

Reflection of His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Tobin, Archbishop of Newark
Evening of Witness and Praise, Convocation of Catholic Leaders
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As delivered

Would you permit me, if I ask nicely, to tell you my two favorite stories about Pope Francis? Are you alright with that?

The first one is actually my second favorite, and it will tell you something about the speaker. The second one is my first favorite, and it may tell you something about you.

Now, the first one, it happened about two years ago on a Wednesday morning in Rome. The Holy Father was in his famous Papa Mobile, the Pope Mobile, making a couple laps of St. Peter's Square and a group of people handed him up a gourd that was full of yerba mate, or if you're from Brazil they call it chimarrão. It is a tea that the people in the southern cone of Latin America really like, and it is always a communal event. They make the tea in the horn of a bull or a hollowed-out gourd and put a metal straw in it and then they pass it around. Well, they handed it up to Pope Francis and I think he recognized what it was, so he took it, took a couple slurps, and gave it back and said thank you.

Afterwards the security forces went ballistic. They said, "You can't do that. If someone hands you a piece of pizza to eat, you can't do that. And whatever you were drinking today, you can't do that."

Finally, the Holy Father held up his hands in a sort of surrender and then offered an excuse. He said, "Those people, they were Argentineans, they weren't cardinals."

The second story, which you'll remember is my favorite, took place in the spring of 2013. Now I'd check this out; I'm not into false facts or bad news, I don't want to get wrestled to the ground, but I kind of would like to see somebody try. These two voices, I think they know what they're talking about so I think you can take this as gold.

The Holy Father, shortly after his election, called the Secretary of State, a cardinal, with a simple request. He said, "I want to go to Lampedusa."

Now, I'm sure some of you have heard of Lampedusa, it is an island in the Mediterranean Sea, technically the territory of Italy, but is actually much closer to North Africa. It is a scene of great tragedy. It's the port of entry for thousands of immigrants and refugees. The seas around Lampedusa have been the graveyard for thousands of people. In 2015 I think it had the distinction of becoming the deadliest migrant route in the world.

The cardinal was a little shocked at this request and I think he tried to talk him out of it. He said, "Look, you've just been elected and I'm not sure you want to be scooting out of Rome so quickly. And what's more, this is your first trip and you're going to be sending a message. Is this the message you want to send? Why don't you think about it?"

So he did. Several days later he called up the cardinal again and he said, “I want to go to Lampedusa.”

The cardinal could see that his mind was pretty much made up. So he said, “Alright, fine, fine. We’ll go to Lampedusa. But you know, these trips can’t be arranged from one day to the next. There’s media, there’s security, there’s all sorts of logistics. Maybe in six months, better, a year, we’ll be ready.”

The following week the cardinal received a phone call, but this time it was from the vice president of Alitalia, the national airlines. And he said, kind of hesitantly, “I think you might want to know that a passenger by the name of Jorge Bergoglio has booked a seat on the Roma – Lampedusa flight.” And they moved.

On July 8, 2013, three-and-a-half months after his election, four-and-a-half months before he would publish *The Joy of the Gospel*, Jorge Bergoglio, better known as Francis, the bishop of Rome, went to Lampedusa where he thanked the harried people of that island for the welcome that they offered the stranger despite their meager resources.

He celebrated the Eucharist where he denounced the traffickers and prayed for the dead. What did he say? He repeated the first two questions that God asked of human beings after The Fall. He asked, “Adam, where are you?” And to Adam’s son Cain, he asked, “Where is your brother?”

Where are you? Where is your brother? The answers do not come easily because of the sin, and they still don’t.

We might ask a question of Francis. Why did you want to go to Lampedusa? After all, you just arrived and this is your first trip. Why pick that place?

Reading carefully *The Joy of the Gospel*, we can expect that Francis would offer three reasons. First, his election had improved his peripheral vision; he saw things that he didn’t see before.

I would imagine as the archbishop of Buenos Aires in Argentina, he did not have much contact with refugees or migrants. Now as the Holy Father he would look around and see, see people that others would overlook; see a reality that was easily brushed off; see the results of a globalization of indifference. And what he would see pierced his heart.

He said on July 8, 2013, looking at the people over an altar that was made of the remains of some of those boats, he said: “When I first heard of this latest tragedy, a few weeks ago, and realized it happens all too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart.”

As missionary disciples, we might ask ourselves, what do we see as we look around? How good is our peripheral vision? Where is God opening a door and beckoning us to enter? What pierces our hearts and leads us to weep?

The second reason Francis might offer for this choice to visit Lampedusa at the start of his pontificate: he had to practice what he would preach.

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis insists that the fundamental conversion that is needed today is a missionary conversion. It is a reevaluation of everything about the Church and everything about us, the structures, the activities, so that mission and outreach to people in the love of Jesus is clearly the first priority. The first priority not just on our papers but in our budgets, because a budget after all is a theological statement.

Sometimes the pope calls it a pastoral conversion, but the emphasis is always on mission, on going out. He says in *The Joy of the Gospel*, “Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy. It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelization” (*Evangeliium Gaudium* 32). No less than all the members of the Church, the pope would not be constrained by the shackles of custom or empty pragmatism.

Thirdly, Francis went to Lampedusa to find the suffering face of Christ.

He reminds us that, “All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives.” (*Evangeliium Gaudium* 121) “The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.” (*Evangeliium Gaudium* 88)

The Joy of the Gospel insists that our response of love to Jesus’ love of us and our willingness to share that love with others is the most important reality in our lives, and not just when we are doing something “religious”.

Are there things in your life, in my life: worries, pressures, distractions, habits, fears, that blot out our awareness of our life in Christ for much of the time?

Are we like really agnostics, who pray in the morning and then take charge the rest of the day? Are we blind to the suffering face of Christ that is around us? For once again, as Francis reminds us, “True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others” (*Evangeliium Gaudium* 88).

If community is so essential to a full Christian life, how can we help it happen? Can you name some ways in which your parish has been able to offer community to people? If you’re already in a small community, God bless you, and I know it is very important to you. Perhaps it is your family, or a special circle of friends, or co-workers in the vineyard. Does it remain inclusive and open to others?

Finally, as missionary disciples, standing by the Cross of Christ in so many situations today, are we obsessed with immediate results that make it hard for us to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, or the Cross?

“And so the biggest threat of all,” says Francis, “gradually takes shape: ‘the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness’” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 83).

Francis would ask us to have good peripheral vision: to go out to the ones who are forgotten, to the ones who are unseen, to bring with us our friendship with Jesus to share with them their suffering, their pain, and their fear. Jesus would have us go with His cup.

My friend, Fr. Dan Groody, from the University of Notre Dame, let me use this cup; a cup that is used at the altar, but a cup that represents the cup of suffering. The wood and the colored chips come from the ships of Lampedusa.

This is the cup of suffering that Jesus did not want to drink, and asked his Father if it would be possible to make it pass. But this is also the cup in which the suffering and pain of this world is transformed by the faithful love of the Father. This is the cup that we share. This is the cup that makes us the Church. This is the vision, the pierced hearts, the quick reaction, the courageous decisions that make us missionary disciples.

We ask our mother Mary, who was the first disciple of her son and a missionary seeing things that others did not see, treasuring things in her heart and standing by the Cross, to help us drink the suffering evangelization necessarily demands with the confidence that it will be transformed by God’s love into the cup of blessing that we raise in thanksgiving.

And to Him who gives us love, who makes us Church, who has called us out of darkness into His wonderful light, who left beside the glory so that He would become one of us, so that we might be one with God. To Him be glory, now and forever in the Church. Amen.