

Synodality

Concept, Reality and Promise

Nihal Abeyasingha

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By Nihal Abeyasingha

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Table of Contents

Diagrams and Tables	x
Preface.....	xi
Chapter 1: Evangelizing and Being Evangelized:	
Communion, Participation, Mission	1
Seeing the world as it is.....	4
Seeing the needs of our world.....	5
A pastoral approach.....	10
The place of doctrine.....	11
Assessing the situation in discernment.....	12
The “Monuments” established by Pope Francis.....	17
Pope Francis’ hope	19
Chapter 2: Synodalization of the Church	26
Synodal structures in the Church	27
Listening and discerning together	29
Listening in the awareness of sin, which clouds the vision ...	30
John Henry Newman.....	33
<i>Synodos</i> : Discovering the path together	35
The initiative of Pope Francis for the 2023/24 Synod.....	37
How far have synodal structures achieved the ideal of Synodality?.....	38
Chapter 3: Synodality and Synodal Structures	40
Catholic Church as Twenty-three Churches in communion..	41
Two traditions in communion.....	43
Polyhedron image of the Church.....	45

The theological issues in process	46
Synodality and Synodal Structures	47
The spirit of Vatican II and the establishment of the Synod of Bishops	50
A second step: An elaboration by Pope Francis	53
Invitation to those competent to contribute	57
Keeping on the “Way”	58
Chapter 4: Synodality and the Reality of Sin in the Church	61
Social Sin.....	61
Power in general.....	78
The exercise of power in the Church.....	83
Pastoral power	85
Two specifics in pastoral ministry	86
Pastoral care for all and each (<i>Omnes et Singulatim</i>).....	88
Renewal of pastoral ministry.....	89
Chapter 5: Obstacles to Synodality: Will Pope Francis’ Synodality Be Received?.....	105
Notional assent versus real assent.....	107
Three stages of life (Kierkegaard).....	109
What of Synodality?.....	112
What is the state of play?	114
The people on a journey are “grumblers”	117
Responding to grumbling.....	120
Because we are not yet fully redeemed, whatever solution is reached, remains imperfect.....	122
Are the people of God, clergy and laity, ready for Synodality? Will they assist each other?	130

The situation today	133
Journeying forward.....	142
Chapter 6: The Synod Ends: The True Journey Begins	147
Letter to the People of God - “A Synodal Church on Mission”	148
After the first session of the Synod.....	149
After the second session of the Synod.....	151
The spirit of the process	153
Repentant sinners (<i>ecclesia reformans</i>) in search of God: “Agreeing to Disagree” while maintaining communion, is the process:	156
Communion-Participation-Mission.....	157
False versus true reform: Personal and collective agenda versus God’s message.....	159
The process of Listening – Discernment – Accompaniment	159
The pre-condition to waiting on the Lord: Conversion.....	164
Chapter 7: An Emerging Theology of Synodality	169
The Exodus: Primordial memory.....	176
Acts: The journey continues	178
Francis’ emphasis on mercy and fraternity	179
The Church is mission	180
The Journey in a world with decreasing religious affiliation.....	183
The tasks of mission.....	184
Ultimately the Holy Spirit is the Protagonist.....	192
“Preach the Gospel at all times: Use words if necessary” ...	193
Select Bibliography	197

Diagrams and Tables

Diagram 1: Institutions harmonizing new initiatives.....	37
Diagram 2: Juridico-Discursive power	80
Diagram 3: Institutionalization-	
Power Relations-Objectification	80
Diagram 4: Power in the Church.....	81

Preface

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was elected Pope aged 76 in 1958. Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope at 76 in 2013, fifty-five years later. Roncalli was a “curia” man with five years of ministry as the bishop of a diocese prior to his election as Pope. Bergoglio had been through rocky times in life – he went through three “Covids” (moments of crisis and rupture) in his life - his illness in youth, his sojourn in Germany, and his exile in Córdoba, as he related in *Let us Dream*). He was in leadership positions in the Society of Jesus and ministered as bishop in a diocese for 21 years prior to his election as Pope. Both men elected in their post-retirement years were not expected to venture into the deep. Both of them are persons who were people-oriented. Both of them have done the unexpected – John XXIII by summoning Vatican II and Francis by his launching the movement “Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”. Vatican II formulated the conceptual shift by envisioning the Church “like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1). Francis by operationalizing that concept has launched a movement towards Synodality – inserting a fresh thrust of how the Church functions as a sacrament. In our book, the word Synodality is used as a convenient way in which to refer to the movement inaugurated by Pope Francis.

The convocation of Vatican II and its output, or the launching of Synodality and the attitudes and reactions it generates, are all human initiatives, under some measure of accepted divine inspiration and guidance. As such, as institutions in the pilgrim Church, they are subject to what LG 48 states:

However, until there shall be new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to this present time, has the appearance of this world which is passing and she herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God.

Walter Kasper¹ echoes that sentiment in theological language

[The] Church is...the space of salvation given by God, and in this deeper theological sense really a 'divine' institution. Its concrete realization, however, happens in a historical way. This is ultimately due to the fact that the acceptance of salvation is in its essence a free human act. The permanent essential structures of the church are thus always realized in contingent expressions of time and cultural history, which must not be absolutized. Hence, we have the unchangeable *ius divinum* only in changeable *ius humanum*. In this respect, even a theological justification of law has anthropological presuppositions. Concretely formulated: As a divine institution, the church must at the same time be an institution of human and Christian freedom and, as such, have a model character.

This reality, revelation articulated in human language and human action following the accepted grace of God, are elements of the life of the pilgrim Church. These elements are not only human functioning under God's grace, but also are influenced by the reality of personal and structural sin. As an operational concept, Synodality seeks to harmonize the divine and the human. Positive and very hopeful aspects of Synodality have been treated in various

¹ "Katholische Kirche", *Staatslexikon* 3 (1987) 330, cf. 325-330.

ways. But the human dimension, which functions as a damper, has rarely been highlighted. There are those who consider the Synodality a “Pandora’s box”. Others see hope and promise in Synodality. The present work tries to focus on the evangelization of the human obstacles to the implementation of Synodality, so that the Communion, Participation and Mission promised by Synodality may be realized.

The Catholic Church (in the words of Thomas Macaulay, 1800-1859) is well able to harness human factors, by enabling the human person to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, the Church, enables such persons to render him/her-self valuable in proportion to his/her strength and spirit.

[The Catholic Church] understands, what no other Church has ever understood, how to deal with enthusiasts. In some sects, particularly in infant sects, enthusiasm is suffered to be rampant. In other sects, particularly in sects long established and richly endowed, it is regarded with aversion. The Catholic Church neither submits to enthusiasm nor proscribes it, but uses it. She considers it as a great moving force which in itself, like the muscular power of a fine horse, is neither good nor evil, but which may be so directed as to produce great good or great evil; and she assumes the direction to herself. It would be absurd to run down a horse like a wolf. It would be still more absurd to let him run wild, breaking fences, and trampling down passengers. The rational course is to subjugate his will without impairing his vigour, to teach him to obey the rein, and then to urge him to full speed. When once

he knows his master, he is valuable in proportion to his strength and spirit.²

The Synthesis Report of 2023, 8a said “Rather than saying that the Church has a mission, we affirm that the Church is mission”³ - Mission in communion with God and with one another, everyone participating. As the Final document of the 2024 session⁴ put it 4:

This call is based upon a shared baptismal identity. It is rooted in the diversity of contexts in which the Church is present and finds unity in the one Father, one Lord, and one Spirit. It challenges all the baptized, without exception: “The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel. Every baptized person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples.

The manner in which this “grand plan” unfolds in the human situation is complex, more especially since it operates in a situation where sin – social or structural sin and personal sin – functions. The present book attempts to treat of this grand plan citing references to current research in the area. The argument of this study is as follows. First, Pope Francis sees the world and assesses it with his own focus (Chapter 1). He envisages his plan functioning through the process of synodalization (that is the concept of communion-participation-mission entering into the consciousness of the whole Church and its structures (Chapter 2). Synodalization of the Church does not function with “democratic” forms of decision making (creating a kind of tyranny of a majority); but rather engages in a participative search for the truth through the only

² <Macaulay on the Roman Catholic Church’s Approach to Dissent>

³ <2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

⁴ <ENG---Documento-finale.pdf>

process we know at the moment – discernment and “bearing each other’s burdens” – accompaniment, listening and refusing to view issues through the prism of the mass media (Chapter 3). The major obstacle in the operationalization of Synodality is the presence and influence of sin, present and functioning at the structural and personal level (Chapters 4 and 5). The antidote is repentance. Peter denied Christ on one night and wept all his life over it. So also, the Church in terms of its structures and the attitudes of its membership needs to repent constantly regarding repentance and reform as a constitutive dimension of its nature (Chapter 6). Finally, the text proposes a possible paradigm of theology against which synodal thought may flourish and synodal action give direction to the Church (Chapter 7).

The content of these chapters was presented in articles and presentations at various times since the launch of Pope Francis’ movement “Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”. Some sections of this work have appeared in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* (India); others have been published online at <academia.edu>, while other sections were addressed to particular groups and not published.

Consequently, there are repetitions in some places. However, bringing my thoughts together in the present work enables a grasp of human factors, particularly the reality of personal and structural sin, that prevent the implementation of Synodality. I have not seen this dimension treated at any length in works on Synodality.

There is no one model of the human functioning in the Church. However, there is one spirit wherever the Church’s mission reaches:

whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various

peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the bliss of men. Thus, missionary activity tends toward eschatological fullness (AG 9).

As the opening paragraph of the Final Document of the 2024 Synod⁵ states

Every new step in the life of the Church is a return to the source. It is a renewed experience of the disciples' encounter with the Risen One in the Upper Room on Easter evening. Like them, during this synodal Assembly, we, too, felt enfolded in His mercy and drawn to His beauty. We felt His presence in our midst as we lived conversation in the Spirit and listened to one another: the presence of He, who, in bestowing the Holy Spirit, continues to build among His people a unity that establishes harmony amidst differences.

I hope that by highlighting the obstacles to the implementation of Synodality and the reality of personal and structural sin, the movement of Pope Francis may be carried forward. The synodal journey will thus be an *ex-hodus* (a journey out) of all types of selfishness and sin to a *syn-hodos* (a journey together) into the new promised land of Communion, Participation, and Mission beginning from wherever we may be or in whatever situation we find ourselves involved – not being concerned overmuch whether the hierarchy is on the same journey (or on a different path as at the time of the Arian heresy). It is a shared journey, each one contributing his / her share and in his/her own way, that is primary. As Pope Fran-

⁵ <Final-Document-English.pdf>

cis says at the conclusion of the “Introductory Note” releasing the Final Report:

The synodal path of the Catholic Church, also animated by the desire to continue the journey towards the full and visible unity of Christians, ‘needs shared words to be accompanied by actions’ (Final Greeting, 26 October 2024). May the Holy Spirit, gift of the Risen Lord, sustain and guide the whole Church on this journey. May the Holy Spirit, who is harmony, continue to rejuvenate the Church with the power of the Gospel, renew her and lead her to perfect union with her Bridegroom (cf. LG 4). For the Spirit and the bride say to the Lord Jesus: ‘Come’ (cf. Rev 22:17)⁶.

Finally, I acknowledge that the present work has been influenced by many circumstances and I have benefited from advice and discussion with various people both Christian and non-Christian. In particular, I acknowledge the contribution of Fathers Angelito Peiris and George Rosario, Prof. Shirley Lal Wijesinghe and Miss Thilini Wijesinghe.

A Postscript: Shortly after my completed manuscript was handed over to the publishers, Pope Francis ended his earthly journey (21 April 2025), just as the Easter season was beginning. Prior to that, he had been hospitalized for thirty eight days, during which twice he had been in a critical condition. Yet on 11 March 2025, while still in hospital, he approved the *Letter on the Accompaniment Process of the Implementation Phase of the Synod* (outlining a programme of implementation for the period 2025 to 2028), which was released on 15 March 2025.

⁶ *Ibid.*

“A Pope dies and another is made” says an old Roman proverb. Pope Francis is succeeded by the first Pope from North America, who has been a missionary in South America, the first Augustinian, Leo XIV. Speaking from the loggia of St. Peter’s after his election (8 May 2025), he said “we want to be a synodal church, a church in pilgrimage, a church which always seeks peace, a church which goes out in love, a church which tries always to be close especially to those who suffer”. In that spirit, Leo XIV will engage with the *whole People of God* on its synodal path. The negative factors, which this book deals with, will continue to impact the journey. But Synodality is a work of the Spirit who “bends the stubborn heart and will, melts the frozen, warms the chill, guides the steps that go astray” (Pentecost Sequence). With Pope Francis entering into a new level of the Communion of Saints, may his desire spoken when he released the final report be fulfilled now, through his intercession, “May the Holy Spirit, gift of the Risen Lord, sustain and guide the whole Church on this journey. ...”

Chapter 1

Evangelizing and Being Evangelized: Communion, Participation, Mission

Pope Francis did not just bring to the Church a refreshing new papal “style”; he refashioned what we have traditionally referred to as the papal magisterium. Pope Francis modelled a fresh understanding of the role of doctrine in the Church while enacting a different kind of papal magisterium¹ and governance.

It is largely in the nineteenth century that we see the papacy becoming a dominant force in the articulation of Church doctrine. It is during this period that papal encyclicals emerged as a significant medium for papal teaching in the papacies of Gregory XVI (1831–46) and Pius IX (1846–78), both of whom used encyclicals to condemn certain erroneous doctrinal positions. Papal encyclicals functioned more as doctrinal “stop signs than directional arrows.”

This began to change at the end of the nineteenth century as Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) further expanded this papal teaching authority by promulgating encyclicals that dealt with doctrinal and theological issues at much greater length than his predecessors. This expansion of the doctrinal teaching role of the pope would continue, culminating in the papacy of Pius XII.

¹ R.R. Gaillardetz, “A Pastoral Magisterium” (The 2016 Louis G. Vance Lecture, Oblate School of Theology) < <https://ost.edu/pope-francis-rise-pastoral-magisterium/> >

Pope St. John XXIII's influential opening address at the council (11 October 1962), *Gaudet mater ecclesia*², offered an unambiguous affirmation of the Church's fidelity to its doctrinal heritage. However, he also insisted that doctrinal fidelity means more than the rote repetition of doctrinal formulas. John XXIII said that the emphasis on the vigorous condemnation of error must be replaced by the "medicine of mercy" and by persuasively demonstrating the truth of Church teaching. This requires a teaching magisterium, he insisted, that is fundamentally pastoral in character. Vatican II affirmed the intrinsically pastoral orientation of doctrine by attending to the recipients of the Church's teaching. The Gospel is proclaimed to ordinary people within particular historical, cultural and social contexts: "For, from the beginning of her [the Church's] history she has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various philosophers, and has tried to clarify it with their wisdom, too. ..." (GS 44). Pope John XXIII and Vatican II initiated a fundamental shift in how one conceives doctrinal/magisterial authority. That shift was largely ignored in the post-conciliar papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The pastoral approach is taken up and developed with unprecedented vigour by Pope Francis.

A Church committed to "walking together", Pope Francis insisted, must resist the Neo-Scholastic separation of the people of God into two separate "Churches": the *ecclesia docens* (teaching Church), and the *ecclesia discens* (learning Church). A synodal Church must be, whole and entire, a Church governed by the practice of mutual listening. He then masterfully linked this listening Church to the council's teaching that all the faithful were given a supernatural instinct, a *sensus fidei*, for discerning God's Word, penetrating its meaning and applying that Word more fully in their lives.

² <john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf>

Francis insisted that, if we are to be a listening Church, the commitment to Synodality must be enacted at every level of Church life. It must be reflected in local parish and diocesan councils, in diocesan synods and provincial gatherings. In what could be termed the *Magna Carta* of his pontificate, *Evangelii Gaudium* (=EG), he had already challenged bishops to broaden their practice of consultation (Cf. EG 31).

In the five decades since Vatican II, there has been an ongoing skirmish between two ecclesiastical camps: those who see episcopal collegiality as serving papal primacy and those who see papal primacy as serving episcopal collegiality. Francis proposes that both primacy and collegiality must serve a third, more basic ecclesial reality, the deep Synodality of the pilgrim people of God. The Church is at the service of people in mission. The Church is mission.

The Pope's denunciation of clericalism is because it is self-referential and not people-oriented. Clericalism, far from giving impulse to diverse contributions and proposals, turns off, little by little, the prophetic fire from which the entire Church is called to give testimony in the heart of its peoples. It is not the pastor who must say to the lay person what they must do and say; he or she knows more and better than us. It is illogical, and even impossible, to think that we as pastors should have the monopoly on solutions for the many challenges that modern life presents to us. Lay people are a part of the Holy Faithful People of God and therefore are protagonists of the Church and the world; we are called to serve them, not them to serve us. Hence, Synodality – communion, participation, mission functioning and supporting each other - with people in the forefront.

In *Laudato si'*³ 15 Francis describes the method he uses to construct his theological argument. He begins by reviewing (“seeing”) the best scientific research today, then (“judges”) considers principles from Judeo-Christian tradition. In light of his theological reflection, he advances proposals for dialogue and action (“action”), both on an individual and global level⁴. This is his pastoral approach to the world. His proposal of Synodality in the Church follows. Synodality is the Church as a kind of sacrament (LG 1) functioning as an instrument of union with God and the unity of the human race, by the exercise of communion, participation, mission.

Seeing the world as it is

Pope Francis⁵ suggests that we look especially to the periphery “to see”:

You have to go to the edges of existence if you want to see the world as it is. I’ve always thought the world looks clearer from the periphery, but in these last seven years as Pope, it has really hit home. You have to make for the margins to find a new future. When God wanted to regenerate creation, he chose to go to the margins – to places of sin and misery, of exclusion and suffering, of illness and solitude – because these were also places full of possibility. Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Rom 5:20).

³ <Laudato si’ (24 May 2015) | Francis>

⁴ In his address to French Catholic Action movements he explained the method <<https://seejudgeact.org/2022-pope-francis-the-sja-and-the-review-of-life/>>

⁵ In conversation with Austen Ivereigh, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon and Schuster 2020) <[PDF] [EPUB] Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future Download (oceanofpdf.com)>

This excludes any kind of lobbying and oligarchy. Seeing and acting in the periphery is not an antiseptic exercise. One can get dirty in the process. A shepherd takes on the smell of the sheep. EG 49 states:

Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37).

Seeing the needs of our world

The conditions in which humans live can and do change, as indeed they have since the time of Vatican II⁶. We are now into digitaliza-

⁶ H. Von Scheel - C. Popa - J. Von Scheel, *Strategy in the age of disruption: A*

tion, automation, computers, robotics etc., involving the areas of smart systems, cloud computing, a focus on sustainability etc. We are moving into what is a fifth stage of industrialization – artificial intelligence. The consequence of these developments is a high rise in both individual and group egotism⁷. There are a variety of responses, each claiming to be Christian⁸ - what would often seem to be each claiming to be “expert” disregarding the norms of the universal Church⁹, and even the norms of basic human decency, making individualism the organizing principle of society¹⁰.

Lack of fraternity

As Pope Francis¹¹ says:

Now more than ever, what is revealed is the fallacy of making individualism the organizing principle of society. What will be our new principle? We need a movement of

Handbook to Anticipate Change and Make Smart Decisions (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley 2024).

⁷ As measured by the Narcissist Personality Inventory (NPI) developed by Raskin and Bell in 1979. Cf. R. Raskin - H. Terry, “A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54/5 (1988) 890-902 <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.5.890>>; P. MacDonald, “ ‘Narcissism’ in the modern world” at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2014.894225>>

⁸ See e.g. S.J. Hunt, *Handbook of Global Christianity: Movements, Institutions and Allegiance* (Leiden: Brill 2016).

⁹ Cf. *Gestis Verbisque* (2024) which draws attention to individuals often administering sacraments invalidly in <Note Gestis Verbisque on the Validity of the Sacraments (2 February 2024) (vatican.va)>.

¹⁰ Pope Francis calls it a fallacy and rightly so in terms of ultimate ends, but in the “pilgrim” situation it is a *de facto* operating principle, cf. K. Sigmund, *The Calculus of Selfishness* (Princeton University Press 2010) vii: “enlightened self-interest”.

¹¹ *Let us Dream...*; *Fratelli Tutti* (2022) mentions fraternity 55 times.

people who know we need each other, who have a sense of responsibility to others and to the world. We need to proclaim that being kind, having faith and working for the common good are great life goals that need courage and vigour; while glib superficiality and the mockery of ethics have done us no good. The modern era has developed equality and liberty with such determination, now needs to focus on fraternity with the same drive and tenacity to confront the challenges ahead. Fraternity will enable equality to take its rightful place in the symphony¹².

In this context, as Pope Francis said during his 2023 visit to Mongolia¹³

The social significance of our religious traditions can be gauged by the extent to which we are capable of living in harmony with other pilgrims on this earth and can foster that harmony in the places where we live. Every human individual, and even more every religion, must be measured by the standard of altruism. Not altruism in the abstract, but in the concrete: an altruism that translates into concern for others and generous cooperation with them.

Pope Francis in his message to the Security Council of the United Nations (14 June 2023) read by Archbishop Paul Gallagher stated:¹⁴

¹² Two books represent the extremities of the spectrum. R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press 40th Anniversary Ed. 2016, original 1976) argues that competitiveness is the key to survival; M. Nowak, *Super Cooperators: Altruism, Evolution and Why We need Each Other to Succeed* (New York: Free Press 2011).

¹³ <Apostolic Journey to Mongolia: Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting in the “Hun Theatre” (Ulaanbaatar, 3 September 2023) | Francis (vatican.va)>

¹⁴ <To the Security Council of the United Nations (14 June 2023) | Francis (vatican.va)>III;

Today's globalized world has brought all of us closer together, yet it has not made us any more fraternal. Indeed, we are suffering from a *famine of fraternity*, which arises from the many situations of injustice, poverty and inequality and also from the lack of a culture of solidarity. 'New ideologies, characterized by widespread individualism, egocentrism and materialistic consumerism, weaken social bonds, fueling that 'throwaway' mentality, which leads to contempt for and abandonment of, the weakest and those considered 'useless'. In this way human coexistence increasingly tends to resemble a mere *do ut des* which is both pragmatic and selfish'. Yet the worst effect of this famine of fraternity is armed conflict and war, that makes enemies of not only individuals but entire peoples, and whose negative consequences reverberate for generations. With the founding of the United Nations, it seemed that the world had learned, after two terrible world wars, to move towards a more stable peace, to become, at last, a family of nations. It seems, though, that we are going backwards in history, with the rise of myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalisms that have kindled conflicts which are not only anachronistic and outdated, but even more violent.

Challenged by the Parable of the Good Samaritan

In *Fratelli Tutti*¹⁵ 69, he observes,

Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders. And if we extend our gaze

¹⁵ <Fratelli tutti (3 October 2020) | Francis>

to the history of our own lives and that of the entire world, all of us are, or have been, like each of the characters in the parable. All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the Good Samaritan.

By putting ourselves in this story, we can reflect on how our encounters have helped or hurt others. The present mentality is curiosity – to see what is happening. Creating a “culture of encounter” is the path to restoring human dignity and building relationships that establish a greater sense of respect, safety, and trust – to make the right things happen. Social change can only happen when people feel welcome, valued, and free to be themselves. *Fratelli Tutti* 71 notes:

The story of the Good Samaritan is constantly being repeated. We can see this clearly, as social and political inertia is turning many parts of our world into a desolate byway, even as domestic and international disputes and the robbing of opportunities are leaving great numbers of the marginalized stranded on the roadside...Jesus trusts in the best of the human spirit; with this parable, he encourages us to persevere in love, to restore dignity to the suffering and to build a society worthy of the name.

Care for the earth

Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si’* (2015) was as much an expression of concern about climate change and its social implications as about its environmental ones. It blamed climate change mostly on the rich world—on “extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some”—yet it noted that the effects of global warming are

likely to be felt mostly in poorer countries, whose infrastructure is less able to adapt to changing temperatures. The analysis includes comparison with various ecological, philosophical, sociological, ethical, theological, and economic schools of thought¹⁶.

A pastoral approach

The Prefect of Doctrine and Faith, Gerhard L. Müller (2012-2017), claimed that his role was to create the “theological structure” of the pontificate, given that the first Latin American Pope was more “pastoral”¹⁷. “Pastoral” represents an approach to theology, where the emphasis is not principally its universalist, philosophical underpinnings. It is existential – it is theology in the context of life and people. Thus, Francis’ agenda and approach and priorities are mission oriented. In the act of faith, a greater accent is placed on *credere in Deum* (real assent to doctrine) than on *credere Deum* (notional assent to doctrine). It is not “devoid of content; rather it discovers and expresses that content by way of symbols than by discursive reasoning.” “It brings with itself the grace of being a missionary, of coming out of oneself and setting out on pilgrimage” (EG 124)¹⁸.

¹⁶ J. Ball, “Laudato Si’: An Environmental Watershed?”, *The Journal of Corporate Citizenship* 64 (2016) 33-36; R. van Tine, “Reflections, Analysis, and Significance for Human Ecology of Pope Francis’s Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home”, *Human Ecology Review* 23/1 (2017) 141-178.

¹⁷ C. Lamb, “View from Rome”, *The Tablet* (5 Aug 2023) 27.

¹⁸ “It is not enough to find a new language in which to articulate our perennial faith; it is also urgent, in the light of the new challenges and prospects facing humanity, that the Church be able to express the ‘new things’ of Christ’s Gospel, that, albeit present in the word of God, have not yet come to light. This is the treasury of ‘things old and new’ of which Jesus spoke when he invited his disciples to teach the newness that he had brought, without forsaking the old (cf. Mt 13:52)”. <To participants in the meeting

The place of doctrine

Doctrine has its place but in the context of evangelization, as Pope Francis said to the new Prefect of the Dicastery for Doctrine and Faith:

I ask you as prefect to dedicate your personal commitment more directly to the main purpose of the Dicastery, which is ‘keeping the faith’.

In order not to limit the significance of this task, it should be added that it is a matter of ‘increasing the understanding and transmission of the faith in the service of evangelization, so that its light may be a criterion for understanding the meaning of existence, especially in the face of the questions posed by the progress of the sciences and the development of society’. These issues, incorporated in a renewed proclamation of the Gospel message, ‘become tools of evangelization’ because they allow us to enter into conversation with ‘our present situation, which is in many ways unprecedented in the history of humanity’.¹⁹

promoted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization (11 October 2017) | Francis (vatican.va)> Cf. J.C. Scannone, *Theology of the People: The Pastoral and Theological Roots of Pope Francis* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist 2021) esp. Part III.

¹⁹ <FULL TEXT: Pope Francis’ letter to new doctrine chief Archbishop Fernández | Catholic News Agency> Cf. Similar sentiments in <General Audience of 22 March 2023 - Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer 8. The first way of evangelization: witness” (cfr. *Evangelii nuntiandi*) | Francis (vatican.va)> Cf. Pope Francis told a group of nuns and priests from Latin America not to worry if they found themselves under similar scrutiny. The Pope’s purported remarks came during a meeting with top officials of the Latin American Conference of Religious (CLAR) on 6 June 2013. Pope to Latin American Religious, <<https://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2013/06/pope-to-latin-american-religious-full.html>> Cf. Sister Jeannine Gramick founded New Ways of Ministry (1997)

Assessing the situation in discernment

In 1994, the Holy See issued certain guidelines concerning the reception of Holy Communion by Divorced and Remarried in two footnotes in *Amoris Laetitia* (2016). Four Cardinals expressed doubts as regards the stand of the Pope²⁰. Pope Francis' explanation of the harmonization between the two standpoints was through the process of discernment²¹.

Yet the Spirit saved us in the end, in a breakthrough at the close of the second (October 2015) meeting of the Synod on the Family. The overflow in this case, came above all through those with a deep knowledge of Saint Thomas Aquinas, among them the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. They recovered the true moral

working with LGBT+. Congregation for Doctrine and Faith (1999) "permanently prohibited [her] from any pastoral work involving homosexual persons". Then, in December 2021, on the fiftieth anniversary of her ministry to LGBT+ Catholics, she received a handwritten note from the Pope. "You have not been afraid of 'closeness' " Francis wrote, "and in getting close you did it 'feeling the pain' and without condemning anyone, but with the 'tenderness' of a sister and a mother". Cited in M. Dow, "From Banishment to a Blessing", *The Tablet* (5 Aug 2023) 12-13.

²⁰ Cf. N. Abeyasingha, "The Law versus the Gospel", *Horizons: Journal of Theology* 11/1 (2017) 117-132.

²¹ "Some priestly formation programs run the risk of educating in the light of overly clear and distinct ideas, and therefore to act within limits and criteria that are rigidly defined a priori, and that set aside concrete situations ... Today the Church needs to grow in discernment, in the ability to discern. And priests above all really need it for their ministry. This is why we need to teach it to seminarians and priests in formation: they are the ones usually entrusted with the confidences of the conscience of the faithful. Spiritual direction is not solely a priestly charism, but also lay, it is true" the pope said during a meeting with 28 Polish Jesuits in Krakow during World Youth Day (2018) <Today the Church needs to grow in discernment." Pope Francis meets with Polish Jesuits - LA CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA (laciviltacattolica.com)>

doctrine of the authentic scholastic tradition of Saint Thomas, rescuing it from the decadent scholasticism that had led to a casuistic morality. Because of the immense variety of situations and circumstances people found themselves in, Aquinas's teaching that no general rule could apply in every situation allowed the synod to agree on the need for a case-by-case discernment. There was no need to change the Church's law, only how it was applied. By attending to the specifics of each case, attentive to God's grace operating in the nitty gritty of people's lives, we could move from the black and white moralism that risked closing off paths of grace and growth. It was neither tightening nor a loosening of 'rules', but an application of them that left room for circumstances that did not fit neatly into categories. This was a great breakthrough the Spirit brought us – a better synthesis of truth and mercy in a fresh understanding drawn from within our own Tradition.²²

Judging with mercy

The motto of Pope Francis both as Pope and previously as archbishop of Buenos Aires was *miserando et eligendo*. In conversation with Andrea Tornielli, Francis²³ explains - through memories from his youth and moving anecdotes from his experiences as a pastor—why “mercy is the first attribute of God.” God “does not want anyone to be lost. His mercy is infinitely greater than our sins”, he writes. As well, the Church cannot close the door on

²² *Let us dream* “In the Synod on Amazonia of October 2019, there was a similar polarization over a secondary issue, but this time without, for now, a resolution by overflow”.

²³ *The New Name of God is Mercy* (Tr. O. Stransky; New York: Penguin Random House 2016).

anyone, Francis asserts—on the contrary, its duty is to go out into the world to find its way into the consciousness of people so that they can assume responsibility for, and move away from, the bad things they have done. He declared an Extraordinary Jubilee of Holy Year of Mercy starting on 8 December 2015 (50th Anniversary of the closing of Vatican II)²⁴.

Awareness of the theology of people

In Argentina, liberation theology takes the direction of a specific sort of “theology of the people” (*teología del pueblo*) that refuses to pit classes of people against one another or against the Church in an inevitable situation of conflict. It takes its starting point in a cultural-historical analysis of the present situation of human communities in the light of faith and not in the light or darkness of Marxist categories.

Rooted in people, Francis was not populist²⁵. Inculturation of the faith is central to Francis’ mission dating from his time in Argentina. A distinctive characteristic of the theology of the people is its theological and pastoral reassessment of the religion of the people, so that it recognized a “popular mysticism”. In Argentina (in Salta), there is a crucifix that is considered miraculous. “He speaks of a

²⁴ <Misericordiae Vultus - Bull of indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (11 April 2015) | Francis (vatican.va)>; cf. homily <Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy: Jubilee of Divine Mercy (3 April 2016) | Francis (vatican.va)>; <sending forth missionaries of mercy to carry message: Meeting with the Missionaries of Mercy (9 February 2016) | Francis (vatican.va)>; <addressing missionaries after their task: To the Missionaries of Mercy (10 April 2018) | Francis (vatican.va)>

²⁵ J.C. Scannone, *Theology of the people ...*; O.D. Santagada, “Popular Religiosity and Pope Francis” <(DOC) Popular religiosity and Pope>; W.P. Gregory, “Mission Shifts from Pope Benedict XVI to Pope Francis” <Mission Shifts from Pope Benedict XVI to Pope Francis (asburyseminary.edu)>

special and singular love for the people of Salta expressed through the image. The image is miraculous, but that does not mean magical. The grace of God must be sought.”²⁶

A culture of encounter

“Spend your life for the Gospel because you have “tasted” the God who made himself visible, able to be touched and encountered in Jesus. Yes, Jesus is the good news, meant for all peoples, the message that the Church must constantly proclaim, embody in her life and “whisper” to the heart of every individual and all cultures.”²⁷ “As we initiate this process [Synod of 2021], we too are called to become experts in the art of encounter. Not so much by organizing events or theorizing about problems, as in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another.”²⁸ Encounter is a way of life. Just as we are shaped by our encounters with others, we fail to be shaped by encounters we avoid. Pope Francis’ call to build a “culture of encounter” is not just an invitation to bring people together across differences in the spirit of mercy, solidarity, and hope; it is also how disciples emulate Jesus Christ’s teaching and healing ministry by practicing inclusive outreach, engaging in mutually respectful exchange, and opening up new possibilities.²⁹

²⁶ T.R. Rourke, *The Roots of Pope Francis’s Social and Political Thought: From Argentina to the Vatican* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2016) 106.

²⁷ <Apostolic Journey to Mongolia: Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Missionaries, Consecrated Persons and Pastoral Workers in Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral (2 September 2023) | Francis (vatican.va)>

²⁸ <Holy Mass - Opening of the Synodal Path (10 October 2021) | Francis (vatican.va)>

²⁹ Various articles on encounter and Pope Francis: <Creating a Culture of Encounter (georgetown.edu)>; T.J. Eggleston, “What Pope Francis Means by a Culture of Encounter”, <What Pope Francis Means By a Culture of Encounter - The Houston Catholic Worker (cjd.org)>; <<https://>

Symbolic gestures are “Theological Action”

Right from the beginning there have been many things Pope Francis has done. They embody an unspoken message. When he was presented to the people after his election, he came wearing the pectoral cross, he had been using as bishop in Argentina. He first asked the blessing and prayer of the people before imparting his blessing. After his election, he travelled in the same bus with the cardinals who had elected him, paid his own bill at the hotel where he had booked in and carried his own bags home. The day after his election, he visited Saint Mary Major and left a votive offering of a bouquet of flowers. On his return from World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, he again visited Mary Major and left a bat and ball as votive offerings. He opted to stay in St Martha’s rather than in the lavish papal apartments, celebrate Mass in St. Martha’s chapel with people and have his meals in the common refectory. On his first Holy Thursday as Pope, he celebrated Mass in a prison and washed the feet of prisoners including a Muslim woman. (As bishop, he had always celebrated Holy Thursday with prisoners; on 26th December 2024, he personally opened a Holy Door at the Rebibbia Prison in Rome). His first journey outside Rome was to Lampedusa (8 July 2013)³⁰, an Italian island that has seen a large influx of migrants. These gestures are symbolic – what could be termed “theological actions” and are intended to make a statement. Since then, he has named Cardinals from many remote places and has visited places

berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/to-live-is-to-encounter-just-like-jesus-pope-francis-and-the-spiritual-exercises.>; cf. T. Banchoff, “Journeying Together”, *The Tablet* (23 Sep 2023) 4-5.

³⁰ At Lampedusa Francis used harsh language: “I felt that I had to come here today, to pray and to offer a sign of my closeness, but also to challenge our consciences lest this tragedy be repeated”. And he added in a low voice, “Please, let it not be repeated!”