REFLECTION - I fell in love with Pope Francis during his inauguration as pope on March 19, 2013. I had already been pretty impressed when, appearing on the balcony of St. Peter’s immediately after his election, he asked the thousands of people gathered there to pray for him before he gave them his first papal blessing. But during the procession to the altar for his inauguration Mass, when he stopped the popemobile and went over to embrace a man who was completely paralyzed—and so tenderly—I fell in love with him. Here was a pope that the church needed today. Here was a pope, as the next weeks and months proceeded, who spoke constantly of tenderness and mercy, who washed the feet of detainees in a juvenile prison—among them Muslims and women—and who, when asked why he did not live in the Apostolic Palace came back with the question “isn’t ‘Apostolic Palace’ an oxymoron?” Here was a man who, as he had exhorted priests to do as well, had acquired the “smell of the sheep.”

Any reflection, it seems to me, on Pope Francis’s understanding of evangelization has to start with the man himself. Pope Francis embodies the joy of the gospel about which he writes so eloquently in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (EG). A long time ago I read a line from the philosopher Nietzsche that has always struck me. The problem with Christians, Nietzsche said, is that they don’t look redeemed. But this is not the case with Pope Francis. He does look redeemed. And this is what he calls the church to as well. We need to look redeemed. We need to show the world that, as the Latin American bishops put it, “life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating it to others.” Pope Francis embodies evangelization in his person; we the church must embody it as well. It’s not enough to preach about Christ and tell people about the joy that the gospel brings. We Christians—in our ordinary lives—need to demonstrate that joy and fullness of life by the way we live.

Evangelization today, then, is more about being than about doing or speaking. The church grows, writes Francis in EG, not by high-pressure tactics or even less by threatening people with eternal punishment, but by appearing “as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet.” It grows, in a line from Pope John Paul II that Francis quotes, “by attraction.”
Francis writes about how the church should be “a mother with an open heart,” the house of the father of the prodigal son in Luke’s parable, “with doors always wide open.” In a homily he gave a few weeks after Easter in 2014, Pope Francis spoke of the church’s ministry as “door-keeping,” always greeting people, always meeting them, but “never the closed door,” never barring entrance. In EG he writes that the church is “not a tollhouse,” but “the house of the Father, where there is place for everyone, with all their problems.” Even sacraments like the Eucharist should not be a closed door. It is not “a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

In his now-famous interview with fellow Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis spoke of the church as a “field hospital after a battle.” He could just as easily have used the image of an “emergency room.” As one theologian noted, the important word in this description is “field.” The church has often referred to itself as a healer, but the pope’s image says something even more important in terms of evangelization. The church should first of all be interested in the basics, and not burden people with what is not absolutely necessary. In a field hospital, in an emergency room, “it is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else.” The pope goes on to speak of the church’s ministers as women and men who need to accompany people “like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans, and raises up his neighbor. This is pure gospel. God is greater than sin.” We have seen the pope in the short time he has been in office reaching out to those whom the church has traditionally placed on its margins: homosexuals, divorced and remarried Catholics, couples married outside the church. “The proposal of the good news must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences flow.”
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