

## Social enterprise lessons from the pope . . .

*I was raised a Catholic in the 1950s, but have not been a member of the church since the mid-1960s. I rejoiced at the arrival of the socially conscious Pope John XXIII in 1958 and mourned his passing in 1963. For the past 50 years I've been what many of my friends call "a recovering Catholic."*

*And now, seemingly from nowhere, comes Jorge Mario Bergoglio, better known to the world as Pope Francis. It's as if the past half-century has evaporated, as if the promise of the Second Vatican Council has been renewed. Francis has joined my pantheon of heroes who aren't chained to the past.*

*Listen to Francis in his interview with Father Antonio Spadaro, editor of the Jesuit publication La Civiltà Cattolica, along with commentary by William Saletan of Slate -- and reflect on the implications for social enterprise . . .*



\* \* \* \* \*

**PINING FOR THE PAST:** "If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. ... those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists have a static and inward-directed view of things. ... there are ecclesiastical rules and precepts that were once effective, but now they have lost value or meaning."

*How many of us are clinging to the past, fearful of risk? How many are able to discard treasured ways of doing things -- let alone eliminate programs, products and services that no longer meet the needs of our clients and customers? How many suffer from the malaise Fitzgerald described in the final lines of The Great Gatsby: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."*

**EMBRACING SHIBBOLETHS:** "The complaints of today about how 'barbaric' the world is ... sometimes end up giving birth within the church to desires to establish order ... as a defense. No: God is to be encountered in the world of today. God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history." As Saletan points out, Francis is "saying God will be found not in the past but in the future, in the unfolding of history. ... He doesn't assume today's Catholic teachings are eternally true."

*How many nonprofits, private sector companies and even social enterprises cling to outmoded ways of doing things, parroting "truths" that no longer apply? How many continue sifting through the past for solutions rather than fully engaging in the evolution taking place*

*around them? There are dozens of shibboleths in the social enterprise sector, philosophies and procedures we trumpet as “eternally true.” I’ve committed that sin. So have you.*

**REFUSING TO DOUBT:** Spadaro asks the pope a logical follow-up question: “If the encounter with God is not an ‘empirical eureka,’ and if it is a journey that sees with the eyes of history, then we can also make mistakes?” Francis agrees: “If one has the answers to all the questions, that is the proof that God is not with him. ... The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties. We must be humble.” Francis assures Spadaro this kind of humility “is not relativism if it is understood in the Biblical sense that God is always a surprise so you never know where and how you will find him.”

*How many social enterprise founders have been “surprised” to discover their original idea has morphed into something they never expected? The Massachusetts Institute of Technology once did a ten-year study of 814,000 small businesses and discovered that, by the sixth year, most of the companies weren’t even selling the same products or services.*

**FAILING TO LISTEN:** Yes, Francis is the pope, the head of the church. But he emphasized to Spadaro that “All the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief. When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. ... We should not even think, therefore, that ‘thinking with the church’ means only thinking with the hierarchy of the church.” Francis cautions that he’s not endorsing pure “populism.” But Saletan points out that he’s rejecting the conventional understanding of infallibility: “He interprets infallibility not as a present attribute -- the rightness of what a pope or a college of cardinals decrees -- but as a collective process. Together, through dialogue with the people, we get the right answer down the road. This notion of dynamic, collective infallibility presumes the fallibility of today’s popes and cardinals.”

*The CEO and the senior managers of a social enterprise are not omniscient either. Top-down management has its virtues, but can also be a vise (that’s NOT a misspelled word!). Pope Francis is altering what has long been a fundamental Catholic belief: God speaks to the pope and the pope speaks to the people -- and when the pope speaks ex cathedra the pope is infallible. Francis is a charismatic leader, as are many social enterprise CEOs and senior managers. But too many of us who’ve led social enterprises have stumbled when we’ve failed to fully involve the people on our team -- or, even more damaging, the people we serve.*

**RAISING EXPECTATIONS:** “Many think changes and reforms can take place in a short time. I believe we always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change.”

*I cringe at all the bells and whistles surrounding the field of social enterprise today. The problem with raising the profile of the movement is exactly that -- the profile gets raised. People begin making unrealistic claims, especially when it’s so difficult to measure social return on investment. Then somebody does some digging and discovers the claims are based on fairy dust. People launching or expanding a social enterprise -- or a new type of legal structure or an innovative financing program -- need to keep expectations at a modest level and not get ahead of themselves. I know, I know: We have to “scale” our successful enterprises in order to create genuine social change . . . but let’s make sure we don’t promise more than we can deliver, okay? “Social enterprise” has such a sexy tone to it these days and people are expecting far too much. They are going to be disappointed, and then they are going to be critical. And when the critical voices rise to a clamor . . .*

**WASTING RESOURCES:** “The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules.” Francis is speaking here of the enormous amounts of time, energy and treasure expended to condemn such practices as gay marriage, homosexuality and abortion -- and the people who practice them. Doing so wastes financial and moral resources he believes could be better employed to help the world’s poor. As Saletan points out, the pope is “not renouncing the teachings” on those practices, “but he’s demoting them to a level at which they could later be modified or quietly abandoned.” Francis emphasizes: “The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you.”

*The most important thing for social enterprises? Our social mission. And to achieve it we may have to de-emphasize or jettison some of our most cherished beliefs about the people we serve and the way we serve them.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Men and women of every religious denomination have been fighting for social justice all their lives, including an impressive roll call of Catholics. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone renounced his personal wealth and is known today as St. Francis of Assisi. Peter Maurin and Catholic convert Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Worker movement. Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli triggered seismic changes as Pope John XXIII. Rebel priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan went to jail for protesting the Vietnam war. Sister Joan Chittister is co-chair of a worldwide network of women peacemakers sponsored by the United Nations. And the list goes on.*

*Today they’ve been joined by a modest, remarkable man from Argentina. Imagine! A pope who believes the teachings of Jesus Christ are calling us to battle unjust economic, political and social conditions.*

*I no longer pray in any Catholic sense of the word . . . but I hope Jorge Mario Bergoglio remains with us for a long, long time.*