

I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting  
and dirty because it has been out on the streets,  
rather than a church which is unhealthy from  
being confined and from clinging to its own security.

(Pope Francis: *Evangelii Gaudium*, December 2013)

December 15, 2013

Dear Friends and Fellow Seekers:

If you had told me a year ago that the Pope was going to resign and be replaced by an Argentinean Jesuit, I would have said you were crazy. If you had told me this new pope was going to celebrate Mass on the Copa in Brazil with 3 million people I would have wondered what you'd been smoking. And if you had told me that he would wash the feet of an Islamic girl at Rome's juvenile detention center on Holy Thursday, say "Who am I to judge?" when asked about gay Catholics and be named Time Magazine's Person Of The Year, I wouldn't have known *what* to say! OK. I admit it. I'm a bit dazzled. And I'm feeling more hopeful about leadership in the church than I have for many, many years. Inevitably I'm remembering Pope John XXIII, who went home to God 50 years ago. (What an earth-to-heaven graduating class that year produced! It included Edith Piaf, JFK and my mother.) My heart still warms as I recall John's first year as Bishop of Rome (1958), when he spent Christmas Day at the Rome city jail, and told the inmates about his uncle doing time for stealing a horse, as various Vatican officials who'd accompanied him stood frozen and aghast with horror. I recently came across a quote from G. K. Chesterton that seems destined for both Francis and John. (***"Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair."***)

Like most of the world, my mind and heart have been full of Nelson Mandela the last 10 days. I hope and pray that someday I might have even a little bit of his perseverance and his capacity for forgiveness. On the last day of June in 1990 I was lucky enough to be jammed into the Oakland Coliseum along with 60,000 other people, to welcome him on the last stop of his "thank you" tour of America, just months after he'd been released from his 27 year ordeal. It was one of the happiest days of my life. We were all so deliriously joyful! During his remarks he talked about the wonderful integration he'd witnessed across this country, including that day's crowd. But, he wondered, did we actually *know* the people in front of us and behind us? He asked us to turn and introduce ourselves and share some sign of peace. (It was, indeed, like a liturgy.) I'd been noticing, and admiring, the tall, attractive black woman in the row in front of me. When she turned around, I said, "Hi, I'm Fitz." And she said, "Hi, I'm Angela Davis." And we embraced. (If you're too young to know, please go to Wikipedia and check out her story. Then you'll understand why ever since that day, along with Mandela, I've believed that *anything is possible!*)

Not everything that happened this year encouraged me. I was disgusted that so many commercial enterprises chose to trash the one remaining day that was considered sacred by people of all

faiths, and of no faith. It wasn't just that people were enticed to abandon their family's dinner tables on Thanksgiving and head out to compete for bargains. Even worse! Workers were forced to miss family gatherings or risk losing their jobs. All for the sake of greed! It reminded me of an exchange I had with a counter sales person a few years ago in New York. It was the middle of October. I stopped in one of those "body shops" (that sell creams and lotions) in Greenwich Village. There was Christmas music playing, *in October!* I discreetly said to the young woman behind the counter, "Look, I know you are not responsible for that, but, as a Christian I've *got* to tell you how offensive that is!" And she, even more discreetly, whispered to me, "I'm Jewish. How do you think I feel?"

There *IS* something magical about this month and season. It's the lights. It's the music. It's the gathering of friends and fellow believers, assembled to celebrate ancient promises, and to renew our faith that "that light still shines in the darkness and the darkness will *never* manage to put it out.!" (Paraphrasing John 1.) It's also a time when I find myself expressing gratitude, devotion and even reverence for all those folks who have grabbed my heart and squeezed. Here are just a few of them.

- My friend, Maria Eitz, was ordained in May. She asked me to teach her how to celebrate Mass and made me the 'point person' in preparing the ordination liturgy. This extraordinary woman, who spent her youth as part of the underground, fighting the Stasi in East Germany, then serving the needs of children in Vietnam and Africa and here in San Francisco, has been part of that "great cloud of witnesses" that Dr. King talked about, long before the bishop laid her hands on Maria's head.
- 50 years ago at the March on Washington, Peter, Paul and Mary sang Bob Dylan's "Blowin' In The Wind". At the anniversary gathering in August they sang it again. But in Mary's place (she went home to God a couple of years ago) stood Trayvon Martin's parents.
- On November 15<sup>th</sup> it seemed as though this whole city turned out to be part of the Make A Wish Foundation's gift to a child struggling with Leukemia. He wanted to be Batman for a day. A whole throng of folks accommodated him, as he accosted the Joker and other scoundrels. Thousands of people, all over the city, cheered him on, many of them shouting through their tears, as "Batkid" saved the day. (Why I Love This Town, entry # 1,387.)
- My grand niece Rowan is 5 and started kindergarten. Among her classmates is a girl with severe physical disabilities. Some of her classmates' parents actually objected to having their kids in the same classroom! When Rowan discovered that she and the disabled girl were born on the same day and told her mom (my sister Marykay's daughter Sara), they decided to have a joint birthday party. I think "Mandiba" Mandela would have been pleased.

As the days grow shorter and the nights longer, please know that you are part of the light that scatters the darkness in my world. Shine on, my friends! A blessed Christmas and holiday season!

With love, from the City of St. Francis!

