

The Changing World: Pope Francis and Religious Freedom

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Presented at the Religiously Affiliated Law Schools Conference, Sept. 19, 2014.

Pope Francis has been described as a Pope of paradox. Paul Vallely writes in his book *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* that

Jorge Mario Bergoglio is a doctrinal traditionalist but an ecclesiastical reformer. He is a radical but not a liberal. He seeks to empower others and yet retains a streak of authoritarianism. He is a conservative yet on the far left of his nations' reactionary Bishops' Conference. He combines religious simplicity with political guile. He is progressive and open, yet austere and severe.

Whatever else he is, Pope Francis is the first Jesuit to be named Pope. It is not surprising that he is: Jesuits are explicitly discouraged from becoming bishops, let alone pope. One Jesuit, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, who conducted a book-length interview with Pope Francis and knows him well said, "We never imagined that a Jesuit could become pope. It was an impossible thing... We Jesuits are supposed to be at the service of the pope, not be a pope."

Another reason Francis is the first Jesuit pope may be that the Jesuits have not always been on such good terms with the Church. There was a time when, under Pope Clement XIV the Jesuits were suppressed, an order that was enforced in France, Spain and Portugal and territories under their influence; they were viewed as too influential and elitist. In fact in Switzerland the ban on the Jesuits was not lifted until 1973.

Although he has many traits that emulate the saint whose name he took – Francis of Assisi – there is no question that Pope Francis has been deeply formed by his Jesuit and Ignatian background. That means that to appreciate Pope Francis' views and behavior on anything, it is necessary to have some understanding of his Ignatian

spirituality. To quote the title of a *National Catholic Reporter* piece written this past year, “To understand Pope Francis, look to the Jesuits.” In that piece, the author suggests that “From his passion for social justice to his missionary zeal to his focus on engaging the wider world and his preference for collaboration over peremptory action, Francis is a Jesuit through and through.”

So I thought I would briefly outline some of the central aspects of Ignatian spirituality. Each of these comes through loudly and clearly in Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, and in his other comments and writings, as well as his behavior. (That is particularly true of the Apostolic Exhortation which I recommend with some frequency; it is impossible to read that document without being aware that its author was formed by Ignatius and the Jesuits.)

1. Personal Encounter with Christ

One of the first things Pope Francis says in his Exhortation (in paragraph 3) is that “all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, [are invited] to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.” Emphasis on “all.” “No one,” the Pope writes, “should think that this invitation is not meant to him or her.”

Central to Ignatian spirituality is the understanding that we need to encounter Christ in a direct way. St. Ignatius encouraged believers to foster a deep personal relationship with the person of Jesus Christ in how they prayed with scripture and how they lived their lives.

In the Apostolic Exhortation, quoting Pope Benedict, Francis says that “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

This is of central importance: It is not enough to learn about Christ. To read about Christ. To think about Christ. (To listen to me talk about what Pope Francis writes about Christ.) We need to encounter Christ. To be with Him. We need to see Jesus Christ not as a “topic” within Catholicism, relegating him to someone or something we express beliefs about, but as a person with whom we are in a relationship.

I start with this point because it is one that is absolutely central to Pope Francis’ theology and it is the predicate for everything else he is trying to say in the Apostolic Exhortation and elsewhere. Without a lived relationship with Christ, we cannot commit ourselves actively to do our part in God’s plan of salvation. We cannot heed the call to evangelization.

That personal encounter with Christ also leads Francis to an emphasis on what one commentator called a culture of encounter. On the Word on Fire blog, Fr. Damon Ference says this:

It seems to me that Pope Francis has offered a important contribution to efforts of the New Evangelization: before one can evangelize others effectively, one must first encounter others effectively. In other words, an often overlooked step in the activity of evangelization is simply meeting people where they are, and loving them where they are, and understanding what it means to be where they are, and then working to understand how they got there. This sort of encounter is disarming, as it first speaks “I love you and I want to understand you” rather than “I have the truth and I want to change you.” I’m not saying that John Paul II somehow failed to recognize the importance of encounter – after all, he named Cyril and Methodius co-patrons of Europe for this very reason – but I am saying that Francis is offering an important nuance that is easy to miss: encounter precedes evangelization.

Pope Francis asks us to “encounter” each other in Christ, to hear “when the other person shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns.” This is not an invitation to water down our beliefs or our proclamation of the Gospel, but an invitation to start with encounter, with love.

2. *We are all Loved Sinners*

Those familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius know that in Week 1 of the Exercises we get in touch with our sinfulness, but in the context of God's love for us. We acknowledge our weaknesses, not for the purposes of beating ourselves up, but so that we are better able to make a return of God's love. We see ourselves, as those with an Ignatian bent are fond of saying, as loved sinners. And we come to understand that Jesus invites us to be with him notwithstanding our sinfulness.

When he became bishop in Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio adopted as his episcopal motto *miserando atque eligendo*. It comes from a comment by the Venerable Bede on the gospel passage in which Jesus met the despised tax collector Mark. Translated it means *unworthy but chosen*, though Bergoglio likes to translate it rather more clumsily as "*by having compassion and by choosing*." In that motto, he uncovered his vocation. He said, "That was how I felt that God saw me during the conversation. And that is the way he wants me always to look upon others: with much compassion and as if I were choosing them for him; not excluding anyone, because everyone is chosen by the love of God...It is one of the centerpieces of my religious experience."

You may have read about the *America Magazine* interview with Pope Francis last year. The first question he was asked was "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" And his answer was "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner." And when he was elected pope, he accepted his election to the papacy with the words, "I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I think that understanding of himself as a loved sinner impacts the mercy he shows toward others, and his pastoral approach to others' sins. So, for example, he got a lot of heat about some remarks he made in an interview on the way back from World Youth Day about homosexuality. He said, "If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, how am I to judge them." I think that sort of thing comes from the recognition of oneself as a sinner. More recently, the first marriage he celebrated included couples who had been cohabitating.

3. Being a Contemplative in Action/Being Men and Women for Others

Second, those formed by Ignatian Spirituality are said to be "contemplatives in action." By that is meant that they are reflective people with a rich inner life who are also deeply engaged in God's work in the world. Contemplatives in action unite themselves with God by joining God's active labor to save and heal the world. (This is why you don't see Jesuits living in cloistered monasteries.)

Ignatian Spirituality is about being "men and women for others." – implying a deep commitment to social justice and a radical giving of oneself to others. The heart of this service is the radical generosity Ignatius asked for in his famous prayer.

Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to ask for reward, save that of knowing that I do your will.

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are designed precisely to help us discern how we are being invited to labor with Christ for the building of the Kingdom. The idea that each of us is called to play a part. So, God doesn't sit back and leave us to do all of the heavy lifting. But neither is Christianity a passive faith where we sit back and wait for God to put all things right. We are participants, co-laborers with Christ.

This idea of being a contemplative in action, of being men and women for others is central to Pope Francis' theology and you will see that it runs through the Apostolic Exhortation.

In his Introduction, he calls it a "profound law of reality" that "life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means." (par.10)

In Chapter 1 (par.20), he gives the examples of Abraham, of Moses, of Jeremiah to show how consistent has been God's challenge for those who believe in him "to go forth."

In par. 39, he tells us that "before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others, and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others."

In par. 88, he writes that "the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others."

And in paragraph 180 of the A.E. Pope Francis states clearly "the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God."

So personal relationship with God - our personal encounter with Christ (the first point I talked about) - is necessary but it is not sufficient. Rather, as Christians, we live for the life of the world. My faith is never completely private; it is not just something between me and God. Instead we are called to be the Body of Christ to the world. We

are called to teach, to heal, to inspire, and to offer hope to the world, and we do so as an expression of our faith and as an outgrowth of our relationship with Christ.

And so we pray – of course – and we go on retreat, and we do many other things to nourish our faith, to deepen our relationship with our loving God. But we can't stop there. Much as it may be appealing, we are not meant to spend all our days sitting blissfully in the arms of God. We are charged to go out into the world and to share our faith and our love with others. Our personal and committed relationship with God commits us to serving others.

In Francis, we have a Pope who doesn't just talk the talk, but one who walks the walk. Look at the incredibly example he has given us in the first year and a half of his papacy.

Think of some of the images you have seen of this Pope – kissing and embracing a disfigured man. Calling up people on the telephone when he has heard of their suffering. Inviting local people to come celebrate Mass with him. Washing the feet of Muslim prisoners.

He does not just tell us to go out and be men and women for others, he shows up what it might look like.

That has implications for the other subject Mark included in this session: religious freedom. Many secular people are all in favor of religious freedom, so long as it is understood in a narrow fashion: be religious, just don't show it in public. However, a separation of Godly and worldly spheres is not possible for those who take Christianity seriously. The Catholic call is, and has always been, a call to integration – to transforming the world to Kingdom. This makes it impossible to practice one's religion

silently; rather our faith has a substantive content that had to influence our choices in the social, political and economic world.

4. Finding God in All Things

Anthony deMello tells the tale of a fish who spent all its life searching for that mystery that goes by the name “ocean.” “What is ocean?” it kept on asking all those who it met. “I have looked everywhere, spent all my life swimming in every possible direction, and still I don’t know what “ocean” is. Do you know what?? It concluded finally. “I don’t think I believe in this thing called “ocean.” How should I believe in something I’ve never seen, and no-one can describe for me.”

The deMello story is one way to remember that God is actually in everything, God is what gives me life in the first place and what keeps me alive. God is what gives me meaning. God is my context for being and my reason for being. No matter what I think I am doing, it is God who is breathing God’s breath through me and bringing my soul to life.

In the words of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

Ignatian spirituality is about finding God in all things, about not separating our world into spheres that are sacred and spheres that aren’t. God is present in every moment and in every place, which means there is, for us, no division of our lives into sacred and profane, or sacred and ordinary. Everything we do is both sacred and ordinary.

For Ignatius, the cosmos is first and foremost an expression of God’s love. *Everything* that exists is a sacrament of God’s love. It all has potential to deepen my life

in and with God. God is everywhere and I can encounter God everywhere.

I am emphasizing everything. Ignatian spirituality is about finding God in all things – the seemingly good and the seemingly bad.

This is reflected in St. Ignatius' Principle and Foundation. In one of the lines, Ignatius exhorts us: *We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God.*

You will see reflected in the Apostolic Exhortation Francis' conviction that God is in all people, and in all things. "To believe," he writes, "that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bounds." (178)

Again, this evinces an integration that makes it impossible to separate secular from religious spheres of our lives.

5. Everything in this world has been given to us so that we may know and love God more and more deeply.

"All of the things of this world are gifts of God presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more easily." (This is another element of Ignatius' *Principle and Foundation*.) We appreciate and use all these gifts of God insofar as they help us develop as loving persons."

Everything God has given me – the things of this world and the talents I have – are for the purpose of, to use the words of the P&F, developing as loving persons. Sharing God's love.

One of the foundational principles of Catholic Social Thought is that of stewardship. A “steward” is someone who is entrusted with some good or talent on behalf of other persons; a steward is a manager and not an owner.

Stewardship, in the Catholic Social Thought tradition, derives from this understanding that God is the source of everything; Everything we have – our time, our talents, all that is in the world – is a gift from God and we have an obligation to manage those gifts for the benefit of all; we are accountable to God for how we use those gifts. Created in God’s image, humans have a mandate to subject to themselves the earth and all it contains, but to govern the world with justice and holiness, with respect for all living creatures and the environment. In one sense, we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation.

You see this reflected in Pope Francis’ commitment to environmental protection; since his election he has made many appeals in defense of the environment. In July he called for more respect for nature, calling the destruction of the rain forests in South America and other forms of environmental exploitation a sin of modern times. He said that one of the greatest challenges of our time is to convert ourselves to a type of development that knows how to respect creation. The Pope is currently writing an encyclical on human relationship with nature.

6. Discernment of Spirits

One of St. Ignatius’ greatest contributions, I think, is his teaching on discernment of spirits – on helping us to recognize what comes from God and what does not come from God. How to recognize what is the spirit of God and what is what Ignatius sometimes calls “the enemy spirit.”

That term is doubtless familiar with you, but let me say a word about it. Ignatius took for granted that evil is real, that evil exerts a strong force in the world, and that evil is always trying to draw all things and all people away from God. Ignatius literally believed in Satan. But whether think of it as Satan, devil, evil spirit – force, etc., the idea is the same - that are two pulls – one from God and one not from God. That we each face real temptations capable of moving us, or luring us away from God. And we intuitively understand that. We know not only from the teachings of the Church, but from our own experience, that serving God and following Christ is not a walk in the park, not a straight, easy and smooth path. (Just the other day, Pope Francis observed that we are all subject to temptation. Anyone who says he has not been tempted, said the Pope, is either an angel or a “little bit of an idiot.”)

In the case of those who of us who are on a spiritual path, those who in Ignatius’ words, “go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise to the service of God our Lord to greater perfection”: The *enemy spirit* disturbs, causes doubts, encourages weakness, makes person feel unworthy, creates anxiety. The spirit of God, or what Ignatius calls the *angel of light* encourages and supports those moving in this direction with confidence, joy, delight. Brings courage and strength.

Given that there are two opposing forces – that on the one hand we are being invited by God’s grace and, on the other, tempted by the evil spirit, we must be able to recognize which impulse is operating at any given time. We must, in the words of one commentator, be able to “distinguish inspiration from instigation, or grace from temptation, so that we may respond to one and resist the other.”

Pope Francis recognizes this. He reminds us that “We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also – and this is decisive – choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil.” (51)

He does, however, express confidence in our ability to do so. “As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.” (119)

7. We are called to labor with God, not to do it all alone.

Mission and service in Ignatian spirituality is not an individualistic enterprise, but work in collaboration with Christ (and others). This is a very important reminder in a parish setting.

Pope Francis writes, “Though it is true that this mission demands great generosity on our part, it would be wrong to see it as a heroic individual undertaking, for it is first and foremost the Lord’s work, surpassing anything which we can see and understand. ..In every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit.” (12)

Francis quotes Pope Benedict’s reflection that “It is important always to know that the first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by

inserting ourselves into the divine initiative, only begging for this divine initiative, shall we too be able to become – with him and in him – evangelizers.” (112)

I think this is an important one when we are talking about the Church’s social teaching because we sometimes need the reminder that it is God’s business we are about and not our own. God’s plans that we are participating in. Our work is essential, but ultimately we don’t run the show.

8. Resurrection

The broad theme of this Apostolic Exhortation is Evangelization. And that raises the question: What is the substance of our evangelization? What is it that we are we trying to convey to the world by our words and deeds?

If you are familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, you know that the Exercises follow a structure that begins with our consideration of God’s love for us and end with the Resurrection and our charge to go forth and proclaim the Gospel.

Neither I in my comments here, nor Pope Francis, seek to minimize the importance of the cross. But I think he is absolutely right in his observation (par.6) that “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.” People who get the suffering part of Christianity, but not the joy. (I often quip that Catholics are a lot better at Lent than they are at Easter.)

Let me ask you this: If someone has gets only the suffering part and not the joy, How can that person evangelize effectively? Pope Francis is clear: “an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!” Remember, Francis tells us that the most effective evangelization is to “appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet.”

This is not to say we don't have tough times, that we aren't sad at times. Of course we are. But we are resurrection people and must transmit our joy in the resurrection. We must never forget that we are a resurrection people. That, as Francis says, "Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world." (par. 276)

There is a beautiful passage (84) in the Exhortation where the Pope calls us to see with the eyes of faith, so that "we can see the light which the Holy Spirit always radiates in the midst of darkness....Our faith is challenged to discern how wine can come from water and how wheat can grow in the midst of weeds." We have to believe it ourselves or we cannot transmit it. "Nobody can go of to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents."

If I can't see it myself, I can't convey it. I can only effectively evangelize on the basis of what I really believe.

Christ's death and resurrection mean that victory has already been won for us. So we can do what we are called to do in confidence and in joy. But I can only do so if I believe it.