

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

Number 108, April 2, 2015

A POOR CHURCH FOR THE POOR

In his first meeting with the media after his selection as Pope, Francis said “Oh, how I would like a poor church for the poor!” He has repeated that theme numerous times since then.

So, what would a poor church for the poor look like? It isn't that the church doesn't serve the poor already. There are many Catholic agencies, organizations, and individuals who help the poor. What's his point?

I think what he means is that the church must be poor while serving the poor. That's more complicated than helping the poor. But don't we need wealth and resources to share some of it with those who have less? Common sense, right? So, Francis must be referring to *how* we share as well as *that* we share.

Are we known as a poor church for the poor? Despite all the service, comfort, and practical help we give to people with a variety of needs, the Catholic Church is not identified with the poor. Our image is a ruling hierarchy and our logo is St. Peter's Basilica, the antithesis of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and those who are physically, spiritually and emotionally struggling. The universal symbol for Christianity is the cross; the universal symbol of Roman Catholicism is St. Peter's. What a shame!

If that is true, then a good place to start being poor while serving the poor might be our buildings. Within 15 minutes of my home, two neighboring parishes needed to build new churches in the past 10 years. One was modeled on a medieval church in Assisi. The other has more modern architecture but both of them cost multi-millions of dollars more than was necessary. Is a taller church building really closer to God than a shorter one? How ironic when Jesus was born in a stable and lived from hand to mouth his whole life. Of course, they will be paying for those buildings, and all that empty space, for a very long time. Those monster buildings will represent the local Catholic Church for decades, perhaps a century.

Two other parishes in the area, including my own, also needed buildings in recent years but these buildings are modest, very functional, long lasting, and religiously appropriate. And they were much less expensive.

Perhaps to be a poor church for the poor we must create church buildings that represent this commitment, not gigantic medieval cathedrals that shout triumphalism, power, and hierarchy despite all their beautiful stained glass windows and statues of white European saints.

But we are stuck with the worship spaces we have; we can't tear them all down and build humble, poor-church-for-the poor buildings. We have control over future buildings but not current ones, so what else can transform us into a poor church for the poor? Here are two ideas, one for the clergy and one for the laity:

1. To be blunt, the clergy need to get off their high horse and be more pastoral. Like Francis. I acknowledge the humble, personal, dedicated ministry of many pastors and even some bishops but there are way too many clerics who are unwilling or unable to relate compassionately and effectively with parishioners, let alone "the poor". That's not just my opinion; Francis says it often.

A challenge for all designated church leaders, including religious orders of men and women, is that many of them take a vow of poverty while they have assured food, clothing, and shelter for life, precisely the necessities that many of the poor do not have. I don't want our bishops, priests, nuns and brothers to lose that core security but it should force them to strive continuously to identify with, minister to, and be poor in thought and action. Like Francis.

2. We laity must do the same, regardless of how much money we have. Think poor, feel poor in order to "be poor". It's not about what we have; it's about why we have what we have, and what we do with it. We can be genuinely poor in spirit, live simply, and share some of our riches in ways that reflect this commitment to the poor.

To become a poor church for the poor, we begin by thinking poor. Like Francis.