

The day Pope Francis welcomed community organizers from the Southwest to the papal residence

By Joe Rubio

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Pope Francis meets on Oct. 14, 2022, with a group of 20 lay leaders, clergy and professional organizers from the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, a representation of a decades-long tradition of community organizing in the United States, of which Catholic communities and parishes have played a major role. (Photo courtesy Rabbi John A. Linder)

We anxiously entered the room, rather plain, like a well-kept church basement. Twenty-one chairs were set in a circle beneath an image of Our Lady Undoer of Knots. We quietly arranged ourselves, leaving a seat vacant.

Five minutes later, he walked in by himself, greeting everyone with a handshake and warm smile, and we all sat.

“Thank you for inconveniencing yourselves to come to meet with me,” he said. And so began our conversation with Pope Francis on Oct. 14, 2022.

We were an interfaith group of 20 lay leaders, clergy and professional organizers from the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, a representation of a decades-long tradition of community organizing in the United States, of which Catholic communities and parishes have played a major role. Parish-based organizing began in earnest with the founding of Communities Organized for Public Service in San Antonio 50 years ago.

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What ensued was a dialogue, a 90-minute conversation in Spanish, filled with humor and back-and-forth engagement. For many of us, this was our first trip to Europe, and we began to realize that our work represented a distinctly American approach to public life, one which values local institutions and non-partisan political action.

We shared stories of organizing to bring running water and basic services to over a million people along the southern border, about working to combat human trafficking, of creating efforts to move poor families into living wage career paths and of helping to develop leadership among the immigrant community in our parishes. Our leaders spoke to their development as public persons, worthy of recognition in civil society and local democracy.

Not long into the conversation, Pope Francis interjected, “Usaron mucho las palabras ‘ver’ y ‘escuchar.’ ... Me impresiona que ninguno de ustedes parte de alguna teoría. Ninguno dice ‘leí un libro y me interesó eso.’” (“You frequently used the words ‘to see’ and ‘to listen.’ I am impressed that none of you start from a

theory. No one says, ‘I read a book and that interested me.’”) Then he added, “el peligro a veces es intelectualizar el problema.” (“The danger sometimes is to intellectualize the problem.”)

He stressed the importance of being with people and paying attention to one’s reality, emphasizing *amor concreto*, love concretely in action, saying that he saw our work as seeing and hearing of injustice in the real lives of our people, acting to change the situation, and being changed ourselves as a result.

He himself told stories of direct encounters he had recently with families distracted by technology at the dinner table or employers underpaying and mistreating their workers, lamenting the little time spent on relationships and the injustice to the poor.

We then talked about our work supporting the synod process in many dioceses, reflecting that the process of community organizing, listening and paying attention to the needs of people, especially at the periphery of society, was uncannily similar to the process of synodality.

“People are not used to listening,” he responded, “and that is what true catechesis does —listen and teach listening. [...] in other words, faith is when another touches your heart and makes you move your hands. Faith leads you to work, to do something.”

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He continued: “This is love of neighbor, love to the brother or sister who is having a hard time, or who is the victim of injustice, providing them an outstretched hand. The only time to look down on a person is when you lift them up.”

He expressed his appreciation for the focus on what we are doing, rather than to complain about what is not being done or to disparage anyone. “No menospreciaron a nadie.”

As I looked around the room, I saw colleagues who felt both at ease with and in awe of this encounter. Many of us have not always felt welcomed in churches and have often been disparaged for our work. This was also the week commemorating the 60th anniversary of Vatican II, strong [papal statements on Ukraine](#),

preparations for [visiting Bahrain](#), and two days before announcing the [extension of the global synod](#). And here we were, a group of community organizers, in a deep encounter with His Holiness. He listened.

Before concluding, he thanked us for the visit, saying that although he had never known of the I.A.F. before, he was glad that he knew us now. This was validating, yes, but also an imperative to move forward.

“Keep going. Don’t rest your laurels,” he said.

“Surely, some call you communists or something similar. They tell pastors, priests, rabbis, not to enter into such things, to stick to your job of just preaching the Word of God. But when you read the standards by which we will be judged, these are the things: I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was in prison and you visited me, I was sick and you cured me. This is the way.”

And so ended our conversation with the successor to St. Peter.