

DAILY COMMENT

# WHAT I LEARNED AT MY AUDIENCE WITH THE POPE

*Addressing the group, Francis spoke about the role of the imagination in the life of Catholicism.*

By Paul Elie

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Audiences form the bulk of the Pope Francis's public life. Photograph from Vatican Media / Getty



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A few weeks ago, Giorgia Meloni, the right-wing-nationalist Prime Minister of Italy, took part in an event with Pope Francis during a conference about Italy's low birth rate, and was criticized by Italian reporters for having worn a light-beige pants suit with a long white jacket. Seizing on an old papal protocol specifying that the only women who are permitted to wear white to an audience with the Pope are queens and the consorts of Catholic kings, they suggested that Meloni was out of line, even that she was trying to draw attention to herself. Francis, all in white, commented from the stage, "We dressed the same."

That little tempest was in mind on a recent Saturday morning, as I hastened to the Vatican for a face-to-face encounter with the Pope. This event was a papal audience; colleagues from Georgetown University, where I teach, had arranged it in connection with a conference that brought several dozen writers to Rome to discuss the ways that Catholicism figures into their work and serves as a "global esthetic," joining writers from different countries and cultures. Instructions had been sent to us: appear at 9 A.M.. sharp, wearing "appropriate attire," described as "suits/ties for men, formal dresses for women" (no white). Thinking of the heat, I'd brought a pale-blue linen suit, but now, in the Roman morning sun, it looked like something Tom Wolfe might have worn, and much too light for the occasion. The real question, of course, was how Pope Francis would look. He had cancelled all his appointments the day before. The Vatican press rep said that he just had a fever, but the Pope is eighty-six and was admitted to the hospital for a respiratory infection in March, and every health issue is a cause for concern. I wondered whether our group was really worth his time and energy.



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Audiences form the bulk of the Pope's public life. On Wednesdays, there is a general audience for several thousand people in St. Peter's Square (or, when the weather demands it, in the vast Paul VI Audience Hall). Many rows of chairs are set out, and V.I.P.s, press members, well-connected folks, and the infirm are seated in front to receive a personal greeting from the Pope. On Sundays, the Pope leads the Angelus prayer from a window of the papal apartments, with the faithful taking part from the square below. Clustered around those events, and throughout the week, are audiences with dignitaries, heads of state, and church officials. Pope John Paul II drew criticism in 1987 for receiving Kurt Waldheim, the President of Austria, after it was alleged that Waldheim had taken a role in Nazi war crimes during the Second World War. Pope Benedict

XVI used his last general audience, in February, 2013, to explain his “difficult, painful” decision to resign the papacy. Pope Francis has met several thousand people in private audience, including Queen Elizabeth II, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky, Bono, and George Clooney. Audiences are also granted to groups whose efforts are of special interest to the Pope: in the days prior to our visit, Francis had met with pilgrims from northern Italy, interfaith leaders from the Middle East, mayors from Latin America and Europe, charity workers from around the world, and Italy’s national governing body for tennis.

At nine sharp, our group was assembled at the Sant’Anna gate, between St. Peter’s and the entrance to the Vatican Museums. We were shown in past the Vatican post office, through a courtyard parking lot superintended by a stone Madonna, up a zigzagging staircase, along a gilded corridor, and then into a grand Baroque salon decorated with frescoes of scenes from the life of St. Clement, a first-century Pope. As we took our seats, a printed English text of the Pope’s remarks was distributed. I sat next to Abraham Skorka, now a Georgetown colleague, who has known the Pope for decades; Skorka was a rabbi in Buenos Aires when Francis was still Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the archbishop of that city. At the end of the row sat Martin Scorsese, who had come straight from the Cannes Film Festival. He joined the conference that afternoon for a conversation with the host, Antonio Spadaro, an Italian Jesuit priest who is close to Francis; the Pope has met with the director several times since the release, in 2016, of Scorsese’s film “Silence,” about Jesuit missionaries in Japan, which drew fresh attention to the Catholic dimension of his work.

The Pope appeared in a doorway, and everyone applauded as he entered the room. He carried a claw-footed cane, and with each step he put the cane forward and pivoted slightly toward it. It was truly affecting to see this man, whose life has not been his own in the ten years since he was elected Pope, whose every move is scrutinized for significance, make his way across the

polished floor in a dainty two-step. He sat down on an upholstered chair and put on reading glasses, and an aide adjusted a microphone for him. Then he addressed the group, in Italian, speaking about the role of the imagination in the life of Catholicism. “Art is an antidote to the mind-set of calculation and standardization,” he said. Artists are called “to give life, flesh, and verbal expression to all that humanity experiences, feels, dreams, and endures.” Their work “has an impact on the spiritual imagination of the people of our time.” And the role of Catholic artists, such as those who were present, is not to “explain” the mysteries of Christ and faith but to help modern people to feel them and to “guide our societies toward beauty and universal fraternity.”

It was a papal address, lofty and universalizing. The most unexpected passage—and so, it seemed to me, the one most likely to reflect the distinctive view of Francis himself—drew on Dostoyevsky’s “The Brothers Karamazov.” Francis said, “A little child, the son of a maidservant, throws a rock, and hits the foot of one of the dogs of the master of the estate. The master then sets a pack of dogs on the child, who runs and tries to save himself from their fury, but ends up by being torn to pieces under the satisfied gaze of the master and the frantic eyes of the mother.” In that grand hall, heavy with ceremony, Francis was speaking about evil—spelling out his sense of an imagination such as Dostoyevsky’s as “disquieting.” He might have been speaking to the students in the literature classes he taught at a Jesuit school in Argentina in the nineteen-sixties.

Sitting just a few paces away from him, I watched intently, focussed on the figure of Francis as much as on the words he was saying. He looked all right: a little tired, but serene and strong of voice. During a brief encounter with him in St. Peter’s Square in 2015, I had been struck by the vitality in his eyes and his smile. Eight years later, he has put on some weight and walks with some difficulty. But his eyes are still bright, and his smile still seems genuine. When he had finished speaking, we formed a single-file line and presented ourselves to him one by one. Some of the writers had brought their books as gifts; others

bore objects to be blessed. (Scorsese and his wife, Helen Morris, gave the Pope a framed text of the Our Father written in Osage, the first language of many characters in his forthcoming picture, “Killers of the Flower Moon,” based on a book by David Grann, a staff writer for this magazine.) When my turn came, Francis took my right hand in his two hands, a cross between a handshake and an embrace. I muttered a few words of appreciation for the view of the imagination that he had just offered. Once everyone had been presented, the Irish bishop Paul Tighe, in full regalia, offered a prayer, which audience members joined. Then Francis left the room, to applause. The entire event lasted just about an hour.

Unlike the two Popes who preceded him, Francis is not known as an author; he left his doctoral dissertation, on the theologian Romano Guardini, which he undertook while studying in Frankfurt, unpublished, and wrote no significant books before becoming Pope. But he has nevertheless brought imagination to the papacy, using vivid images to convey his sense of what Catholicism ought to be. Early on, in an interview with Spadaro, he described the Church as a field hospital where the modern world’s wounded are cared for. Then, as he travelled to meet refugees on Lampedusa and Lesbos, and to the Central African Republic and South Sudan, he seemed to envision a church of the poor and for the poor, meeting people where they are rather than summoning them to Rome. This October, at a long-planned synod of bishops, he is expected to promote an image of the Church as a space for listening, in which church leaders hear ordinary people’s needs on issues of poverty, justice, migration, and sexuality, and in which the Pope is addressed by others the way he had just addressed us. Sure, the synod may turn out to be just another rote assembly, and Catholicism has problems that dialogue alone cannot solve, but the Pope as listener-in-chief is an idea that’s hard not to like.

As I walked out through St. Peter’s Square, I passed a group of a couple dozen men under Bernini’s famous stone colonnade. Some wore sandals; some were

barefoot. Some carried bags; others pushed wire handcarts. They had come to St. Peter's to use toilets and showers behind the colonnade that had been made available to unhoused people in 2015. Three years ago, Francis also arranged for a palazzo nearby to be put to use as a shelter. In establishing the shelter, Francis sought to bring Catholicism as it is closer to Catholicism as he envisions it—to make the Church of the poor visible, so that visitors to St. Peter's might leave with their image of the religion that he leads deepened, and complicated. ♦

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