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## The Francis effect

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## Quad 136

### The Francis Effect

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

## The Francis Effect



Photo: jeophotos via Flickr

I had the pleasure and thrill to be in Washington DC representing Saint John's University during the Pope's visit. It was certainly a singular privilege and honor to be with Abbot John to **present an Apostles Edition** of *The Saint John's Bible* to the Library of Congress in honor of Pope Francis's first visit to America. That event at the Capitol will be unforgettable, yet what was equally memorable was the atmosphere in Washington during our two day visit.

There was something about the Pope's presence that affected people in the city and made my visit strikingly different than any previous trip to Washington.

Midwesterners often comment on their interactions with easterners when they travel to the Atlantic seaboard for work or pleasure. In my

experience, the comments are mostly about Bostonians and New Yorkers, but Washingtonians are not immune from these mildly critical characterizations. The general observation is that metropolitan areas in the middle Atlantic and northeastern states feel significantly less friendly than Midwestern cities, even the biggest Midwest city of Chicago.

One must, of course, be careful about generalizations, but having lived for close to a decade in the Boston area, I find these observation to be largely on target. While personally friendly and engaging in more intimate settings, my experience with easterners in public is that they tend to be cool, focused on their own business and, while not overtly rude, certainly not particularly friendly and more than capable of looking out for their own interests.

It was against this backdrop that my two days in Washington DC were so striking.

Three experiences:

1. Abbot John, Rob Culligan and I got up early on Wednesday to go to the White House where President Obama was welcoming the Pope. There were thousands of people waiting to be admitted to the South Lawn of the White House. Despite long lines, not terribly well run security, and a long, crowded wait once you got to the South Lawn, I did not witness a single tense or unpleasant encounter. In fact, people were offering each other advice about the fastest way to get through security. I also heard more than one person tell their neighbor in the crowd, "I'm not even Catholic, but I

love this Pope.” The atmosphere was festive, and it was both an historic and gorgeous day, so maybe the aura of civility was not such a surprise, but there were a lot of people operating in very close quarters.

2. The gorgeous weather and significant traffic made it very conducive to walking during my two days in Washington. In my various forays around the city I was amazed to have strangers on the street greet me and even occasionally offer unsolicited help with directions when I would pause at an intersection and appear perplexed. In my experience, you rarely get unsolicited greetings in big metro areas on the East Coast. People have their guards up against unwanted solicitations or panhandlers and therefore typically even avoid eye contact. But the social rules seemed noticeably different to me during those two days. Certainly not everyone greeted me as I passed them, but it felt a lot more like Minneapolis (or even Collegeville!) than I had ever experienced before in Washington (or Boston or New York), with two exceptions noted below.
3. On Thursday morning, as Abbot John and I walked toward the Library of Congress, an African-American woman driving some kind of delivery van stopped in the middle of the block and rolled down her window. She called out to Abbot John, who was looking clerical in his robe and Abbot’s Cross, “Did you see the Pope yesterday?” Abbot John explained that we have been on the lawn of the White House and saw the Pope from afar. Undeterred, she asked enthusiastically, “What did he say?” Abbot John quickly gave her a very abridged version of the Pope’s comments about compassion and love, as drivers were waiting behind her in the street, though without honking or showing any overt signs of impatience. After the brief recounting, she exclaimed, “Thanks. That is great. Have a wonderful day!” Not your typical Washington exchange.

I had experienced similar social interactions in East Coast areas twice before.

When I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, residents in the area were extremely friendly and engaging when the Red Sox were making a playoff run in 1986 and ultimately made it to the World Series (where they famously lost to the Mets). Everyone felt like your aunt or your brother-in-law as they delighted in the Sox’s success. Camaraderie around a sports team’s success is not uncommon, but it noticeably took the chill off social relations in Beantown for a few weeks that fall.

I was in New York City a couple months after 9/11. The city felt different than I had ever experienced it before or since. The best way to describe the experience is that people were being gentle, even tender with one another. New Yorkers (and we) were still suffering together.

Though the interactions were similar, the cause and tenor were different. In Boston it was a kind of superficial fun – we were all sports fans together. In New York it was a somber wake, as we mourned. In Washington the feeling was delight, joy and hope. People seemed surprised to be so moved by this Pope. In an era of political, racial, religious, or economic divides, we seem to be delighted by the unabashed goodness and sincerity of this man, especially so because maybe we were not sure we could still feel this way.

These are, of course, only my observations – anecdotes, as it were. I have no illusions that the Pope’s visit will permanently change social interactions in Washington (or New York or Philadelphia), and it is much easier to talk about the Gospel message than to put it into public policy, where real resources and inevitable trade offs are required.

But for a couple days we seemed to be able to put aside our differences and celebrate a message of hope and compassion. If we were able to do so for a couple of days, that suggests we may also be able to do it for a longer period.

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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | September 28th, 2015 | Categories: [History](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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## About the Author: **Michael Hemesath**

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).