

From Foreigner to Familiar -Reflections on an Abu Dhabi Pope visit

On February 5th of this year, Pope Francis celebrated Mass in Zayed Sports City in United Arab Emirate's capital, Abu Dhabi. This is the first time Pope Francis visited the Arabian peninsula, or the Arabian Gulf, drawing a crowd of over 135,000 people. The Mass was entitled "Holy Mass for Justice and Peace." Scriptural readings were written in Arabic, Korean, Konkani, French, Tagalog, Urdu, and Malayalam, and the Mass was delivered in Italian, Arabic and translated in English on screens that, from where I sat, unfortunately, were too hidden by the glaring sun to see.

The Mass service beautifully emphasized peace, and fed my soul the encouraging message I crave to hear. It fittingly centered on the Beatitudes, and gave us what could be a version of peace building 101. It covered who we are in Christ and the inherent blessing of being a child of God, the beatitude of meekness and peace making, and the greek word for a brotherly/sisterly/sibling kind of love. To the UAE expatriate populations in particular, the Pope reminded them that when they feel alone and are so far from home, Jesus is walking at their side even when it doesn't feel like it.

The Mass offered many amazing moments that I had the privilege to relish through this experience. But one moment of worship that I was particularly moved by while sitting among the 135,000 + gathering of people, was seeing the strategically dispersed Catholics on the ground level heading towards the communion in order to bring it to the massive stadium of Christians. After all the pomp and circumstance of the Pope's entrance and the grand historicity of the event,

these “regular” people serving communion suddenly stole the spotlight and got my heart’s attention.

I suddenly recognized these church members responsible for the pinnacle of this Mass as people just like the ones I know in my hometown. They didn’t even know me, but they were about to bless me with what I have experienced as the the most profound tradition of grace enacted in a Christian church service. I recognized the sacredness involved, because I recognized the body and blood of Christ that they were carrying in silver plates, and carrying in their hearts...and giving to people they didn’t know, but perhaps recognized too.

And then I began to recognize the people all around me, for what seemed like the first time that day, from the long night of standing in line in the wee hours of the morning, through snacks at sunrise and long, crowded bathroom breaks, to the Pope’s anticipated arrival at 10:30am. These regular church people have had similar experiences with God as I, only within a different lifestyle and culture knitted together as the veil of foreignness. The sudden recognition of the familiar, or one could describe it as an epiphany of sorts, touched me deeply and puzzled me enough to reflect later on why it produced a reaction of tears.

Maybe I was hit with recognition at this moment because I’m not Catholic, so while some of the liturgy, traditions and songs are *unfamiliar* to my own, I recognize them through sacrament that I am familiar with. Maybe it’s because I spent so much time waiting to worship with all the people, and hadn’t seen their common faith in this much action yet. Because even though I saw the people participating in singing and liturgy, there was something about seeing the *movement* of communion, seeing the Christian calling represented in gestures made with hands and feet. Many would speculate the awe comes from being amidst a likely once in a lifetime

representation of diversity that exists as the body of Christ. Even though this event was uniquely significant in its immersion of Christian diversity, the church services I attend weekly in Oman are very diverse, so it was more than this. Perhaps, I had gotten so used to being a foreign minority surrounded by cultures not my own, so used to expecting a foreign majority around me, that in public spaces I have come to expect being unknown. And in contrast, communion represents the experience of being deeply known and recognized by Christ, and it is in turn one of the most profound and efficacious ways for us to recognize the person of Christ. Communion captures Christ's compassionate essence so much so, that some people and traditions literally believe the bread IS Christ.

One of the greatest strengths of liturgy and the sacraments that my seminary professors teach is that holding to the same sacraments and liturgical process amidst the varied dynamics of the seasons, the holidays of a year, as well as in different settings and contexts, gives a fresh new insight on that sacrament. From the regularity of this foundation, one is able to perceive new possibilities opening up in relation to the tradition. Your heart is able to expand on that foundation of familiarity to embrace wider than you were able to before. Deep communion with God allows us to build a foundation of trust, that frees our arms to take risks in loving others and seeing them like Christ does, and where we learn that God's arms of love will always be supporting ours yet always challenging us by reaching wider than our own, no matter how wide we think we have reached into the unknown, to those we don't like, to those who we have only misunderstood as foreign, to those we didn't *know* we used to believe were foreign, to those we never imagined we could love.

When I saw this act being done, when I could see the faith of these people enacted through the loving gesture of communion, I recognized them. Their culture did not disappear, their differences did not disappear, but their foreignness did. The strangeness of strangerliness did. On one hand, yes, I was able to recognize Christ. On the other, these strangers themselves embodied the strangely amazing yet familiar humility and compassion of Christ, that has met me in the mundane, in times of difficulty, when you are feeling quite the opposite of eventful, glamorous, or holy. I recognized that what they were giving I had given before, and surely what I needed to receive through communion, they also needed.

When one recognizes strangers and is familiar with the foreign they aren't foreign and they aren't strangers anymore. A barrier is removed and eyes made new.]

I then was moved by recalling the group of diverse ppl earlier that morning who, with grace and hospitality, recognized my needs, and so to a certain degree, me. Close to 9am, I peered up at a man wearing a *keffiyeh* scarf and long white *dishdasha*, traditional Emirate dress. "Are you ok?" He asks. A plethora of guesses on my state of well being emerged from several heads surrounding me. "Do you need ambulance?" the Emirate man continued, who looked like he was quite important to the function of this event.

"Sick?" - a Catholic volunteer.

"Vertigo?" - from a professionally dressed woman who appeared to be at a high level of leadership for the Pope's visit. Suddenly bewildered by how the appearance of my public nap could be interpreted, I attempted to muster a wholesome, bright-eyed look upon my face and clutched my sweatshirt pillow. "Ohhh, no, no," I assured them, "thank you, I am just tired."

“Are you sure?” They insisted. Do you need an ambulance? Water?” Their insistence startled me, but was wise. At a large event like this, who knows what kind of situation they imagined I could be in. I was thankful for their insight-maybe I wasn’t being honest, or refusing their help out of fear of being a “burden.” I had 5+ important host’s undivided attention...I was impressed and feeling just a little guilty.

I responded. “No, no really, I am ok, I have water, thank you. I was just very tired, but feel better now.” It was a good nap. Exhausted from the long day and night of travel to the stadium in Abu Dhabi where we had tickets to see the Pope deliver a Mass, I felt so fatigued and cold from the cool morning temperatures that I claimed a nap spot in the sun on the ground outside our gate- where there was little foot traffic, but where I was aware it was plenty public. I rolled my sweater in a ball and put it on a ledge that had the perfect space for my head. “Can we get you anything, do you need anything? A chair?”

“No, that’s ok.” I attempted to make a joke. “...I need coffee?”

They didn’t have it.

After this I couldn’t help but think about the practice of hospitality in this region in connection to the heat, desert and need for water. I can’t speak for people who have lived in a foreign country for years or pretend that I have, but in my experience abroad so far, I am at times wholly dependent upon foreigners seeing me as more than a stranger. I am dependent upon them recognizing my fragile needs as the same needs that are their own. In some ways, living here I cannot afford to see all people different from me as strangers. How much we depend on the hospitality of one another, not just spiritually, but on the other’s physical and emotional hospitality. We forget that even though Christ was pure and fully God, Christ was also fully

human, and had human needs- dependent on the female body to come to earth, dependent on his disciple's companionship, encouragement, and prayers, dependent on such basic needs as the bread for eating and blood in his own body.

The Mass's entrance hymn "Christ, be Our Light" had beautiful lyrics that communicated these needs. In this song we typically hear Christ being our guiding light in the way that Christ is also God. But Christ must be our guiding light as a human being, too, teaching us what it means to be human-humane human- while living with others.

"Longing for food, many are hungry,
longing for water, many still thirst
...Make us your bread,
broken for others,
shared until all are fed."

Communion bread, ideally, is actual bread and substance to our bodies. And Jesus didn't ignore people's physical needs as he cared for their spiritual needs. Sometimes, as communion demonstrates, these needs can be the same thing.

When we can recognize the dependence of Jesus' humanity, we practice widening our arms' capacity to perceive the needs of others that we most struggle to understand and love. God's arms must reach wider than ours, otherwise we get confused with whose arms are God's and whose arms are our own. While at times love must include boundaries, we must always be challenged to learn and do better and open them wider, otherwise we play god and our arms narrow into judgment. One of our duties as Christians is to figure out where it is that we need to learn more about loving others. This means paying more attention to those who feel foreign to

us, even if what feels foreign to us is the humanity of Christ. The words of Pope Francis that day, based on Isaiah 43, written originally to people in a similar desert region, help to encourage us. “And if we continue to go forward, he will open up a new way for us; the Lord specializes in doing new things; he can even open new paths in the desert.”