

Pope Francis and the Humility to be Vulnerable to Others.

The 86-year-old pope continues to model Christlike compassion and vulnerability to a world that rewards the self-sufficient and frowns on weakness.

Robert Mickens



A disabled boy lays his hand on Pope Francis' forehead during his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, February 8, 2023. (Photo by Massimiliano MIGLIORATO)

It's hard to forget the evening of March 2013 when the "new pope" - Franciscus - appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica just after being elected Bishop of Rome.

After a few brief words in Italian, he was about to bless the massive crowd in the square below. But he paused and surprised us by saying, *"First, I want to ask you a favour. Before the bishop blesses the people, I ask you to pray the Lord bless me. The prayer of the people, asking the blessing for their bishop."*

Francis concluded with words to this effect: *"Pray silently over me."*

It was an extraordinarily moving moment. St. Peter's Square suddenly grew to a hush. Here was the pope -- the man many Catholics see as the person on earth closest to God - asking us to basically bless him. It is usually the other way around. We're used to asking priests and bishops to pray over us and bless us.

But here was the pope - a Jesuit from Argentina who had already been a bishop for two decades and was a year beyond the normal retirement age of 75 - asking the hoi polloi to pray over him. Little did we know back then that this would be one of the defining marks of his pontificate: the humility to be vulnerable to others, to be touched by others, to draw close to those who are weak, who count for little, who are on the margins, people considered outsiders... And not only that, but even more essentially, relying on them and their prayers; being in need of their presence and their assistance.

"When I am weak, I am strong"

As we approach the 10th anniversary of Francis' election to the Roman papacy, it has become clear to me that, just as St. Paul says to the Christians of Corinth, so it is with our now 86-year-old pope: **"It is when I am weak that I am strong"** (2 Cor 12,10). That does not pertain to physical weakness as much as to the realization that we need each other -- all of us. It means willingly renouncing the illusion that self-sufficiency is a sign of strength. It means reaffirming, instead, that we become strong in relation to our reliance on and trust in others. Pope Francis has given us one example after another of this throughout his pontificate. For instance, each time he has admitted his wrongs or mistakes and, thus, has been forced to rely on others - through their corrections and forgiveness -, he has modelled strength-through-weakness. This is also true with physical weakness, as we have seen the last several months as he has been forced to rely on using a wheelchair - and rely on someone to push him.

Francis' recent pastoral visit to Africa offered other examples of his willingness to be vulnerable and his recognition that he needs others, especially to help him with basic physical tasks he could not handle by himself. Many wondered why the elderly and mobility-challenged pope was even making the six-day visit to two developing countries with - let's be honest - substandard infrastructures compared to the affluent West. But Francis went all the same, knowing he would have to rely on all sorts of people in ways he never would have needed to even a few years ago.

"We are all in the same boat"

The Jesuit pope's fiercest Catholic critics sometimes describe him as dictatorial and clinging to power. But he did anything of the sort during the South Sudan leg of the visit. Instead, he visited the fledgling and violent-racked country with the heads of the Anglican Communion and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, knowing that his message of peace and reconciliation would be even stronger by joining mind and heart with the other two Christian leaders that have sizeable communities in South Sudan.

One of the pope's most important messages, which he has only intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic, is: *"We are all in the same boat."* This comes out in all his major writings and speeches, and in all his personal encounters. It's a message he shared with us on that first evening in St. Peter's Square. *"Let us pray for the entire world that it becomes a great brotherhood,"* he said.

The pope has tirelessly tried to drill it into our thick skulls that we need each other, that we need to strive to be more united (while respecting the vast and wonderful diversity of our cultural, social and religious expressions), and that we need to live in harmony with each other and all creation.

"The suffering of one becomes the suffering of all"

He did it once again this past week in light of the World Day of the Sick, which we Catholics observe on the February 11th Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. Speaking to a group of healthcare workers and patients on Thursday at the Vatican, he said: *"Becoming a leaven of charity means to 'make a network'."*

And how does one do that? *"Simply by sharing a style of gratuity and reciprocity, because we are all needy and we can all give and receive something, even if it's just a smile,"* Francis said.

"The suffering of one becomes the suffering of all, and one person's contribution is received by all as a blessing," he added, offering these words:

*Dear friends, being close to those who suffer is not easy,
you know very well. That's why I say, do not be discouraged!
And if you encounter obstacles or misunderstandings, look into
the eyes of your brother or sister that is suffering and remember
the words of the Good Samaritan (to the innkeeper): "Look after
him." In that face it is Jesus who is looking back at you.*

There are many illnesses and much suffering in our world - and not only of the physical sort. How many of us try to face them alone or only with our most intimate loved ones or particular tribe, clique or co-religionists? How many of us are afraid of being vulnerable toothers, forgetting that *"we are all in the same boat"* and that *"if one of us suffers we all suffer"*?

Francis - the pope of *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* - has tried these past 10 years to offer us another, more fraternal way forward. But we too often continue carving up the world and our own reality into good guys and bad guys, them and us... The pope's prayer at the conclusion of *Fratelli tutti* is for something much different and much better:

Prayer to the Creator

*Lord, Father of our human family,
you created all human beings equal in dignity:
pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit
and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter,
dialogue, justice and peace.
Move us to create healthier societies
and a more dignified world,
a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war.
May our hearts be open
to all the peoples and nations of the earth.
May we recognize the goodness and beauty
that you have sown in each of us
and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects,
and shared dreams. Amen*