

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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THE POPE FRANCIS FAN CLUB

I've been trying to contain myself but being a natural born optimist, I'm having a hard time holding back my respect, excitement and surprise with Pope Francis. After 40 years of Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, I have become skeptical and, frankly, jaded with our Papal leadership.

But Francis is pushing all my buttons. Well, not all of them (e.g. he hasn't found the ordination of women button yet) but he's pushing enough of them to get me genuinely energized. What has happened so far has been astounding. Francis is a direct descendant of St. John XXIII, with less girth and, hopefully, a longer life.

It feels like it's time for the PFFC, the Pope Francis Fan Club. This is not a typical fan club because this one demands that members do more than cheer for a superstar Pope. Membership includes participation, doing something gospelish.

Two areas of Francis' leadership stand out:

- **Collegiality:** he is moving this word and its Vatican II teaching out of the Papal-imposed dungeon and into the sunlight where it can flourish and extend its vine-branches into the basilicas, chancery offices, parishes and hearts of the People of God. He formed an Advisory Council of eight pastoral Cardinals. He is empowering Synods of Bishops. He is reforming the Vatican bank, and the Curia is clearly in his sights.

So far, his efforts in collegiality are directed at the hierarchy. Makes sense, because they need the most reform. Many bishops, I suspect, are running scared, unable to handle collegiality personally or as an organizational model.

- **Emphasis on the poor:** this focus of his personal life and Papal ministry becomes more evident every day. That emphasis is a key theme of the gospel also. Is it asking too much of our Pope to imitate this aspect of Jesus' mission? It should be the first item on the job description for Pope. The surprise that Francis actually lives this authentic identify with the poor is an indication of how far from the gospel we've come as an institutional church. Other Popes, of course, have talked about it but Francis is leading by living. No better teacher.

My question here is: how are we following his lived teaching? This column is not a homily, so I don't want to get preachy. On the other hand, if we are going to join the Pope Francis Fan Club, we need to do something with and/or for the poor. Many of you, I presume, already do service for other people, so what does Francis' leadership add to your service? If you don't serve, it's time to get crackin'.

My particular service niche is with the families and friends of anyone with a mental illness or anyone who lost a loved one to suicide. Like most of us, I chose this ministry because of personal experience. Our daughter had bipolar disorder and died by suicide at age 26. That difficult and then devastating experience left our family with the resolve to help others who are struggling with those issues. If you face these problems or just curious, check our website at www.karlasmithfoundation.org.

The point here is for all of us to have a service niche, since no one can do everything and there are lots of ways to help the poor, however you define that term. Just do something!

I would continue to do what I do with our Foundation regardless of who is Pope. While we are not officially a ministry of the Church, I consider our work gospel-based. Perhaps your service work is similar. If so, what difference does Francis make?

A few thoughts:

- It simply feels better doing our bit for the poor knowing that our Church leader is doing his bit for the poor. The operative word is "doing". It feels like we are together doing something central to the gospel. It's like people working side by side filling and delivering sand bags when a flood threatens, or dishing out the green beans while the Pope is scooping out the mashed potatoes in a soup kitchen. We are together. That is a powerful motivator!
- But it is more than feeling good. It is knowing that doing the gospel is more important than teaching doctrine. Teaching and preaching Catholic faith is important but the teaching is more credible in the context of the doing.
- In the midst of all the scandals, Francis' commitment to the poor shines a beam of hopeful light into a darkened Church, a light that is seen by the world. That's evangelization!

So....wanna' join the Pope Francis Fan Club?