



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Room number 5

I must say that the moment Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger) decided to hang up his red leather loafers it felt good.

In my eyes he was an ineffective pope, detached from the realities that people face and transmitted so much weightiness it almost felt good not to be Catholic. After the freshness and enthusiasm generated by John Paul II's Papacy, it seemed as if we were back to square one.

On the other hand, when Pope Francis I was elected two years ago the vibe changed. I must say that the first impression most of us got, as soon as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio appeared in the central balcony at St Peter's Basilica, was that he seemed frozen and petrified.

However, it only took a few moments before people started to see into this man. He became a point of reference and an inspiration, not only for the devout and pious, but the general populace who saw in him an opportunity to regenerate this dialectic with the Catholic Church.

Instantaneously this Pope came across as reluctant to subscribe to the stereotypes usually accredited to a pope. He wanted to do away with the fancy cars, opted to live in a modest accommodation, the Cross he carries around his neck is made of ordinary metal, wears unadorned shoes and bears a simple low-priced ring.

In terms of what he wants to represent, I feel that this Pope is showing us that he is his own man; he chose to ride in a modest Fiat 500L when visiting the US and a Ford Focus in Italy. He tried to engage minorities, was no longer hypercritical towards the lifestyles of the LGBTI community and symbolically kissed and washed the feet of convicts, including women, during Maundy Thursday

rituals.

In addition he visited the gypsies and the homeless communities and argued strongly in favour of climate related issues. He even took the time, not just once, to call people to try and comfort them - like that Argentinean woman who was a victim of rape. He hugged and embraced a seriously impaired person, Vinicio Riva, stopped to speak with the parents of a child with cerebral palsy while visiting the USA, condemned greed and embraced atheists and referred to them as good people. He has taken tangible action against allegations of child abuse changing the law within the Vatican to establish these acts as crimes. Pope Francis also said that the Church was overly focused on abortion, gay marriage and contraception and insisted 'we' should focus more on love and serving. This Pope loves simplicity. He takes selfies with all the young people who ask him to, holds children intensely and passionately but at the same time does not shy away from taking a stand on positions he believes strongly in. In fact during his visit to the US he condemned abortion, asked Congress to support immigration and did not hesitate reproaching the politicians on the negative impact of capitalism.

People understand not only by what 'you' tell them but the way 'you' carry yourself, the priorities you give to the issues you engage with and the way one communicates. This Pope has understood all of this. Pope Francis recognises the fact that symbols matter. He has tried to get the Vatican to walk the talk, to live the beatitudes and exhorted parishes and

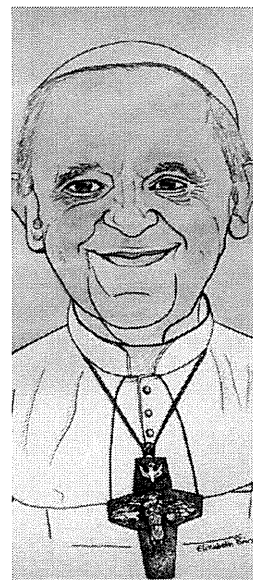
dioceses all around the World to support people in need - to lead by example.

But where does he get all of this humanity from? What makes him understand people so much? Why are relationships so important for him? Why is it that he gives so much attention to individual needs?

As we will see shortly, the Ignatian spirituality that he got during his formation as a Jesuit was not left out in the cold even though there were moments where it wasn't easy for him to cope with the way that the Order dealt with him. He knows how demanding Jesuit regulation is.

For Pope Francis, dealing with poverty and physical deprivation is crucial. Even though you can see clear traits in the way he talks that lead to liberation theology, he makes it known that it is not just about chatting but acting. This is what he used to do and ask the novices and the people he was responsible for; to help the poor, work in pigsties if need be, serve where the greatest need lies. He found solace and value in the concept of base communities, creating a network of support so that people can experience wellbeing.

By many he has been described as a humble man and a 'disciplined rule-breaker' at the same time. Much as he is spiritual he is hands-on. He lives by example. When he was controversially sent to Cordoba, in all probability as a way of disciplining and chastising him it angered the people who knew and worked with him. Some consider these two years as a form of exile and all because he would stand his ground and speak his mind. Like every true



Jesuit he would never shy away from conflict if the circumstances required. So he was left to stay in the little red room, some 500 miles away from home all alone in room number 5.

So Pope Francis knows what it means to suffer and feel left out.

This Pope discerns that life is not a bed of roses. This man understands suffering and recognises exclusion. He brings all this to his Papacy which at the core focuses on the notions of life and dignity, the call to community participation, the focus on the vulnerable. Pope Francis is not alienated and estranged but knows that life is a tussle, but his actions, his gaze, his words provide hope and solace, comfort and serenity.

"Ghandi xi Nghid"

TO SHARE THE ROADWAY WITH THE HOMELESS TO RESPECT

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