

# Blueprint for a New Social Imaginary[Pope Francis (with Austen Ivereigh), Let Us Dream : The Path to a Better Future]

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# Blueprint for a New Social Imaginary

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Book Review. Pope Francis (with Austen Ivereigh), *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. Simon & Schuster, 2020 ; ISBN : 978-1-398-50221-5.

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“The historical mission of our times is to re-invent the human at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience. … I say *reinvent the human* because humans, more than any other living form, invent themselves”

Thomas Berry, (159).

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If this troubled and unsettling millennial moment, described by some as ‘the polycrisis’<sup>1</sup> is, at its heart, spiritual in nature as many have intuited, who better to offer a response than the shepherd of our planet’s Catholic flock, Pope Francis?

The project of the book, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, was conceived in the spring of 2020 as the global pandemic flared, an offering to the Vatican commission established to prepare for the post-Covid<sup>2</sup> future. Francis’ admirably futures-literate<sup>3</sup> idea was to propose that the Church had a choice to respond not simply to what was to come, but to play an active role in helping to shape the post-Covid future. In rousing, spiritually generous tones, he invites us ‘to dream big, to rethink our priorities—what we value, what we want, what we seek—and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of’ (6). This book is a seed for the post-Covid world, a guide perhaps, for what Thomas Berry calls for in the ‘reinvention of the human’ via a ‘shared dream experience’ in the creation of a new social imaginary.

In *Let Us Dream*, written in collaboration with his biographer, Austen Ivereigh, we encounter the pastor Francis’ relaxed, disarming, conversational manner. ‘Come, let us talk this over,’ he seems to say. ‘Let us dare to dream’ (6). It is as if he sits beside you weaving his narrative with personal anecdotes and reflections, and layering his points with wisdom gathered from a wealth of sources: biblical texts, a wide-ranging collection of world novelists (Dostoyevsky, Borges, and Chesterton, for example), myth (a compelling gloss on the drama of the labyrinth as metaphor for our predicament and

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its release), and poetry from the likes of Hölderlein and Tagore. Along the way, he calls to attention many of the ruptures in the fabric of our social life, elements of the polycrisis, and offers practical suggestions for engaging with them, personally and systematically.

For Pope Francis, the Covid-19 crisis is a time of 'reckoning', one in which we are being 'sifted' (1). We are being shaken up, our priorities and lifestyles unsettled, 'normal' categories and ways of doing things disrupted. This very uncertainty is a mark, Francis assures us, of a threshold time: a ripening, a breakdown, a labour, an emergence. In every crisis, he declares, there is a 'movement of spirits beneath its surface' (142), between what has been and what is coming, whose rich, dark promise spiritual training in dreaming and discernment can help us to sense. Under the surface we will see there is a window of opportunity to choose to abandon the patterns that have contributed to the present state of difficulty. Possibilities will emerge from the dreaming for the needed transformations of our currently dysfunctioning social, economic, political and ecological dynamics.

Francis' preferred rendering of the traditional Latin American 'see-judge-act' problem-solving method is 'contemplate-discern-propose' (142). To contemplate is a more refined take on simple seeing; a call to take in, in as full a sense as possible, not simply visually, what is unfolding in the world around us. Ponder first the question: What needs to change? What forces have brought us to this point and are interacting in this situation? Next, can it be discerned what is bringing life and what is destructive? What lends itself to the cultivation of right relations, and what is dehumanising? These are human or spiritual questions that reveal our hearts and help us respond to the basic question: How do we choose the good? With a fuller understanding of what needs to change, we can consider together how such changes might be activated and sustained by proposing 'fresh thinking and concrete steps' (143) for the planned action. The book is divided into three main chapters or 'times' to see, to choose and to act. They are not separate categories as the book shows but contain and generate elements of the other. The focus on discernment, though, is key. Francis is concerned with the deepening of our capacity to act wisely, in accordance with the reality of the world.

The invitation from a pope to dream struck me at first as odd. What could it mean? Obviously, there is biblical precedent for dreaming as a tool for divination, but in this post-enlightenment, post-modern, hyper-rational age, who takes that seriously? What the 'dream' in the title refers to, however, is not the self-centred, escapist kind of fantasy that essentially seeks to avoid reality. Rather, the dream here concerns the cultivation of vision, of seeing aright (recalling the Buddhist 'right views' approach to plumbing reality). We have to learn to see in several dimensions at once, to become aware of entanglements and various forces interacting that create patterns and stories that alienate, degrade, exclude and depress. These are not of God. They cannot lead us to a better future. Seeing in layers of dimensions may have us focus, for example, on rising poverty and inequality and enable us to trace the lines of connection to abused and oppressed racial or ethnic groups, or migrants, say, or human trafficking. It would be easier to avoid looking at these constellations of pain at the

margins of society; it is painful and unpleasant. However, 'armour-plating our hearts' (19) with narcissism, discouragement, pessimism or indifference, or exercising an 'existential myopia that allows us defensively to select what we see' (16) is not an option if we truly seek a path to a better future.

In addition to giving our attention to the poor on the peripheries, we are enjoined to stay in touch with projects that are working well, where hope is flourishing, where solutions have emerged out of struggle that testify to life's immeasurable creativity, novelty and goodness. The focus of the vision Pope Francis promotes is illuminating in the way of soft, warm lamplight, not the hard, cold focus of the laser.

This latter way of looking we find all too often in a world dominated by an ideology Francis sharply criticises: the neoliberal, market economy. Neoliberalism is a name for the premise that has come to regulate all we practise and believe: that competition is the only legitimate organising principle for human activity. It atomises people, weakening social bonds and institutions; it prioritises the interests of business over those of civil society; it undermines the agencies of collective action, like trade unions; it decouples economics and morality, putting a market logic on everything, and the economy in the hands of technocrats who have little interest in ethics. There has been a lot of lip service from governments, policy makers and activists about 'building back better' and of 'green recovery' after the world shock of the pandemic. Even so, there are forces that press in the opposite direction, and the extent to which those 'most invested in the current way of doing things' are 'digging in'. There are, he writes: 'leaders talking about making a few adjustments here and there, but they're basically advocating for the same system as before. When they talk of "recovery" they mean putting a bit of varnish on the future, touching up the paintwork here and there, but all to make sure that nothing changes' (44).<sup>4</sup> *Let Us Dream* challenges us to imagine and live our way into different ways of organising society. Francis writes: 'We can reorganise the way we live together in order to better choose what matters. We can work together to achieve it. We can learn what takes us forward, and what sets us back. We can choose' (47).

This book is suitable for a wide audience, but reading it I felt it would be valuable for university students for a number of reasons. First, the critical thinking is both a model and a stimulus to examining and reflecting on one's own positions on a variety of issues.

Second, the process of conflict resolution, of how to 'forge unity from tension' by 'holding together differences to make them fruitful rather than letting them fall into contradiction' (143), is remarkably compelling and well-described, with several examples from the Pope's life. Though demanding, the process is powerful in its healing and peace-making potential. Resolution that does not depend on a zero-sum outcome insists on the practice of mutual and respectful listening, as well as the recognition of a shared destiny, the common good and the promise of what Francis calls 'overflow.' The concept of

overflow permeates the whole of *Let Us Dream*. It is that which lies beyond the frame of the map and the boundaries of the known and imaginable. It is, he writes, always a gift from the 'God of Surprises' (93). Believers may call this 'grace.' It is a reward for all who hold on, trust the process and remain open to the breaking through of a different order of reality.

The third point that recommends this book is the message that 'belonging' has powerful, catalysing effects. We are called, as the present synodal movement in the Catholic Church underlines, to walk together. This is the time to restore an ethics of solidarity, centred on dignity and for regenerating the bonds of trust and belonging. 'For what saves us,' writes Francis, 'is not an idea but an encounter' (107). If we really want a different sociality we need to be reminded of who we truly are and empowered to belong to one another in new ways.

The fourth point of recommendation is related to the final exhortation to 'decenter and transcend' (136). This is a call to move beyond distorted myths of self-sufficiency, beyond egoism and individualism, beyond current conventions that give rise to the proud and lonely 'isolated conscience' (70) and to be called out of our shells, our cages, and into a new way of being in a new world that we—all of us—have participated in co-creating. It is to realise the astonishing fact that not only are we to do the work of dreaming, discerning and reinvention, but that we do it because *God has a dream for us!*

*Let Us Dream* rewards repeated reading. It is divided in such a way that makes it easy to pick up and revisit and linger over short sections. It is recommended for the practice of *lectio divina*<sup>5</sup> and has been my own *vade mecum*<sup>6</sup> since it arrived.

When crisis comes and provides the opportunity to stop and reflect on whether we wish to continue into the future as we have in the past, how will we decide? How will we inform ourselves? What visions will we receive; what visions will we activate? What dreams will we dream together in the hopes for a better future? Are we up to opening our minds wide enough to ask how the world might be organised differently for justice, dignity and the common good to flourish? We do not live in a static world. Our gifts of spirit and intellect and our option to change as new information becomes available is key to our human development, a new social imaginary and the well-being of our world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Polycrisis' is defined as "A global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected" (Lawrence, et al. 11).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Covid’ is rendered thus in the text, and not in all capitals, so is reproduced as such, here.

<sup>3</sup> “For ‘futures literacy’ the specific context is the human imagination, as the future can only be imagined. The ability referred to by the term ‘futures literacy’ is therefore the capacity to know how to imagine the future, and why it is necessary. Futures literacy enables us to become aware of the sources of our hopes and fears, and improves our ability to harness the power of images of the future, to enable us to more fully appreciate the diversity of both the world around us and the choices we make.” See, Miller, Riel & Mortensen, Jennette & Larsen, Nicklas (2020)

<sup>4</sup> At the Youth4Climate conference in Milan in September 2021, Greta Thunberg memorably characterised politicians’ lip-service as yet more ‘blah-blah-blah.’ See, transcript <https://www.carbonindependent.org/119.html>. To wit, the headline “Greenhouse Emissions Rise to Record, Erasing Drop During Pandemic” appeared on June 30, 2022 on the IMF (International Monetary Fund) website’s Climate Change Indicators Dashboard.

<sup>5</sup> *Lectio divina* is an ancient spiritual discipline that centers around reading the Bible contemplatively. The words *lectio divina* translate to “divine reading” and the phrase means, above all, reading in such a way that you are aware of God with you.

<sup>6</sup> A *vade mecum* is a portable, often personally precious, guide or handbook that can be easily consulted.

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