

Pope Francis: revitalising Vatican II

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Pope Francis has captured widespread attention in a way reminiscent of Pope John XXIII. Both share fresh, warm personalities, and inspire us with an earthy faith alive to contemporary social and cultural issues. But just as Pope John ushered in the great reforming Second Vatican Council, it seems Pope Francis is embarking on a major new process to implement the Council reforms more fully. It is Vatican II, Part II.

Coming from Argentina, and keenly aware of the problems of third-world poverty, Pope Francis is calling not just Catholics, but all people of goodwill, to focus on the pressing task of social transformation for a fair world. He is especially alert to the power of international capitalism, and how the ideology of economic liberalism undermines social equity and human rights in favour of powerful interests.

Hence promoting efforts for social justice are high on his agenda. For him, work for social justice and promoting human wellbeing are not optional extras to the Gospel, but at the heart of Christian faith. God identifies intensely with those in distress: “When did we see you hungry, naked, in prison...?”

He is encouraging people as individuals and groups to do what they can, especially by making direct personal contact with the poor and marginalised, as he did himself walking the streets of poor districts in his city. But that is not enough. There are great global forces that determine the fate of millions of lives, and these must be reformed to ensure decent life opportunities for everyone.

Francis is urging a renewed commitment to solidarity among peoples:

This word, ‘solidarity’, is too often forgotten or silenced, because it is uncomfortable. It almost seems like a bad word... solidarity. I would like to make an appeal to those in possession of greater resources, to public authorities, and to all people of goodwill who are working for social justice: never tire of working for a more just world, marked by greater solidarity. No one can remain insensitive to the inequalities that persist in our world. We need an enduring peace in our communities, one that brings genuine social justice... do not lose hope. (*Tablet* 3 August 2013).



The Inauguration Mass For Pope Francis by Catholic Church England & Wales, flickr cc

An end to the culture wars?

Francis wants to press the reset button, to put an end to the ‘culture wars’ that prioritised human life issues, particularly of abortion and contraception, while often overshadowing wider social justice and human rights issues. Francis is not abandoning church teaching on life issues, but wants to set them in a wide perspective about the search for meaning and God’s solidarity in Jesus in the struggle for human wellbeing in this life and the next.

Here, he invokes the social thinking of the Church, not in a dogmatic way, but as expanding the conversation with people of goodwill about promoting human wellbeing, together with people of other faith traditions, and even with atheists.

Francis as communicator

A naturally shy person himself, Francis is emerging as an astonishing communicator, particularly with symbolic actions, like on Holy Thursday, commemorating the Last Supper before Jesus went to his death,



Pope Francis met with media by Catholic Church of England & Wales, flickr cc

by washing the feet of people in a jail, including two Muslim women. Though against the liturgical rules, Francis presumably saw this as a gesture of inclusiveness, highlighting the fact that Jesus meant us seriously to be servants to others, especially to the excluded.

In his interview with the Jesuits, he insisted that “God is to be encountered in the world of today”, and urges priests to leave the sacristy to accompany their people closely, to listen, learn, and dialogue. He urges Catholics not to live in a laboratory but to understand the context of people’s lives, to “live on the border and be audacious”.

“I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else – God is in this person’s life... You have to trust God.”

From his experience talking with people in their troubles, he learned to listen to what was in their hearts, and to encourage the good in them. As Pope, he speaks as a pastor, not as a disciplinarian. Like a good pastor, he knows it is not how many times we fall that finally matters, but that we keep getting up again.

Without pretence, he speaks in simple and unaffected language about his faith and life experience, frankly admitting that, as a Jesuit superior, he had been authoritarian and hasty in decisions, resulting in “serious problems”. “I lived a time of great interior crisis” for a while, but learned many things and grew “through my faults and my sins”. In the extensive interview with the Jesuits published on 30 September 2013, he added that “I have never been a right-winger”.

Collegiality and participation

From his own experience of failure, he became convinced of the need for adequate consultation, and now wants the Church to adopt policies of “real consultations”, beginning with the synod of bishops.

Without damaging the authority of the papacy, he wishes to abandon the monarchical overlay that enveloped the papacy from medieval times, and return to the earlier tradition of a communal notion of the Bishop of Rome as the vicar of St Peter, enjoying special preeminence and authority certainly, but in a collegial context.

Pope Francis wants to reverse the Church’s centralisation of management by returning responsibility to the local bishops’ conferences. Hence, he is asking advice about promoting collegiality, and how to develop synodal structures at various levels. He expressly invited an ecumenical perspective, especially from the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches. Presumably, he will also be inviting consideration of forms of collegiality and lay participation in other churches. It is possible that, within decades, the Catholic Church might have structures of governance and participation similar to those of the Anglicans or of some Protestant churches today.

He understands “thinking with the Church” not as only thinking with the hierarchy, but as being part of the people of God on their journey. “And all the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display this ... infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together.”

In contrast to some conservatives who wanted to draw a line in the sand and insist that people were either in or out of the Church, Pope Francis is vastly more inclusive, thinking of the Church as “the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people.”

He is opposed to “restorationism”, meaning conservative efforts to turn the clock back to the structures and mentality before the Second Vatican Council. But he is also critical of concentrating on efficiency, which he thinks akin to a “prosperity gospel”, without concern for the spiritual Mystery at the heart of the Church.

Speaking to the bishops of Latin America in July, he called for a “grammar of simplicity” to engage with the world, and not use language that is “merely prescriptive, distant, and abstract.”

In his interview with the Jesuits, he added: “I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity”, like a field hospital after battle where wounds are tended. “The Church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules”, he said, obscuring the basic message of Jesus Christ’s saving presence. The proclamation of the Gospel must focus on the essentials that fascinate and make our hearts burn, as they did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Francis in interviews: too risky?

Francis has adopted the unprecedented practice of giving interviews that reveal not only his own personal views on many matters, but also how he wants the Church to improve its service to humanity, especially by being a “poor church for the poor”. These interviews are likely communicating his ideas and hopes far more widely even than recent papal encyclicals. It is a surprising but welcome innovation in communicating so personally with large numbers of people of all beliefs.

Yet it is not without risks. Papal comments are usually carefully scripted and scrutinised, but Pope Francis often speaks spontaneously and from the heart. In this attempt to engage with a particular person or audience, he cannot speak like a textbook of moral theology, with all the usual nuance and qualifications.

Pope Francis is undoubtedly aware of these, but they do not belong in such personal dialogues. He is not trying to develop doctrinal positions, but to open doors to communicate with our culture about ultimate questions of meaning and motivation.

His approach is very different from that of Pope Benedict, who spoke and wrote in a very sophisticated way out of the high theology of Europe. Francis comes from the third world, where grinding poverty and social injustice are the dominant realities. Nevertheless, he seeks collaboration with all people of goodwill in the struggle for justice, and has been deeply influenced by nonbelievers who dedicated their lives to pursuing human rights and social uplift.

When Bergoglio went to university, one of his lecturers was a “fervent communist” but became a good friend, and introduced him to communist writings. She was “later arrested, tortured, and killed by the dictatorship then ruling in Argentina.” “Her materialism had no hold over me. But learning about it through a courageous and honest person was helpful. I realised a few things, an aspect of the social, which I then found in the social doctrine of the Church.”

The Pope wants to encourage this dialogue with nonbelievers, and so spoke at length with Eugenio Scalfari, the nonbeliever founder of the Italian *La Repubblica* magazine (October 1 issue), stressing that the Church must share responsibility to help resolve urgent social issues, including the very high unemployment in Italy, especially among youth.

Francis said he did not want to convert Scalfari: “Proselytism is solemn nonsense, it makes no sense... This is important: to get to know people, listen, expand the circle of ideas. The world is criss-crossed by roads that come closer together and move apart, but the important thing is that they lead towards the Good.”

Pope Francis extolled the importance of an “autonomous” conscience: “Everyone has his own idea of good and evil, and must choose to follow the good and fight evil as he conceives them.” “We have to encourage people to move towards what they think is Good.”

These comments could easily be misunderstood if taken out of this context in which he is promoting conversation about the meaning of the Good for human beings, and what in practice follows from living good lives.

Ending clericalism: lay participation, parish councils, and synods

Pope Francis has repeatedly criticised clericalism, saying in his interview with Scalfari that “when I meet a cleric, I suddenly become anti-clerical. Clericalism should not have anything to do with Christianity.” But what he means by clericalism is not immediately clear. Presumably, he means situations in which the clergy exercise authority in a domineering or self-serving manner, or arrogate all key functions to themselves without mature collaboration with lay women and men.

For Francis, an end to clericalism would mean new structures of participation and consultation at all levels in the Church, with a sharing of authority and responsibilities. He called for “a whole process of reforming ecclesial structures” in a new missionary key. In his address to the bishops of Latin America in Aparecida on 28 July 2013, Francis said clericalism “explains in large part the lack of maturity and Christian freedom among a good part of the Latin American laity.”

To overcome clericalism, he said the spread of “Bible study groups, ecclesial base communities and pastoral councils is in fact helping to overcome clericalism and to increase lay responsibility.” He called on bishops and pastors to encourage lay participation in “consultation, organisation and pastoral planning”, especially through diocesan and parish pastoral and financial councils.

As the Second Vatican Council strongly encouraged, Francis is quite insistent on the need to set up new structures of participation in the Church, involving lay men and especially women as well as clergy. He asked the Latin American bishops:

Is pastoral discernment a habitual criterion, through the use of Diocesan Councils? Do such Councils and parish Councils, whether pastoral or financial, provide real opportunities for lay people to participate in pastoral consultation, organisation and planning? The good functioning of these Councils is critical. I believe that, on this score, we are far behind.

As pastors, bishops and priests, are we conscious and convinced of the mission of the lay faithful, and do we give them the freedom to continue discerning, in a way befitting their growth as disciples, the mission which the Lord has entrusted to them? Do we support them and accompany them, overcoming the temptation to manipulate or infantilise them?

As demonstrated by the October meeting with the eight cardinals in Rome, Francis is also intent on reforming the Vatican curia. In surprisingly strong language, he said in his interview in *La Repubblica* that he was opposed to the flattery of courtiers. “The court is the leprosy of the papacy.” He defended the curia as a whole as at the service of the Holy See. “But it has one defect: it is Vatican-centric. It sees and looks after the interests of the Vatican, which are still, for the most part, temporal interests.” “The Vatican-centric view neglects the world around us. I do not share this view, and I’ll do everything I can to change it.”

Francis added that his eight cardinals were not courtiers, but “wise people who share my own feelings. This is the beginning of a Church with an organisation that is not just top-down but also horizontal. When Cardinal Martini talked about focusing on the councils and synods, he knew how long and difficult it would be to go in that direction. Gently, but firmly and tenaciously.”

Francis said “our goal is not to proselytise, but to listen to needs, desires, and disappointments, despair, hope.”

We must restore hope to young people, help the old, be open to the future, spread love. Be poor among the poor. We need to include the excluded, and preach peace. Vatican II, inspired by Popes Paul VI and John, decided to look to the future with a modern spirit, and to be open to modern culture. The Council Fathers knew that being open to modern culture meant religious ecumenism and dialogue with non-believers. But afterwards very little was done in that direction. I have the humility and ambition to want to do something.