The current superior general of the Jesuits, Fr. Adolfo Nicolas SJ, has said the “globalization of superficiality is one of the great dangers in our world today”. We have an enormous amount of information at our fingertips and flooding over us every day. This fills our brain with data but escapes the deeper understandings of the realities they present.

Perhaps one way of saying this is, “We have abundance of ‘knowledge’ but scarcity of ‘wisdom’. We have an abundance of ‘information’ but a scarcity of ‘formation’.” Wisdom is an action involving the mind and the heart as information becomes analyzed, and measured by such spiritual realities as human dignity, the common good, and moral responsibility. Information can become simply superficial but wisdom runs deep into the interior of our heart and souls. “Without the perspective of eternal life, human progress in this world is denied breathing space.” (Pope Benedict XVI, Charity in Truth).

The good people of Nazareth seem to be at the superficial level. They have information of all the powerful deeds Jesus has done in other Galilean villages. They know he is faithful to synagogue and understand him to be Joseph’s son. While all that information is accurate, they remain at what they “think they know” and so live at what is “superficial”. The people of Nazareth are collectively saying, “We know who we are. You are Joseph’s son and someone from our town.” They are unable to look beyond the visible and see the power of God in Jesus. They see Joseph’s son, but cannot see God’s Son. Jesus had performed mighty deeds in other synagogues, so “why not us?”

But the Jesus they thought they knew prior to his baptism in the River Jordan is not the same Jesus coming home to Nazareth. Oh, it is the same Jesus, but he has received a deeper awareness of his true identity and the purpose for his living in this world. His fellow citizens are not the least bit interested in this deeper identity he now recognizes and embraces.

Jesus recognizes their expectations as “Physician cure thyself.” That is really another way of reminding Jesus that “charity starts at home, so start.” Jesus reminds his fellow citizens that foreigners and pagans have been blest by God through other prophets at times when God passed by his own people. They should expect the same from him. Telling them his mighty deeds are more for foreigners and pagans instead of them sets them off in a rage.

Jesus’ two examples involving Elijah and Elisha come from Israel’s prophetic tradition. Prophets do not primarily predict the future. Rather, they interpret the present. As conduits for God’s own voice and God’s own words, prophets come to shake us out of our moral slumber or upset the comfortable cart of superficiality. They relay what is really going on at the deeper levels of reality and not merely superficial. They open our eyes to the reality of our sinfulness and its impacts throughout society.

In his magisterial work Prophets, Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote, “The prophet hears God’s voice and feels His heart... The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man’s fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words.”

An opinion poll taken after Pope Francis’ visit to the United States found his popularity among Catholics had fallen slightly albeit from 86% approval to 81% approval. The opinion poll discovered that Pope Francis’ emphasis on his encyclical Laudato Si’ regarding global warming and his negative critique of capitalism accounted for this drop in approval. Those now voicing disapproval failed to see why Catholic faith should be involved in such issues that seem beyond the purview of religious authority.
There is great irony in this. Pope Francis’ statements on the environment are almost identical to statements made by both Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. His critique of unregulated capitalism echoes every pontiff since Pope Leo XIII in 1891! For sure the way he comments on these issues or any issue for that matter is vastly different from the way any pope has spoken perhaps since St. Peter.

But most secular media and often Catholic media in this country have not emphasized what previous popes have said regarding the complete social teaching of The Catholic Church, including the issues of environmental destruction and economic division. Thus, in The United States, Pope Francis seems even more out of step from previous papacies on these issues, when in fact the opposite is true.

In any event, these popes have spoken on these issues out of the prophetic mission of the church. In our baptism, we are called to share the three-fold ministry of the Risen Christ: priest, prophet and king. The prophetic role will bring us to the issues most impacting the world today. Our critique of those issues will most certainly bring division and criticism back onto the church. The guidelines of human dignity, the common good and moral responsibility are the measures used to critique such issues.

19th Century Protestant philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, “It is well known that Christ consistently used the expression ‘follower’. He never asks for admirers…A follower strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what he admires makes a claim on him and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires.

“The difference between an admirer and a follower still remains, no matter where you are. The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in words, phrases and songs, he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, gives up nothing, will not reconstruct his life, will not be what he admires and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. Not so for the follower. No, no. the follower aspires with all his strength with all his will to what he admires.”  (Give Us This Day, March 2014, pp 350-351).

The Nazareth townspeople in the synagogue at first decided to admire Jesus before they tried to kill him. But no one decides to follow him. If as St. Paul tells us in the second reading, “Love is not jealous and does not seek its own interest”, then the people of Nazareth show us what happens when love doesn’t happen.

Where are we? Does jealousy and self-interest keep us closed and protective? Or does love open us with welcome and hospitality? Does the prophetic voice draw us closer to Christ or repel us with disgust? Are we admirers on the sidelines perhaps even observers? Or are we followers of Christ, renouncing everything so as to embrace all we are called to?