

# Pope Francis Meets With Kenneth Copeland, James Robison—High Fives Ensure

What does it take to produce the first-ever papal high-five? A meeting with American televangelists, apparently.

The gesture came during a three-hour meeting of Pope Francis and Texas televangelists Kenneth Copeland and James Robison, just weeks after the pontiff met with televangelist Joel Osteen and other religious leaders. At the June 24 meeting, Robison said he was so moved by Pope Francis' message of the gospel that he asked the translator to ask Francis for a high-five. The pope obliged, raised his arm and the two men smacked hands.

The televangelists are among some wealthier U.S. evangelicals who have recently met with Francis, who has called for a focus on the poor and a simple lifestyle for clergy. In March, the pope met with members of the Green family, the Oklahoma billionaires whose company, Hobby Lobby, won their challenge to President Obama's contraception coverage mandate at the Supreme Court last week.

Robison said he was born into the Episcopal Church but didn't have a "born-again" conversion until later in life, the kind of story he sees among many Protestants and Catholics. "There are a lot of evangelicals and Catholics who don't know Christ," he said.

In fact, Francis' meeting may reflect a shift in emphasis within the papacy. His predecessor, Benedict XVI, regularly bemoaned the decline of Christianity in his native Germany and across Europe. In contrast, the Argentine Francis comes from a region where competition from Pentecostalism is one of the biggest challenges facing the Catholic Church, Peppard said.

As unusual as it might seem for a pope meet with celebrity Protestant preachers, the potential awkwardness goes both ways. While some praised Robison for going to Rome, others said Protestants and Catholics have too many differences, on issues that include the role of the Bible, saints, the status of the Virgin Mary and the nature of salvation. "Very disappointed in you James and Betty. Never forget the Inquisition—Never forget!" one commenter wrote on Robison's website.

But Robison said he and Francis found common ground in caring for the poor.

"I don't see him as presenting himself as infallible," Robison said of Pope Francis. "He's been to confession. He asks for prayer. He's anxious to apologize on [behalf] of Catholic leadership."

Osteen's meeting with Francis on June 4 was part of a larger gathering coordinated by the International Foundation, also known as "the Fellowship." Osteen was joined by Utah Sen. Mike Lee, a Mormon; California pastor Tim Timmons; and Gayle D. Beebe, president of evangelical Westmont College.

The June 24 meeting leaned particularly toward charismatic Christianity. Other guests were Anthony Palmer, a bishop and international ecumenical officer with the independent Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches; Geoff Tunnicliffe, the outgoing head of the Worldwide Evangelical Alliance; and John and Carol Arnott of Catch the Fire Toronto, which grew out of a Pentecostal revival 20 years ago.

The pope met with more than 50,000 Catholic charismatics in Rome last month, admitting he was not always comfortable with the way they prayed. Still, he knelt on stage as they prayed for him and spoke in tongues. "Where does division come from? The devil!" Francis told them. "Division comes from the devil. Flee from internal struggles, please!"

Pentecostal and charismatic Christians—charismatics are often Pentecostals in other churches, including the Catholic Church—share much in common, such as speaking in tongues and healing. Together, they make up at least 584 million people in the world, about 9 percent of the global population and one in four Christians worldwide, according to the Pew Research Center.

And that's probably partly why Francis extended the invitation to the U.S. pastors. The Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, a veteran of Catholic-Protestant ecumenical groups and the author of *From Times Square to Timbuktu: The Post-Christian West Meets the Non-Western Church*, said Pentecostalism is growing in the Global South at three times the rate of Catholic growth, especially among the poor.

"My guess is that Francis knows this community can't be ignored," Granberg-Michaelson said. "Certainly, Francis would want to encourage Catholic charismatics to feel at home, as well as build ecumenical relationships with the Pentecostal community—and those reinforce one another. That's also why what he is doing is both ecumenically creative, and makes sense."