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The People's POPE

A Gift and a Challenge for the Academic World

By Patrick Howell, S.J.



In just short of 18 months, the new pope Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who took the name Francis, has captured the world's imagination and brought a remarkably bright new image to the Catholic Church.

Much has already been written about a series of "firsts" for this pope: the first pope from Latin America, the first pope in 16 centuries from outside of Europe, and significantly for *Conversations* readers the first Jesuit pope.

The innovations go on. From the beginning he eschewed all papal regalia. He prefers to be known simply as the Bishop of Rome, rather than Pontifex Maximus, Your Holiness, Patriarch of the West, or all the other titles that have accumulated since the time of Constantine. Forget the lace and brocade, let's preach the gospel. His good humor, his strong critique of any form of clericalism, and especially his concern for the poor preach an authentic gospel far more compelling than any written text.

My focus in this short article will be how his message and actions impact Jesuit higher education and how he has

created new, positive avenues for Catholic education. The implications are many, but I will focus on only a few significant trends, which I hope will be suggestive for our research and teaching within the AJCU tradition.

Jesuit spirituality and Franciscan charism

In the now famous papal interview published in English in *America* magazine (*A Big Heart Open to God*, Sept. 19, 2013), Fr. Antonio Spadero, S.J., begins by bluntly asking Pope Francis, "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" After a long pause, the pope responds, "I am a sinner." He adds, "It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner." He explains that he is a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon and to whom the Lord has shown mercy.

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He explains by referring to the painting “The Calling of St. Matthew” by Caravaggio, which hangs in the French church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. In the painting a shaft of light flows over the head of Jesus directly onto the counting table where Matthew and the other tax collectors are tallying up their gains. Suddenly the finger of Jesus points at Matthew. “That’s me,” the pope says. “I feel like him. Like Matthew.... It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: he holds on to his money as if to say, ‘No, not me! No, this money is mine.’ Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.”

The Jesuit origins of the pope’s spirituality become increasing obvious. In General Congregation 32, the Jesuits described themselves as sinners yet called to be companions of Jesus as Ignatius was (GC 32, Decree 11). As provincial of Argentina, Bergoglio attended this congregation and certainly absorbed its spirit. Jesuit discernment also plays a big role for the pope. He doesn’t appear to have some predetermined, architectonic plan, but step by step, discernment by discernment, he is shifting the direction and demeanor of the Church.

Pope Francis has made the Christian ideals more concrete, more palpable, more humane. He regularly speaks of

the mercy of God – which has no bounds. Not only that, he practices it. For this pope, spirituality always has a human face, like the faces of Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Mary, Ignatius Loyola, and Peter Faber or of the poor themselves.

Good news for the poor

Francis leads by concrete, symbolic action. He lives simply. He invites the poor to eat with him. For his low-key birthday celebration in December, he had the Vatican almoner, an archbishop, go into the streets and invite three homeless men to a little party. They had been sleeping out under the portico facing St. Peter’s Piazza. They loaded up their ragged belongings in the archbishop’s car, along with a dog, who rode in the middle. This impromptu celebration was similar to the pope’s celebrating Holy Thursday and washing the feet of prisoners, including two women, one of whom was a Muslim.

One of the things Pope Francis speaks about most is the disgraceful level of poverty in the world. How can it be, he asks, that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure but it is news when the stock market



Pope Francis blesses the faithful in St. Peter's Square.

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loses two points? He tellingly says, “The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges” (*Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel*, 218).

The pope’s actions and preaching suggest a new and more radical way of doing theology – more in line with Jesus and Francis of Assisi and Ignatius Loyola than with the systematic theology of Aquinas, Bellarmine, or von Balthazar. These are not contradictory, but the starting point is dramatically different and hence the result is much more pastoral, concrete, and attuned to the grassroots where people live and breathe, love and work and die.

The pope consistently gives clear examples of this pastoral, personal approach. When he heard that a priest in Rome would not baptize an illegitimate child he said, “There are no illegitimate daughters or sons – there are only children. The mother has the right to have her child baptized. The church must open its doors to everyone.” He told the young mother, “I will baptize your child.”

Sometimes one is known more clearly through one’s critics. A few ultraconservative groups find it intolerable that the new pope received in private audience one of the pioneers of the theology of liberation, Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez. They are stunned by the pope’s sincerity in recognizing the church’s errors and his own and in denouncing the careerism of many prelates, calling “leprosy” the flattering stance of many in power and describing priests without a vibrant prayer life and relationship to Christ as “smarmy” or “unctious.” What really scandalizes them is the inversion he makes by putting in first place love, mercy, tenderness, dialogue with modernity, and tolerance towards people, including the divorced and homosexuals, and putting ecclesiastic doctrines and discipline only in last place.

Fresh images of the church. The church needs to be a “field hospital,” the pope avows. “It is useless to ask a seriously wounded person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugar. You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else (*A Big Heart Open to God*).

“I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out in the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and clinging to its own security” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 49). One of my favorite scriptural images from the pope supports this ecclesiology, “Christ is knocking on the door of the church, but he’s knocking from the inside trying to get out.”

In keeping with his “ground up” perspective, the pope stressed with theologians (address to the International Theological Commission, Dec. 6, 2013) that the church must pay attention to the *sensus fidelium* (the sense of the faithful). “By the gift of the Holy Spirit, the members of the church possess the ‘sense of the faith,’” he said. “It is a question of a kind of spiritual instinct, which permits us to think with the church and discern what is consistent with the apostolic faith and the spirit of the Gospel.” He added that the magisterium, the church’s teaching authority, has the “duty to pay attention to what the Spirit tells the church through the authentic manifestations of the sense of the faithful.” And he charged theologians to find criteria by which to discern the *sensus fidelium*.

In another striking departure from his two predecessors, Francis prefers an image of the People of God as descriptive of the Church; it is “first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 111). This image, strongly advocated at Vatican II, is deeply scriptural and advances the mystery of the church in relation to the modern world. By way of contrast, however, Pope Benedict XVI favored the model of church as “communio,” which suggests the church as more self-contained, unified, and sufficient in itself. Benedict favored a church purified of conflict or dissent and, as a theologian, was critical of the overly optimistic view of the world embodied in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Francis expects a certain amount of doubt and uncertainty. “If one has all the answers to all the questions it means he is a false prophet using religion for himself” (*A Big Heart Open to God*).

His predecessor Benedict entertained no such

doubts. He focused strongly on the need for reforms for secular society, primarily in Europe. Not surprisingly, Francis has a much wider world vision and underscores the need for reform of the church itself. And he suggests that much of this reform can come from the periphery, from the frontiers of the church.

A world-affirming spirituality. Francis has an extraordinarily positive spirituality, very much rooted in the Ignatian vision of a world-affirming spirituality. In this view every culture is the opportunity for a fresh, vigorous, surprising incarnation of the gospel. God is one, but the agents of evangelization learn their missionary calling within the diverse contexts that give birth to “genuine catholicity” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 116). The sense of the faithful in every region of the globe is showing the church “new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face” (116).

All this diversity could lead to massive confusion. “God is always a surprise,” Francis affirms, “so you never know where and how you will find him.... You must, therefore, discern the encounter. Discernment is essential.” But one will miss the God of surprise, he says, “if the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing.” Discernment is obviously a strong component of Francis’s Jesuit heritage.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis not only intensifies his criticism of capitalism and the fact that money rules the world but speaks out clearly in favor of church reform “at all levels.” He specifically advocates structural reforms – namely, decentralization toward dioceses and communities, reform of the papal office, upgrading the laity, and dismantling excessive clericalism; he favors a more effective presence of women in the church, above all in the decision-making bodies. And he comes out clearly in favor of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, especially with Judaism and Islam (Hans Kung, NCR (Dec. 20, 2013 – Jan. 2, 2014): 8).

An inspiration and an agenda for Jesuit universities and colleges

It would be a mistake for Jesuit institutions to reduce the lifestyle and teaching of Pope Francis to a programmatic imitation. His example far exceeds organizational boxes. Jesuit institutions need to embrace dimensions of his lifestyle – reaching out to the poor, embracing the disenfranchised, welcoming all with the love of God –

no matter creed, marriage status, sexual orientation, nationality, or origins. All are children of God.

Even so, Jesuit colleges and universities would do well to pursue certain themes that emerge from reflection on his life and a deeper discernment of the energies arising from God’s presence in his life:

- His transparency, warmth, and hospitality are immensely energizing to young people. Perhaps this could be a first principle for administrators, faculty, staff, and students: *people are more important than agenda.*
- He has opened up a broad highway for a deeper reflection by theologians on the very nature of the church, the People of God on a pilgrimage together. What are the accretions, the superfluous additions, which have accumulated over the ages and can now readily be shed so that the message of Jesus stands out in its pristine attractiveness?
- The new pope has set an agenda for greater transparency in finances in the Vatican Bank (the Institute for the Works of Religion). Might universities do the same for all their constituencies: faculty, staff, and students, not just board members? What are the sources of funding, and how are they allocated? If you want to know what an institution’s priorities are, “follow the money.”
- The Vatican curia is top-heavy with prestigious trappings and titles, which the pope has commissioned eight cardinals to assist him in reforming. What kind of university/college consultation might result in greater grassroots resources for students and academics and a more parsimonious approach to “overhead”?
- The pope speaks of the need for a new theology of women. Thoughtful Catholic women, however, say that what’s needed is a more adequate, deeper, more inclusive theology of the human person. Likewise, the pope seems to have not yet found language to express mutuality in dialogue with Hindus, Buddhists, and some of the other great religions. How might theologians in Jesuit universities suggest creative alternatives?
- Until now it has been forbidden to talk about sexual morality, celibacy, and homosexuality. Theologians and priests who did not conform were censured. Jesuit universities have already, rather freely, pursued these topics but often enough by way of negative criticism. Could they now shift gears and provide more positive avenues of reform for the Church to pursue?
- Pope Francis has repeated the challenge of Pope Benedict to Jesuits to go out to the periphery, to be on the frontier, where the Church would otherwise not be. A similar mandate could be given to Jesuit universities and colleges. What are the new frontiers? What would that look like? ■