. For the Polish pope, they included right off the bat fighting communism and backing workers' rights. For the Latin American pope, they include cutting through clericalism and rules to get back to religious faith as it is actually breathed in people's lives and everyday decisions.

Pope Francis is touching a chord because he wants to talk about the realities with which people struggle. For this pope, doctrines are of course important, but they lose their importance if they are not tied to their very point of existing. When reality is subordinated to concept, people experience Christianity as cold rules, not a living faith.

Pope Francis wants to build bridges, not draw lines on a blackboard. This stance is what is behind his famous line about gay people, "Who am I to judge?" and his wanting easier (and free) annulments. Realities are behind his apparent desire to see divorced and remarried Catholics receive the Eucharist as well as his recognition that while the ban on artificial birth control remains, the decision to have children must be made responsibly. A couple need not breed like rabbits in order to be good Catholics, as he colorfully put it. What grabs attention after the laugh line is his practical recognition that raising children is both a blessing and a difficult task.

Reality is relevant. Relevance resonates. Relevance and resonance are calling people back to the church in a very inviting and exciting way.

Let's return to that wise clown Robin Williams for an image of the church's current reality check. His last film was the third *Night at the Museum* movie, where he reprised his role as Theodore Roosevelt in his most dashing days. "Smile, my boy," Robin Williams said in his final words to us. "It's sunrise."

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