

A religion reporter's take on Pope Francis

By Jessica Hall

Elon N.C.— David Gibson is a national reporter for the Religion News Service, as well as an author and filmmaker. On Oct. 5, Gibson came to Elon University to give a speech about his experiences covering religion, specifically about Pope Francis' visit to the United States.

After a few years spent trying to discover what he wanted to do after college, Gibson found himself working in the Vatican. After working for Vatican radio and Italian newspapers, Gibson eventually converted to Catholicism.

Gibson is often asked why he converted, especially after the clergy abuse crisis. He often responds with a simple answer, saying that it was meant for him—a straight, white male.

Since his election, Catholics and non-Catholics alike are very interested in what Pope Francis is doing. Gibson said the Pope is, “a very unpredictable fellow,” which is why more people have been following Catholicism.

A very important time for Gibson was in 2013, when Pope Benedict decided to resign. This came as a complete shock to everyone, because Popes don't resign, he said.

One thing Pope Benedict had promised was that he would travel to America, but that never happened. Pope Francis decided to follow through on that promise, and the week of Sept. 23, 2015, Pope Francis came to America.

Gibson said that Catholics were unsure whether Pope Francis would really come to America, as the U.S. doesn't make up a large percentage of the world's Catholics. Pope Francis decided that this trip was not just going to be for the Catholics; he had “a lot of agendas” coming to the U.S.

Francis was the first Pope to be invited to speak at a joint session of Congress and he also spoke at the General Assembly of the United Nations. Gibson said that the Pope came to America as a pastor not a politician, but he is very political-minded.

Gibson discussed the circumstances of the Pope's visit. He mentioned that the Pope is very fond of meeting people, but he was not allowed to do that for security reasons. To make a statement, Pope Francis drove around in an unarmed and tiny Fiat rather than a limousine.

This trip, according to Gibson, was the Pope's longest, most difficult trip. He had originally planned to come to the United States through Mexico, to make a statement about immigration, but that plan became too complicated.

Still wanting to make a statement, Pope Francis came to the United States straight from Cuba. The Pope had helped broker the deal between the U.S. and Cuba, so he thought it would be a positive statement about global diplomacy and the relations between people.

Gibson discussed the mixed feelings many Catholics have about Pope Francis, and said that, "conservative Catholics are deeply critical of him." They do not support how simply he lives or that he criticizes most Catholics' limited scope of concern.

The Pope is largely in support of broadening the focus of Catholics, from issues such as gay marriage and abortions to bigger societal challenges, such as helping the poor.

While there are some people who don't support him, he has gained many supporters outside of the Catholic Church.

Gibson stated that the Pope has two main messages, one on the Catholic Church and the other on American Politics. Gibson said that Pope Francis wants to "Reorient the Catholic Church that has been focused on the culture of wars."

Pope Francis is very focused on assuring acceptance for everyone, and wants Bishops to welcome people with the “warmth of love.” Gibson said that the theme of the Pope’s message was “to get out of the fortress mentality.”

One of the more memorable events the Pope had during his trip was a meeting with some of the Clergy sex abuse victims. “I don’t think it was artfully done,” Gibson said, “but it was interesting the way that he met with them and the language of the apology.”

The Pope was able to address controversial topics such as gay marriage and abortion in a way where he did not discuss them outright. “He is innocent as a dove, wise as a serpent,” Gibson said.

Gibson believes that what the Pope is doing is important to the advancement of the Catholic Church, but “the most important Pope is not Francis, but the Pope who comes after Francis,” Gibson said.

Gibson does not believe that Pope Francis will have enough time to complete his mission because of his age, so it will fall into the hands of whoever follows him.

This Pope is doing a lot to change the views of Catholicism and he is making advancements with every action he takes. “The fact that Francis has lifted the lid of off free speech in the Catholic Church is a huge change,” Gibson said.

“A lot is at stake here for the Catholic Church,” Gibson said, and the world will have to see if Pope Francis’s mission is carried out.