
Comment

Pope is restoring moral authority of the Church

What – if any - will be the lasting legacy of the personal triumph of Pope Francis in Cuba and America last week? - Martin O'Brien writes

The short answer is that it is too early to say but please permit me a few thoughts.

But first, did you notice the significance of the Holy Father going first to Cuba just as he chose to visit Palestine before setting foot in the State of Israel, having begun that pilgrimage in Jordan?

Previous Popes first visited Israel. This Pope never misses an opportunity to indicate a preference for the underdog.

Pope Francis came to the United States with approval ratings that a president or presidential hopeful can only dream of.

But his popularity there slipped after the publication of his eco-encyclical *Laudato Si'* in May. His attack on “pollution, waste and the throwaway culture” and his call for “ecological conversion” were too much for the climate change deniers, including Catholics like Arizona Congressman Paul Gusar who boycotted the Pope's address to Congress and then, feeling the heat, said he had actually watched it on TV in his Capitol office.

It's hard to convey the excitement the Pope generated from the moment he stepped off the red carpet and into that modest Fiat 500L. Another homily to a worldwide audience on wheels!

His plea in Congress, as the son of immigrants, that refugees be seen not as “numbers” but “as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories” was as powerful and prophetic as anything ever heard from that podium.

This from the man who prophetically highlighted the migrant crisis on his first visit as Pope outside mainland Italy to the island of Lampedusa two years ago.

In the US huge crowds followed him everywhere. No one in the world has such appeal. All the main television channels provided blanket coverage and CNN carried every public appearance hour after hour worldwide.

Dipping in and out of CNN I happened on a remark that set me thinking about the possible long term significance of this visit.

I took a note of what the speaker said: “He [Pope Francis] was speaking from the heart and with a moral conviction that I think will resonate with people all around the world.” The speaker was Josh Earnest, Obama's press secretary and he was briefing the White House correspondents after the President had welcomed the Pope.

The words “moral conviction” and “all round the world” stayed with me. I was still buoyed up by the words of Obama to the Pope on the South Lawn: “From the busy streets of Buenos Aires to the remote villages in Kenya, Catholic organisations serve the poor, minister to prisoners, build schools, build homes, operate orphanages and hospitals.

“And just as the Church has stood with those struggling to break the chains of poverty, the Church so often has given voice and hope to

those seeking to break the chains of violence and oppression.”

Would any Taoiseach have the guts to say that? Those words will have affirmed countless Catholics and many members of other religions also.

For a great many Catholics one of the most painful and shaming consequences of the clerical sex abuse scandals – after the violation and betrayal of the victims of course – was the grave damage they caused to the moral authority of the Church.

Pope Francis is restoring that moral authority but the Church must never lapse into complacency about the safeguarding of children. The Church may have a spring in her step again but the challenge of addressing the aftermath of the scandals and of dealing with possible future revelations will not go away anytime soon and certainly not before a possible papal visit to Ireland in 2018.

The Pope appeared slow in getting to grips with the fallout from the abuse scandals until he set up the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors which has credibility with a good representation of women including sex abuse

survivors such as the wonderful Marie Collins from Dublin.

On the American trip Pope Francis has given heart to Christians and others everywhere by speaking truth to power with such moral authority and he is the premier prophetic voice on the planet.

The leadership of national Churches, not least in Ireland, must show that they are learning from him, as must the rest of us.

The Pope now faces the greatest test of his papacy so far, the Synod of Bishops which opens in Rome on Sunday. But that is another story.

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