

# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



May 17, 2015

## **A MEMO TO HIS HOLINESS, POPE FRANCIS**

**To:** His Holiness, Pope Francis

**From:** Rabbi Kurt F. Stone

**Re:** Poverty and Peace, Climate and Capitalism, Misery and Miracles

Your Holiness:

I am a bit hesitant to compose and post this memo to you for fear that what I write might be taken -- at least in some quarters -- as an act of *chutzpah* -- that is, of "gall" or "utter impertinence." Believe me, it is anything but. For although you and I are ordained in two different religions, and study the word of God in two different directions -- me right-to-left and you left-to-right -- I have the



utmost respect for you and what you have already accomplished in the first 2 years and 65 days of your papacy. This is not to say that I agree with everything you've done or said, for indeed, I do strongly disagree with the Vatican's (*id est* your)

[decision to recognize the Palestinian state](#). But now is neither the time nor the essay to get into that issue.

To date, there have been 8 Popes during my life: Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and you, Your Holiness. And I must say, you have the best, most honest smile of them all. Your humility is overwhelming; your Papal motto -- *Miserando atque Eligendo* (roughly "Lowly but chosen") pretty much says it all. To my way of thinking, you are, by far, the closest to being in the mold of John XXIII than any other Pope in my lifetime. John XXIII, like you, was truly a man of the people. His 1963 encyclical on peace and nuclear disarmament, *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth") and 1965 document on interfaith relations -- *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Age") -- which absolved Jews of killing Jesus were quantum leaps in the way the Church responded to the realities of the day.

Likewise, your recent statements on economic justice, climate change and the responsibilities of the wealthy, as well as your efforts to broker a thaw in relations between the United States and Cuba, represent quantum leaps as well.

Early in your papacy, [you wrote](#) *"Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills, . . . [is] unjust at its roots [and one] which defend(s) the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation."* Such a system, you warned, is creating a "new tyranny," which "unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules."

Just the other day, [you warned](#) "the powerful of the earth" that they will one day have to answer to God if they fail to protect the environment -- to ensure that the world can feed its population. *"The planet has enough food for all, you said, "but it seems that there is a lack of willingness to share it with everyone. . . . We must do what we can so that everyone has something to eat, but we must also remind the powerful of the Earth that God will call them to judgment one day and there it will be revealed if they really tried to provide food for Him in every person and if they did what they could to preserve the environment so that it could produce this food."*

To say the least, you have ruffled quite a few feathers. And from where I stand Your Holiness, that is -- or should be -- one of the missions of a successful papacy or rabbinate for that matter: to awaken the somnambulant; to make the complacent uncomfortable; to put religious scruples to work for the betterment of the downtrodden; to continually remind humanity that the earth belongs to God, not to industry, and as such, we are its guardians, not its despoilers . . .

It has long been my belief -- and whenever tenable, my practice as well -- to employ religious lessons and principles to both goad and to challenge; to comfort and congratulate; to make the commonplace grand and the grand divine. But as you well know, Your Holiness, over the past generation or so, the public face of religion -- especially here in the United States -- has been doing anything but.

For the most part, religion and politics have forged a strait-laced, fundamentalist -- and from my perspective barely holy -- alliance which seems to care far more for the unborn than the living, and preaches an unforgiving Biblical literalism whenever it suits their purposes. This fundamentalist alliance is far more concerned with who we may love or bed or wed -- or indeed, what we may teach -- than with feeding the poor, clothing the naked and protecting God's good earth from the rapacious. Somehow, they have discerned within Holy Scripture the justification for putting profit ahead of people and the wishes of the few against the needs of the many. Indeed, it appears that they have concluded that it is they who control the moral high ground, and the rest of us just don't get it. They have grafted their interpretation of the Bible and religion on to the political process so that now, the two are all but indistinguishable. And my father always taught that "*Politics and religion are like fire and water . . . unless handled with the utmost intelligence and discretion.*"

Of course so long as you, or any religious leader agrees with the fundamentalist alliance's approach, you are accounted as a shining presence whose words should be heeded as if they came from Mt. Sinai or Capernaum. But now that you have begun speaking up about climate change, the responsibilities of "the powerful of the earth," and matters of peace and social justice, it's a whole other story. Suddenly, your words aren't nearly so welcome; your opinions are being challenged; even your knowledge of the Bible is being brought into question.

It's both a *shanda* ("a shame) and a *nes* ("a miracle")!

A *shanda*, for sure. But a miracle? Permit me to explain . . .

From what I understand, Your Holiness, The Church has a [three-step process](#) for canonization -- for becoming a saint. To a non-Catholic, the most difficult step to grasp is the requirement that candidate have performed two verifiable miracles. Now miracles are, by definition, for the most part counter-intuitive and outside the bounds of rational experience. Which is not to say that they do not and cannot occur; it's just that they are incredibly rare and easily as much a product of faith as of reason.

Having written this, Your Holiness, permit me to continue now in a slightly jocular but nonetheless serious vein: I think you may well have performed your first miracle by getting some of the more outspoken members of the fundamentalist alliance -- the very people who have grafted their religious worldview onto secular politics to publicly state . . . are you ready for this? . . . that religion should be kept out of politics!

A handful of examples:

- South Carolina Rep. Jeff Duncan said he was stunned to see you getting so “political” and demanded that you rein in your activities and pronouncements to more traditional church-y stuff. Said the congressman, *“It’s interesting how the Vatican has gotten so political, when ultimately it ought to be working to lead people to Jesus Christ and salvation.”*
- Iowa Rep. Steve King echoed Duncan, saying he’s not sure that you’re “as good of a politician as you are a Pope.”
- Kansas Rep. Tim Huelskamp actually said that Catholicism is agnostic on issues of poverty (!), and that you should stick to what he termed Catholicism’s “non-negotiables,” like its opposition to abortion and gay marriage and its support for school choice. *“How do you deal with a poverty problem?”* he asked. *“There’s not a Catholic [fix], contrary to the arguments of certain economists that work at the Vatican... But there’s a Catholic view on life, on marriage, on the rights of parents and education. So I hope he sticks to this.”*

Texas Rep. Louis Gohmert, who has pretty much replaced -- and outpaced -- Michelle Bachmann, let the you know in no uncertain terms, Your Holiness, that they don’t take too kindly to your style of Popin’ down in East Texas. Said America’s “Dumbest Congressman,” *“The Pope is the head of his religion, and he makes those calls for himself . . . but I represent 700,000 people from East Texas and a vast majority agree with me.”*

From where I sit, the above has all the hallmarks of a miracle. May their ears hear what their mouths have said. And may you be on the path toward eventual canonization.

This past February, House Speaker John Boehner issued you an invitation to come and address a Joint Session of Congress this coming September 24 -- which happens to be 24 hours after the holiday of *Yom Kippur*. At the time he announced the invite, the Speaker was all smiles . . . as were just about every member of his caucus. I have to wonder how they feel about your upcoming visit in light of the positions and prescriptions you’ve made public in the past several days and weeks. I for one would pay a pretty penny to be in the chamber on that day, but alas, it is cannot be.

But please know Your Holiness that I will be there in spirit.

So do what you do best: speak the truth; introduce them to those parts of Holy Scripture which put people ahead of profit and the needs of the many ahead of the needs of the few. In short, make ‘em squirm.

And as for your recognizing a Palestinian State, we'll take that up on another occasion. Although we do not agree on this point, I will continue to support and applaud you on oh so many other issues upon which we do agree.

*Pax vobis and shalom*

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kurt F. Stone". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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