

Pope Francis, Vatican II and the Medicine of Mercy

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- Pope Francis announced the Year of Mercy in December 2015, precisely fifty years after the close of the Second Vatican Council. He is the first pope not to have attended Vatican II (1962-65) yet his language and style of leadership continues to manifest many of Vatican II's key themes for the renewal of the Church – servant leadership, a genuinely missionary Church that goes to the 'peripheries', collegiality and synodality, genuine humility, transparency especially with regard to Vatican finances, the ongoing commitment to social justice, ecumenism and inter-faith relations, enhancing the place of laity in the Church, ongoing dialogue with modern culture, solidarity with the needs of humanity especially the poor, care for the environment, etc.
- Pope Francis shares many of the traits of Pope St John XXIII (1958-63) who convened Vatican II. John XXIII (Angelo Roncalli) was from a humble peasant family in northern Italy, worked for many years at the 'periphery' of Church life, was not known internationally as a great intellectual or theologian, was elected pope in 1958 as a 'stop-gap' measure (transitional papacy) and in a short amount of time almost revolutionised the papacy and the Church in the calling of Vatican II. John XXIII brought great warmth and humanity to the papacy, abolished much of the formality of Vatican protocol, was highly respected by believers of other faiths and even non-believers, emphasised his role as a shepherd and pastor of the flock, especially as Bishop of Rome. John XXIII spent most of his life studying the pastoral reforms of the Council of Trent, especially in the way it was implemented by St Charles Borromeo of Milan.¹ At the opening of the Second Vatican Council on 11 October 1962, John XXIII insisted that 'today the Church prefers to use the medicine of mercy rather than the weapons of severity'. He also insisted that Vatican II was to be fundamentally a 'pastoral' council for the updating of the Church (*aggiornamento*) in contrast to previous councils that were summoned to deal with major theological disputes and heresy.
- Like John XXIII, Pope Francis uses a direct form of speech that does not require expert levels of theological interpretation. This can cause nightmares for canon lawyers, theologians and diplomats, but it is certainly effective. Even his homely and simple sayings seem to go directly to the heart of the Gospel

¹ On this, see Max Vodola, *A Friendly Guide to Vatican II*. Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2012.

message. Pope Francis has called a Year of Mercy to manifest to the world a softer and more humble image of the Church, some would even say a more maternal image of a Church that at times looks terribly hierarchical, juridical and institutional. He wants genuine **mercy** (not pity) to touch and heal the wounds of life, hence his insistence that the Church is really like a 'field hospital', binding up and attending to the acute wounds both physical, spiritual and psychological of modern existence. He clearly doesn't want the Church to become a lifeless organisation with colourful brochures and corporate management plans that has lost touch with the reality and struggle of daily life. Mercy meets human brokenness and suffering. For Pope Francis, this is a pastoral imperative that renews the mission of the Church. A pastoral emphasis always contributes to the renewal of the Church. This is what John XXIII emphasised at Vatican, what he studied regarding the Council of Trent and the reforms of St Charles Borromeo and what Pope Francis is insisting on today.

- By his own admission Pope Francis declares, 'I am sinner'. Every pope has had a confessor and would regularly make his confession in private. Pope Francis walks across St Peter's Basilica and knees at the nearest confessional where a priest is on duty. God help that priest!! By his own admission, Pope Francis has stated that when he was a very young Jesuit provincial in Argentina, he let power and authority go to his head and made some harsh decisions in dealing with his colleagues. Authority in the Church is for service and building up the community of faith and not for those on a power-kick of vanity, megalomania and self-importance. When he was elected, I was delighted to hear that in Argentina, he would give priests a hard time for not baptising the children of single mothers. He demands patience, mercy, compassion, understanding and genuine pastoral dialogue in the face of complex and demanding human realities.
- There is nothing too original in saying we must love the poor. Every pope has said this. But when he was an auxiliary bishop and cardinal archbishop in Argentina, Bergoglio lived humbly in a small apartment, forsaking many of the trappings of office and often went into the poorest districts of the diocese by public transport. The shepherd came to visit the flock, not to convert or to bring pity but to be 'converted' by contact with the poor and marginalised. When he talks about 'going to the peripheries', he speaks from personal experience. And here is the genius of the man. He goes to the peripheries because the 'sheep' shape the heart and style and soul of the 'shepherd'. He wants bishops and priests to have 'the smell of the sheep'. According to Pope Francis, the pastor will be found where the sheep is lost. At the peripheries, he speaks into the centre to those in the Church who are comfortable, career-minded and proud, especially those who have lost touch with the poor, who have never looked into the eyes of a single mother working two jobs to raise

three children in public housing, or the factory worker with few skills about to lose his job who can just survive daily life and does not have the benefits of cultural pursuits or a comfortable lifestyle.

- Francis has been pope for only three years but his litany of gestures and classic (and sometimes devastating one-liners) are legion. Choosing not to live in the splendour of the Apostolic Palace but in the communal lodgings at *Casa Santa Marta*, paying his own bill at the *Casa Internazionale del Clero* the day after his election, carrying his own bags, riding in the bus with the other cardinals, making his own phone calls. He wants a Church that is free of corruption that goes out and touches the reality of life. He wants to go out and continually make contact with people because this is what a pastor does, the shepherd who comes into genuine pastoral intimacy with his people as opposed to someone who governs from afar and receives pages of reports. But touching the pastoral reality is confronting. I remember Pope Francis in St Peter's square embracing a man with severe facial deformities, something that would have caused me to recoil. Touching the poor, the broken and the marginalised is touching the face of the suffering Christ. And when we touch the poor, this shines a light on our own spiritual poverty, especially those who live in relative comfort. Mercy for the poor, not pity, because mercy makes *us* more compassionate in the face of human suffering. This is the radical call to conversion and discipleship. Mercy and compassion set us free from our own selfish preoccupations in order that we might live in the light of the Gospel. According to the pope, 'the name of God is mercy'.
- His papacy, like his Jesuit heritage, is like a great examination of conscience. Pope Francis has reserved his strongest criticism for priests, bishops and religious who are career-minded, who are ambitious and vain, who seek titles and recognition in the Church, who have become materially comfortable and have forgotten about the genuine needs and suffering of the poor. I once saw Youtube footage of one of his morning Masses at *Casa Santa Marta*. He stated that, 'there are those in the Church who are ambitious, who want to climb, climb, climb. If you want to climb, go to the Alps; it's much better for you'. A devastating critique for the vain and the ambitious in the Church.
- In western society marked by greater affluence, higher living standards, opportunities for luxuries, relative comfort and sometimes a sense of entitlement, Pope Francis gave another devastating critique and wake-up call. He stated, 'when we throw out food, we are taking it from the tables of the poor'. Reflect for a moment on the power of this image. When we are careless and wasteful, it is as if we literally break into the homes of the poor and take that little bit they have on their tables. The pope's words haunted me in my last parish when at the end of the week I would throw out food prepared by

the housekeeper or given to me by parishioners that I had not eaten because of various circumstances.

- Pope Francis doesn't simply call attention to the 'peripheries' but makes radical decisions in this regard. For example, there are major dioceses in Italy that normally receive a cardinal's hat. Some incumbents are waiting patiently. They may be waiting for a while. Last year, Pope Francis appointed the Bishop of Tonga a cardinal, a scattered group of Islands in the Pacific whose total Catholic population would fit into two large-size American parishes. By doing this, Pope Francis brought the 'peripheries' into the top level of the College of Cardinals. The Church of Tonga is not 'out of sight, out of mind'. He gave that country an honour far in excess of its numerical strength but at the same time made an important statement in terms of Catholic ecclesiology.
- Some Italian bishops want the pope to make stronger statements against abortion, artificial contraception, gay marriage and the evils of secularism and relativism, etc. The pope replies by stating that pastors must not be bureaucrats focused on efficiency but agents of peace who live a simple life, always there for others who ought not be scandalised by the fragility of people. Pastors are to bring the oil of hope and gladness, they are called to be people of joy, a sign and instrument of God's tenderness. In a recent ordination ceremony, he told the group of priests, 'don't make your homilies long and boring'.
- Pope Francis is living the grand vision of the Second Vatican Council in terms of mission and evangelisation. Let the Council have the final word as we hear in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (no. 1): 'For the Church wants the whole world to hear the summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope and through hope it may come to love'.

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