

Another prophetic pope

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A new pope arrives in the United States. Expectations are high for this different type of papacy, which brings fresh air from a land that has never given Catholicism a pope before. He comes to America as a media star, having energized not only Catholics but many of other faiths or even no faith at all. His charisma and direct contact with people in the pews contrast starkly with the remoteness and intellectualism of his predecessor. Catholicism has been in the doldrums for more than a decade, but his unexpected election has sparked excitement and curiosity. He gives voice to many who haven't been heard and have been yearning for leadership.

The year is 1979. The pope is John Paul II.

Pope John Paul II arrived in the United States as a prophet unafraid to speak uncomfortable truths to powerful people, including his hosts. In one of his major statements during that trip, his homily at Yankee Stadium in October 1979, he spoke of peace, justice, and fairness. Solutions will not be simplistic slogans: "You will not allow yourselves to be intimidated or discouraged by oversimplified explanations, which are more ideological than scientific—explanations which try to account for a complex evil by some single cause."

Back in 1979, John Paul II spoke of the problems of resource inequality and advocated stewardship of the earth's resources:

For it is not right that the standard of living of the rich countries should seek to maintain itself by draining off a great part of the reserves of energy and raw materials that are meant to serve the whole of humanity. For readiness to create a greater and more equitable solidarity between peoples is the first condition for peace.

He drove home his point by speaking on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. (I was 14 years old and sat next to my father, way up high in the stands. I can still

conjure that voice: “Lah-zah-rooz.”) “All of humanity must think of the parable of the rich man and the beggar.... We cannot stand idly by when thousands of human beings are dying of hunger.”

No one, then or now, called him a socialist.

Like Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis speaks truth to power. Some conveniently forget that the prophetic John Paul II was a critic of capitalism, not just communism. Many of those who deny Francis’s right to a voice on the economy or climate science had no problem when John Paul II was deeply involved in politics, especially when it came to the final push that toppled communism. They also ignore that the Polish pope used a workers union to help do it.

Like all prophets (see the Bible), Pope Francis speaks joy in a time of sadness, hope during despair, and encouragement to those at the bottom of society’s pile. Prophets call crushed people to rise. They call on elites and hypocrites to stoop down. They throw insiders out and turn pyramids upside down.

The difference may be that John Paul II’s prophetic voice was frequently aimed at government and economic leaders, while Francis has targeted not only them but also the church’s militant and authoritarian bureaucrats, pundits, and watchdogs.

As a prophet, Pope Francis is a radical moderate. The Latin words that give us “moderate” include a sense not only of moderation but also restraint and discipline to temper our basest instincts. Francis is comfortable with the real messiness of a gray world standing between the ideological righteousness and alleged certitude of pure black or white. Rigidity and resistance (once again: see the Bible) are often grounded in the fear of change that stands at the root of the prophet’s call for metanoia—a fundamental conversion of our very essence as God’s children. If Francis seems strident and scolding at times, prophets often do. So did John Paul II, but few of the Polish pope’s champions today complained about his wagging finger then—even as they criticize Francis, who is singing the same song now.

Perhaps a prophet’s cry is accepted only when you agree with it. When it hits home, the voice in the wilderness is unnerving. That means the prophet is telling the truth.

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