

The Church of the People: Ecclesial Vision of Pope Francis

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What sort of Church Pope Francis has in mind? Where does he want to take the Church? He often speaks of a people-oriented pastoral Church that focuses on the needs of others rather than the one that is preoccupied with its own prestige. While comparing the present situation of the Church to what happened to the disciples on their way to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35), in a speech delivered in Brazil soon after his election, Pope Francis gave a blueprint of his vision and agenda for the Church:

“We need a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church capable of entering into their conversation. We need a Church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning.”¹

To put the ecclesiological vision of Pope Francis in perspective, first, the article briefly will review the ecclesiology that he inherited from the past, including that of Vatican II. In the second part of the article, the reader is introduced to the theological framework of Cardinal Bergoglio that forms part of his ecclesial

¹POPE FRANCIS, “A Church that Accompanies Man on the Journey Home,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng.-ed., 31 July 2013, 12.

vision. After reflecting on some of the key elements in his ecclesiology, the article concludes by highlighting some of the implications of his ecclesial vision for the Church.

Church Prior to Vatican II

One of the fundamental concerns of the Second Vatican Council was to articulate in a credible way the Church's own identity and vocation: Church, what do you say about yourself? (*Ecclesia, quid dicis de teipsa?*).² The Council made some serious efforts to respond to it by making inquiries on the ecclesial self-consciousness.³ It shows that the Church was well aware of the fact that the earlier self-understanding was insufficient to convey the mystery of the Church to the modern world. Why was it insufficient? What were those prevailing images? That makes us briefly reflect on the models of the Church in the Catholic circle before the Second Vatican Council.

The ecclesiological manuals of the neo-scholastic schools in the past, even at the threshold of the Second Vatican Council, viewed the Church as a hierarchical society. For them, all the 'notes' of the Church—one, holy, catholic and apostolic—converged to demonstrate that the Roman Catholic Church was the true and legitimate Church of Jesus Christ. Moreover, while identifying the Kingdom of God with the Catholic Church, these manuals indirectly affirmed that the Catholic Church alone was the true Church and all other Christian communities were 'non-churches.' In such a scenario, any ecumenical dialogue was impossible. Further, according to this view, the Pope, who by divine right the successor of Peter, received primacy and jurisdiction over the whole Church.⁴ In Congar's view, such an understanding of ecclesiology had the tendency to regard "the

²G. PHILIPS, *La Chiesa e il suo mistero nel Concilio Vaticano II: storia, testo e commento della costituzione Lumen gentium*. Milan: Jaca Book, 1975, vol. I, 19.

³K. WOJTYLA/JOHN PAUL II, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*. London: Collins, 1980, 35-41.

⁴A. DULLES, "A Half Century of Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 420-21.

Church as machinery of hierarchical mediation, of the powers and primacy of the Roman see, in a word, a *hierarchology*.⁵ It overlooked the fact that the pope is first of all the bishop of the local Church of Rome, which of course has primacy in authenticating the apostolic faith.⁶

The notion of ‘perfect society’ (*societas perfecta*) too was prevalent at the threshold of Vatican II. It is obvious from the intervention of Karol Wojtyla of Krakow (the future Pope John Paul II): “Although the notion “People of God” is in itself best for explaining the social nature of the Church, it does not seem best for describing the Church *in actu*, because it does not explicitly convey the idea of *societas perfecta*. . . . The Church is a *societas perfecta* in the supernatural order, i.e. disposing all the means necessary to attain the supernatural end.”⁷ Let us note that the notion of *societas perfecta* was developed as a theoretical construct to demonstrate the independence of the Church from any unwarranted civil interference.⁸ The ecclesiology of ‘perfect society’ wanted to assert that the Church was not subordinate to secular powers and it lacked nothing required for its own institutional completeness. What is important to note is that here the Church is understood in terms of the analogies taken from political society. For example, one may recall the oft-quoted definition of Robert Bellarmine that describes the Church as a

⁵Y. CONGAR, *Lay People in the Church*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985, 45.

⁶Here it is interesting to note that Pope Francis has on several occasions emphasized his role as a bishop. He often introduces himself as the “Bishop of Rome.”

⁷*Acta synodalia* II, 3, 155-56.

⁸In the Middle Ages the Church and the State were not considered two diverse, independent, or perfect societies, but rather two parts of a unified social reality—the *Respublica Christiana*. The *imperium and sacerdotium*, civil and ecclesiastical power, together formed the one perfect community, the Christian commonwealth. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the unitary view of society was gradually replaced by a dualistic concept. It was out of the continuing confrontation between the Church and the State that the concept of *societas perfecta* was born. P.GRANFIELD, “The Rise and Fall of *Societas Perfecta*,” *Concilium* 157 (7/1982), 3-4.

society “as visible and palpable as the community of the Roman people, or the Kingdom of France, or the Republic of Venice.”⁹ Although it began as a political expedient, it eventually became the norm to describe the essence of the Church. Such an ecclesiology insists on visibility bordering on vanity. While fostering a juridical ecclesiology the notion of ‘perfect society’ gave importance to the external and hierarchical elements at the expense of the mystery aspect of the Church. Again, the ecclesiology based on the concept of ‘perfect society’ did not provide space for a theology of the local Church. The reason was that the local Churches (dioceses) were not perfect societies since they lacked full legislative, judicial, and coercive power. The very fact that it fails to acknowledge that the universal Church is actualised in the local communities, this overly universalist ecclesiology of *societas perfecta* is inadequate to describe even the social and visible aspects of the Church.¹⁰ Though some Catholics are extremely uncomfortable with any other notion of the Church than the *societas perfecta*, this societal model has been displaced from the centre of Catholic theology since about 1940.¹¹

With the publication of the encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (MCC), a new orientation emerged in Catholic ecclesiology: the Church as mystical body. Pope Pius XII’s encyclical gave official stamp to it: “If we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ—which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church—we shall find no expression more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the phrase which calls it ‘the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ’” (MCC 13). Though the notion of the mystical body of Christ advanced an ecclesiology that went beyond the juridical ecclesiologies of the manuals, in the encyclical, Pope Pius XII did attempt to harmonize the “mystical body” with the societal model of Bellarmine. For Pius XII, this

⁹Cf. R.P. McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?* London: Collins, 1969, 104.

¹⁰GRANFIELD, “The Rise and Fall of *Societas Perfecta*,” 6-7.

¹¹A. DULLES, *Models of the Church*. London: Image Books, 2002, 21.

mystical body is not an invisible reality. On the Contrary, according to him, the Church could not be a body unless it was visible. Now we may ask: What are the visible elements or traits of this mystical body? The encyclical points to the pope and the bishops as the joints and ligaments of the body, and asserts that “those who exercise sacred power in this Body are its chief members” (MCC 17). The laity are said to “assist the ecclesiastical hierarchy in spreading the Kingdom of the divine Redeemer” and thus to occupy a place, even though often lowly, in the Christian community.¹² Though other ecclesial images of the Church were present, these two models—perfect society and mystical body—were dominant images of the Church at the threshold of Vatican II. In Vatican II these two models were dislodged by other models.

Church and Vatican II

The Vatican II documents, especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, give the impression that Council wanted to move away from a static, juridical vision of the Church to one that was open and dynamic.¹³ In other words, in the Second Vatican Council, the Church as an organized society or institution is clearly subordinated to the mystery of Christ. The Extraordinary Synod of 1985 reaffirms this fact when it says: “The Council described the Church in various ways, as the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Family of God... We must not substitute for the false, one-sided, merely hierarchical notion of the Church, just a new one-sided sociological concept.”¹⁴

Though different biblical images of the Church are present in the documents of the Council, the metaphors of the People of God, Sacrament, and Servant became iconic images.¹⁵ Here

¹²DULLES, *Models of the Church*, 44

¹³Cf. A. ACERBI, *Due ecclesiologie: Ecclesiologia giuridica ed ecclesiologia di comunione nella Lumen gentium*. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1975.

¹⁴SYNOD OF BISHOPS, “The Final Report,” *AFER*, 28 no 1-2 F-Apr 1986, 84.

¹⁵DULLES, *Models of the Church*, 22.

McBrien explains why Vatican II radically revises the pre-Vatican II ecclesiology:

The Church is a mystery before it is an institution or an organization. It is a mystery because it is the presence of the merciful Lord among men. Therefore, it is a mystery even in its institutional and juridical structure. The Church is also the sacrament of Christ, the visible presence of Christ in the world. Moreover, it is a pilgrim community, or the People of God, with a mission within as well as beyond the confines of history.¹⁶

Vatican II not only corrects the unduly one-sided pre-Vatican II emphasis on the Church as a hierarchical institution but also highlights the fact that the whole People of God—laity, religious, and clergy alike—is called to participate in the mission of Christ.¹⁷ Moreover, the hierarchy, without detriment to its authority, gets a new orientation. It is viewed as the one that is at the service of the whole People of God. Further, the bishops are seen as a collegiate body, sharing with the pope the responsibility to carry forward the mission of Christ in the world. Regional and local Churches are seen as having a distinctive character, adapted to their cultural milieu. Episcopal conferences are given a new canonical and theological status.¹⁸ Again, the new understanding of the Church modifies a common pre-Vatican II notion that the Church is always to be understood as the Church universal, centralized in the Vatican under the supreme authority of the pope, with each diocese considered only as an administrative division of the Vatican, and each parish, in turn, an administrative subdivision of the diocese.¹⁹ Further, in this new way of understanding, the laity are seen as active participants in the life of the Church, not an appendage to the hierarchy. Thus, the

¹⁶McBRIEN, *Do We Need the Church?*, 121.

¹⁷R. P. McBRIEN, *Catholicism*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, 683.

¹⁸DULLES, "A Half Century of Ecclesiology," 429-30.

¹⁹McBRIEN, *Catholicism*, 684.

theology of the Church is no more “hierarchology,” but “ecclesiology” in the true sense of the word.²⁰

Having said that, however, we cannot but notice the shift that took place in ecclesiology after Vatican II: the emphasis on ‘communion’ ecclesiology. That is very evident in the *Relatio finalis* of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod. The reason perhaps is that the years immediately after the Council was marked by a heated debate on the ecclesiology of Vatican II, that was entangled in the discussion of ‘mystery’ and ‘the People of God,’ often the latter being used to highlight the dissent against the hierarchy. What happened later was that such discussions drove the Vatican II ecclesiology into an either-or situation: the Church as a mystery or the People of God. In fact, this opposition is entirely extraneous to the *mens* of the Fathers of the Council. To overcome this unpleasant impasse, the 1985 Extraordinary Synod proposed the idea of communion as the hermeneutical key to interpreting the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Because of this undue emphasis on communion, the notion of the People of God sank into oblivion and slowly faded away. The papacy of Francis has brought the People of God back to the ecclesiological arena.²¹

Theology of the People

Pope Francis’ ecclesiology is greatly influenced by the “theology of the people,” which considers the “faithful people of God” as a key source for theological reflection.²² The theology of the people was developed by thinkers like Rafael Tello and Lucio Gera in Argentina, which became an alternative to the radical Latin American liberation theology. In fact, the term “theology of

²⁰MCBRIEN, *Catholicism*, 683.

²¹D. VITALE, “Una chiesa di popolo: il *sensus fidei* come principio dell’evangelizzazione,” in H. M. Yáñez, ed., *Evangelii Gaudium: il testo ci interroga: Chiavi di lettura, testimonianze e prospettive*. Rome: GBP, 2014, 59-60.

²²For further details, see J. C. SCANNONE, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies*, vol. 77/1 (2016). 118-135; ID., “Lucio Gera: Un teologo «dal» popolo,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1166(2015)539-50.

the people” was coined by the radical liberation theologians as a pejorative term. Though the Argentine version of theology shared two characteristics in common to all theologies of liberation—“preferential option for the poor” and inductive method of “see - judge - act,”²³ the theology of the people has followed its own path and developed its own profile. That is to say, the Argentine liberation theology does not proceed from an analysis of socio-political and economic relations in ideological categories. Rather, it proceeds from a historical analysis of the culture of the people, who are united by a common ethos. Thus, it becomes a theology of the people and of culture.²⁴ In other words, while some of the radical liberation theologians drew inspiration from left-wing ideologies, the theology of the people found its source in common peoples’ culture and devotion, including their spirituality and sense of justice.

The idea of the theology of the people has undergone evolution in the course of the years. In the words of Pope Francis, at first, it was labelled ‘popular religion,’ then Pope Paul VI called it ‘popular piety,’ and finally the 2007 Aparecida document called it ‘popular spirituality.’²⁵ According to Scannone, the influence of the theology of the people was very little in the Latin American Bishops’ Conference held at Medellín in 1968, but that it increased considerably by the time of the Conference at Puebla in 1979 due to the support it received from Pope Paul VI: “It began in Argentina and then was taken to Rome by the Synod. There Paul VI deepened it, before it was taken up in Puebla and further enriched at Aparecida (2007). Now it returns to Rome with Pope Francis,

²³G. WHELAN, “Theological Method in *Evangelii Gaudium*: A Dialogue with Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran,” *Gregorianum*, 96/1 (2015), 52.

²⁴W. KASPER, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological & Pastoral Perspectives*. New York: Paulist Press, 2015, 16.

²⁵J.M. BERGOGLIO-POPE FRANCIS, “Prefazione,” in E.C. Bianchi, *Introduzione alla teologia del popolo*. Bologna: EMI, 2015, 15. While Archbishop of Buenos Aires, then-Cardinal Bergoglio wrote the foreword to the original Spanish edition: *Pobres en el mundo, ricos en la fe. La fe de los pobres de América Latina según Rafael Tello*. Buenos Aires: Ágape, 2012.

who has helped it flourish, to the enrichment of the universal Church.”²⁶

Endorsing the basic idea of the theology of the people, Cardinal Bergoglio wrote: “When we approach our people with the gaze of the good shepherd, when we do not come to judge but to love, we can find out that this cultural way to express the Christian faith is still present among us, especially in our poor.”²⁷ He is of the opinion that when we walk with the poor, we understand that they live life in a transcendental sense, beyond the huge daily difficulties. These experiences form the framework out of which Bergoglio’s pastoral and theological views emerge. In any case, the influence of the Argentine school of theology on Pope Francis’s ecclesiology is very much evident in his teachings, especially in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG).

Among the different images of the Church that we find in the Second Vatican Council, Pope seems to prefer the image of the People of God. However, the People of God that he has in mind is not a gathering of passive Christians, but conscious protagonists of their history. For him, the People of God who are on the move are under the guidance of Christ who leads them to their goal. Certainly, it is a journey with many twists and turns as they make their pilgrimage onward. One may wonder why in the exhortation there is such an emphasis on the image of the Church as a pilgrim people. That invites us to reflect briefly the ecclesiology that emerges in this important papal document.²⁸

Church in *Evangelii Gaudium*

As Pope Francis himself has mentioned, *Evangelii Gaudium* is the key document of his papacy: “I want to emphasize that what

²⁶SCANNONE, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” 123.

²⁷BERGOGLIO-POPE FRANCIS, “Prefazione,” 14-15.

²⁸For a detailed review of the ecclesiology of EG and its implications, see J. Xavier, “Spalancando il dinamismo ecclesiale: l’identità ritrovata,” in H. M. Yáñez, ed., *Evangelii Gaudium: il testo ci interroga: Chiavi di lettura, testimonianze e prospettive*. Rome: GBP, 2014, 39-52.

I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences” (EG 25). What does it say about the Church in today’s world? Before considering the ecclesiological import of this document let us remember that, from believers’ perspective, the Church is not a multinational organization, but a theological reality. It has its origin in the biblical tradition. That is to say, the Jewish *qahal Yahweh*, which later becomes *ecclesia* in Greek-Latin usage, means first of all the assembly of Yahweh.²⁹ It is not a conglomeration of individuals or any people taken at random. On the contrary, it is a community of believers whom the Lord himself has called and gathered together, leading them out of Egypt. In other words, the prototype of the Church, *qahal Yahweh*, is the gathering of those who remain loyal to the Lord and to his call.

Let us also note that in the whole process of becoming the People of God, what is at the centre is not human effort, but God who gathers and forms this community of believers. That is to say, *ecclesia* is not ‘a sociological identity tag,’ but a theological reality whose ultimate foundation is the free and gracious initiative of God (EG 111). The same pattern emerges in the New Covenant too, especially in the first Christian community. In the New Testament, the Church is a community of disciples who are called and gathered by Jesus Christ. Further, like the *qahal Yahweh* of the Old Testament, *ecclesia* of the New Testament is not an institution-centred sedentary organization, but a dynamic community of pilgrims who are on their way which has a clear eschatological horizon. Pope Francis reaffirms this when he says: “The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary” (EG 111).

²⁹J. RATZINGER, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008, 26.

While reflecting further on the biblical foundation of the Church, in the exhortation, Pope Francis reminds the reader that the origin of the Church has to do with a 'vocation' or a 'call.' First he presents three prophetic figures of the Old Testament, i.e. Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah (EG 20). From the Bible we know that all these three are called to abandon their land, properties and their own personal plans. While accepting the call they express their willingness to be guided by God. Thus, they were able to collaborate with God in the formation of the People of God in the Old Covenant. As already mentioned, they are not the protagonists, but only agents or instruments of God in the plan of salvation.

One can see a similar mission-oriented pattern in the New Covenant as well. The Church as the community gathered around Christ is a community created for a missionary "going forth."³⁰ The Pope draws our attention to the missionary experiences of the disciples before and after the Paschal Mystery. Moreover, the Church formed by Christ is not a sedentary community. "The drive to go forth and give, to go out from ourselves, to keep pressing forward in our sowing of the good seed, remains ever present" (EG21). Why does he insist for a pilgrim-missionary Church? The reason perhaps is that, according to him, a sedentary Church that is too preoccupied with itself is prone to various types of illness. The typical illness of the shut-in Church is narcissism that leads her to shallow clericalism. It impedes her experiencing the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing.³¹ Moreover, a self-referential

³⁰In one of his homilies he described the nature of this 'outgoing' movement thus: "The Christian life is not a self-reflexive life but it comes outside of itself to give to others: it is a gift, it is love, and love does not turn back on itself, it is not selfish, but self-giving!" Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*. Eng. ed., 19 September 2014, 8.

³¹"A Church that does not go out, sooner or later gets sick in the vitiated atmosphere of her enclosure. It is true also that to a Church that goes out something can happen, as it can to any person who goes out to the street: to have an accident. Given this alternative, I wish to say to you frankly that I prefer a thousand times an injured Church than a sick Church. The typical illness of the shut-in Church is self-reference; to look at herself, to be bent over herself

‘navel-gazing’ Church is overly paranoiac about its structures, privileges and worldly vanity.³²

The pope highlights another danger. When the Church is self-referential, inadvertently, it believes it has its own light. It ceases to be “the *mysterium lunae*,” i.e. to depend on Christ for receiving and reflecting his light.³³ The consequence is that the Church begins to live for itself, and not for the world. The reason for its existence is just “to give glory only to one another” that, as de Lubac has warned, eventually paves the way for ‘spiritual worldliness.’³⁴ In the same way, a Church that is closed in on itself

like the woman in the Gospel. It is a kind of narcissism that leads us to spiritual worldliness and to sophisticated clericalism, and then it impedes our experiencing ‘the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing.’” POPE FRANCIS, *Letter to participants in the 105th Plenary Assembly of the Episcopal Conference of Argentina* (25 March 2013). Cf. “Ni mundanidadespiritualniclericalismosofisticado,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Spanish ed., 19 April 2013, 11.

³²Even before becoming the pope, he warned against a self-referential Church: “When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize she becomes self-referential and so shuts herself in. The evils which as time passes afflict ecclesial institutions are rooted in self-reference, a sort of theological narcissism.” CARDINAL J.M. BERGOGLIO, “Intervention at General Congregations prior to the Conclave.” Cf. *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 3 April, 2013, 16.

³³Here one may recall the opening statement of *Lumen Gentium*: “Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church” (LG 1).

³⁴Henri de Lubac had identified it as the most insidious temptation of all for religious people: “If this worldliness of the spirit were to invade the Church and set to work to corrupt her by attacking her very principle, it would be something infinitely more disastrous than any worldliness of the purely moral order—even worse than the hideous leprosy which at certain moments in history inflicts so cruel a disfigurement on the Bride; when religion seems to set up the scandalous ‘in the very sanctuary itself—represented by a debauchee Pope, hiding the face of Christ behind jewels, rouge and beauty-spots.” H. DE LUBAC, *The Splendor of the Church*. London: Sheed & Ward, 1956, 288. According to Ievereigh, “it was a sickness with many symptoms: high-spending prelates, “airport bishops” often absent from their dioceses, bishops who flitted from one gala dinner to the next, Catholic laymen who used chivalric orders to advance their business interests, dioceses that idolized efficiency and put plans before people, elite groups with theological or liturgical agendas, self-appointed inquisitors who

and in the past, a Church that only sees the little rules of behaviour, of attitude, is a Church that betrays its own identity.³⁵ For Pope Francis the Church can never forget Jesus' command to "go and make disciples." The Church should never hesitate to adapt this missionary spirit of going forth.

Missionary Discipleship and Church's Identity

As already mentioned, for Pope Francis, the Church is more than a gathering of individuals for the sake of a cultural or religious identity. Therefore, he qualifies it with an important Christian notion: *mission*. For him, the Church is a *missionary community* of believers, i.e. a community with a mandate to preach the Gospel to all mankind. "If we attempt to put all things in a *missionary* key, this will also affect the way we communicate the message" (EG 34). That is to say, the identity of the Church comes from its mission. Here, the mission is understood in a wider sense. Therefore, he says: "In our day Jesus' command to "go and make disciples" echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church's mission of evangelization, *and all of us are called to take part in this new missionary "going forth"* (EG 20). Quoting from Aparecida, he asks all Christians to be "permanently in a state of mission" (EG 25).

Certainly, what the pope says is not something new. From its inception, the task of the Church consists in proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world.³⁶ The Second Vatican Council reaffirms it when it says: "The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth" (LG 17). In fact, drawing

combed priests' homilies in search of heterodoxy, church organizations that were so professional that they were indistinguishable from those of the world." A. IVEREIGH, *The Great Reformer: Francis And The Making of a Radical Pope*. London: Allen & Unwin, 2014, 85-86.

³⁵POPE FRANCIS, "Like a River Coursing Through Time," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng, ed., 18 October 2013, 4.

³⁶R.P. McBrien, *The Nature and Mission of the Church According to Bishop Robinson*, Londinii, 1966, 131.

inspiration from the teaching of the Council, Pope Francis hopes that this self-understanding of the Church as “missionary community” could open a new phase of evangelization, one marked by enthusiasm and vitality (EG 17). Moreover, this self-understanding makes every Christian a responsible member of the community. That is to say, no one is dispensed from the missionary responsibility. The mission is not the preserve of a select few. In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. It highlights the fact that the Church is more than a hierarchical administration: “*Mere administration can no longer be enough*” (EG 25). Furthermore, the missionary consciousness of every Christian makes him/her take the first step, who does not wait for someone else to propel him/her because the Lord himself has shown how to proceed: “The Lord has taken the initiative (*primerear*), he has loved us first (1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast” (EG 24).

A missionary heart is aware of the limits of others and thus makes itself “weak with the weak... everything for everyone” (1 Cor 9:22). It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness (EG 45). This vision has an enormous ecclesiological significance. The Church does not exist for itself. Pope Francis holds that the *raison d’être* of the Church is the salvation of the world, that is, the continuation of Christ’s mission in the world—*missio Dei*. Therefore, the characteristic of the missionary community is that it is prepared to meet people where they are and accept them for what they are: “The Shepherd will be found wherever the lost sheep is... While he is looking for the lost sheep, he challenges the ninety-nine to participate in the reunification of the flock.”³⁷ In other words, in the eyes of Jesus, according to Pope Francis, there are no lost

³⁷POPE FRANCIS, “No One Is Ever Lost,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 6 May 2016, 1.

sheep, but only sheep needing to be found. If the mission of the Church is the salvation of the world, then, the concern of the Church cannot be of her self-preservation (EG 27) or her desire to cling on to past traditions and rubrics (EG 95), but her self-giving in the order of Jesus Christ (Phil 2: 5-9). That is possible only when ecclesial vocation becomes an “outgoing” movement to the outskirts of its own territory or towards new socio-cultural settings (EG 30). He encourages every member of the Church to discern the call to go forth from his/her own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel. He urges the Church to avoid any attempt to remain 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.³⁸

For Pope Francis, the mission of the Church is not building walls, but breaking them down³⁹ so that the Christians could readily welcome and embrace the strangers, the neglected and the abandoned. Here we see his concern for the refugees, especially those who come from the war zones. It is significant to note the warning he has issued along with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and the Archbishop of Athens:

To meet this grave challenge, we appeal to all followers of Christ to be mindful of the Lord’s words, on which we will one day be judged: ‘For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:35-36. 40).⁴⁰

³⁸POPE FRANCIS, “I Dream of a Restless Church,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 6 November 2015, 6.

³⁹POPE FRANCIS, “More Responsibilities for the Laity,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 2 October 2015, 16.

⁴⁰POPE FRANCIS, “The Crisis of Humanity,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 22 April 2016, 8.

One can see that when Pope Francis suggests that the Church should open its door to strangers, he is touching on matters that J. B. Metz explains in his political theology. For Metz, like Pope Francis, any attempt to protect the Church from the “contamination of the world” or from “strangers” is not a true Christian attitude. The Church, as the Church of the Son, cannot remain closed to the “strangers” in the historical world.⁴¹ The fact is that the “conditioning by strangers” is not something that was subsequently added to the Church. On the contrary, it is an element of the Church’s constitution and part of its *specificum christianum*. In the same way, the Church cannot come to know what is “Christian” or “human” prior to, and without going through, the experiment of historical experience. Whenever the Church forgets its identity “being defined by the other” (EG 179), it runs the risk of becoming a “sect” in the theological sense of the term.⁴² In the face of losing its relevance and identity, the Church, out of fear, like a tortoise, tries to withdraw itself into its shell. Furthermore, aggressive “self-assertion” of a closed-in Church can take different forms like ultra-conservatism, pure traditionalism, zealous language, inability or unwillingness to have new experiences. These things make the transformation of active Church life into a humourless dogmatism. At best, such an attitude could do is to drive the Church into a backward-looking stabilization.⁴³ Like Metz, Pope Francis cautions the Church against the temptation to be a “sect” that insists on

⁴¹Metz draws our attention to the origin and transformation of the primitive Church: “Its foundation was the crumbling of the wall of division between Jews and heathen, the tearing of the veil of the Temple, and the transformation of the Synagogue into the Church in the midst of mankind, and for mankind. The movement into alien territory was obligatory. Therefore the Church surpasses itself by moving into that alien world to which it must always relate because it is the Church of the Son who reclaimed this “alien” country as his “own”, and sealed this claim with his death for all men— even for unbelievers.” J.B. METZ, “Does Our Church need a New Reform,” *Concilium* 6 (1970), 87.

⁴²J.B. METZ, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2013, 95-96.

⁴³METZ, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, 77.

withdrawing from the world (*fuga mundi*). Pope Francis urges the Church to be a welcoming house of the Father with doors always wide open (EG 47). While reflecting on the parable of the Lost Sheep, Pope Francis reminds us that if we are not outgoing and welcoming people, we “run the risk of shutting ourselves in the pen, where there won’t be the odour of the sheep but the stench of enclosure!”⁴⁴

Church of the People and *Sensus Fidelium*

Pope Francis who understands the Church as the pilgrim people of God envisions a new way of being the Church. For him, if the Church wants to encourage every member to be a responsible person, it needs to pay attention to the exercise of the *sensus fidelium* in the Church. Pope Francis in his first *Angelus* address invites everyone to reflect on “the wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives” to the faithful.⁴⁵ In fact, the *sensus fidei* enables the faithful to make discernment with regard to the things of faith.

Generally speaking, the theological notion of *sensus fidei* holds that the whole body of the faithful cannot err in matters of belief.⁴⁶ According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, because of its anointing by the Holy Spirit, the whole body of the faithful possesses a sure sense of the faith (LG 12). In other words, the Church believes that, in virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, all of the baptized participate in the prophetic office of Jesus Christ. The *sensus fidei* is a criterion for discerning whether or not a truth belongs to the living deposit of the Apostolic Tradition. It also tells that the Holy Spirit never ceases to speak to the Churches and

⁴⁴POPE FRANCIS, “No One Is Ever Lost,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 6 May 2016, 3.

⁴⁵Pope Francis quoted the words of a humble, elderly woman he once met: “If the Lord did not forgive everything, the world would not exist.” And the pope commented with admiration: “That is the wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives.” Cf. *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 20 March 2013, 11.

⁴⁶For a synthetic presentation, see INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church,” *Origins*, vol. 44/9 (2014), 133-155.

to guide them towards the whole truth.⁴⁷ In other words, the *sensus fidei* is the supernatural instinct or aptitude of the individual believer (*sensus fidei fidelis*) or the community of believers (*sensus fidei fidelium*) to make an accurate discernment in matters of faith. Though the Council affirmed that all the baptized participate in their own proper way in the prophetic, priestly and kingly offices of Christ, verifying the authenticity of the *sensus fidelium* ultimately rests with the Magisterium, especially when it makes the distinction between the teaching Church (*ecclesia docens*) and the learning Church (*ecclesia discens*). However, it is also important to note that the Magisterium exercises this ministry of oversight within the fellowship of the Church.⁴⁸

After the Council, though the Magisterium prior to the papacy of Francis occasionally mentioned it in its teaching, often the notion of the *sensus fidei* was addressed as a warning against its misuse, namely, presuming that public opinion inside (or outside) the Church is necessarily the same thing as the *sensus fidei*. For example, in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC), Pope John Paul II warned against mixing up the *sensus fidei* with ‘consensus of the faithful’ determined by sociological and statistical research. According to him, it is the task of the Church’s pastors to promote, discern and authoritatively judge the genuineness of the sense of the faith in all the faithful (FC 5). In the same way, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted the need to distinguish the authentic *sensus fidelium* from its counterfeit.⁴⁹

Though he agrees with his predecessors that the *sensus fidelium* must not be confused with the sociological reality of majority opinion,⁵⁰ according to Pope Francis, the Magisterium

⁴⁷POPE BENEDICT XVI, “Address to International Theological Commission,” *Origins*, vol. 42/31 (10 January 2013), 502.

⁴⁸Cf. Y. CONGAR, *The Meaning of Tradition*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, 79.

⁴⁹Cf. POPE BENEDICT XVI, “Address to International Theological Commission,” 502.

⁵⁰POPE FRANCIS, “Speech to International Theological Commission,” *Origins*, vol. 43/31 (9 January 2014), 519.

must pay attention to the sense of the faithful when exercising its teaching authority. In fact, Pope Francis looks at the Council's teaching on the *sensus fidei* as an opportunity to enter into dialogue with the concrete life situations of the Church. He has elaborated the fundamental idea thus:

In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression (EG 119).

For Pope Francis, as mentioned earlier, all Christians have a responsibility for the Church and her mission. As missionary disciples, all the baptized are agents of the mission of the Church. Further, he maintains that it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. He reminds the faithful that the new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized (EG 120). He elaborates it further:

One of the great challenges facing the Church in this generation is to foster in all the faithful a sense of personal responsibility for the Church's mission and to enable them to fulfil that responsibility as missionary disciples, as a leaven of the Gospel in our world. This will require creativity in adapting to changed situations, carrying forward the legacy of the past not primarily by maintaining our structures and institutions, which have served

us well, but above all by being open to the possibilities which the Spirit opens up to us and communicating the joy of the Gospel, daily and in every season of our life.⁵¹

Pope Francis has made serious efforts to make the *sensus fidei* a practical reality for the Church. That can be seen in the process and the conduct of two synods on the family. His initiative to circulate an extensive questionnaire on family issues, requesting feedback from the faithful prior to the synods, can be interpreted as his earnestness in making *sensus fidei* a practical reality. Moreover, during the Synods, he has asked the participants to share their views and concerns with total freedom. He encouraged the Synod Fathers to “speak with openness (*parrhesia*) and listen with humility.” For him, the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated people and of bishops. Everyone forms the holy faithful People of God. He reminds ordained or consecrated people: “Looking to the People of God is to remember that we all made our entrance into the Church as laypeople. The first sacrament is baptism.”⁵²

Towards a Compassionate Church

For Pope Francis, mercy stands at the centre of Christian life.⁵³ The Church cannot exist without this virtue. In the bull of indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV), he writes: “Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love” (MV 10). On this matter, Pope Francis

⁵¹POPE FRANCIS, “More Responsibilities for the Laity,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 2 October 2015, 16.

⁵²POPE FRANCIS, “The Hour of the Laity Has Come,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 29 April, 2016, 4.

⁵³His personal preference for mercy can be seen in the motto of his episcopal and papal coat of arms: *Miserando atque eligendo* (by gazing upon me with the eyes of his mercy, he has chosen me).

follows the path trodden by his predecessor St John XXIII. At the opening of the Second Vatican Council, speaking of false doctrines and erroneous opinions, Pope John XXIII made this observation: "The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. But at the present time, however, the spouse of Christ prefers to use the *medicine of mercy* rather than the weapons of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by explaining the validity of her teaching more fully rather than by condemnations."⁵⁴ One can see a similar language in Pope Francis: "It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father" (MV 12).

Pope Francis reminds us that the temptation to focus exclusively on justice can make us forget that the Church needs to go beyond and strive for a higher and more important goal. Without a witness to mercy, the life of the Church can become fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a barren desert. The Church can never forget that she is commissioned to announce the mercy of God. He seems to be well aware of the Ignatian notion of charity: "Let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbor's proposition than to condemn it" (*The Spiritual Exercises*, no. 22).

Indeed, Pope Francis speaks of pastoral conversion and the need for facing the challenges with an open mind and heart. But it appears that it is easier for Pope Francis to teach and catechise the ordinary faithful and the secular world than some of his collaborators. They seem to prefer "to be ruined rather than changed." In the words of Pope Francis himself, "they prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion.

⁵⁴JOHN XXIII, "Opening Address to the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council," 11 October 1962. Cf. *AAS* 54 (1962), 792. Emphasis added.

But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street."⁵⁵ The problem with the rigorists is that they seem to be knowing everything except the message of the Gospel. Like the religious leader in the time of Jesus, they prefer justice to compassion or charity. If ever they consider charity, it is not a standalone term, but always a hyphenated concept: 'charity-in-truth.'

As mentioned elsewhere,⁵⁶ Francis prefers the image of the Church as a merciful mother, a metaphor dear to the martyr-bishop Cyprian. On the contrary, the schismatic bishop, Novatian, could see in the Church a pure and holy virgin. Against the rigorism of Novatian, Cyprian advocated for a lenient Church that showed mercy to those Christians who had become weak during persecution. Pope Francis battles for a Church that is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church remaining shut up within its structures, while outside a starving multitude is waiting.⁵⁷ For him, the Church is not a super speciality clinic reserved exclusively for the VIPs, but rather a 'field hospital': "a Church with a great heart, close to the many wounded and humiliated of history, at the service of the poorest of the poor."⁵⁸ Therefore, he insists that such a hospice should be an open house with open doors (EG 46-49).

Concluding Remarks

Pope Francis envisions a missionary Church *of* the people, a Church that wants to meet the people where they are, without any precondition. For the question 'insistently posed by the Gospels is not how far men are from the manifest Church but how far they are

⁵⁵POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*, 308.

⁵⁶XAVIER, "Spalancando il dinamismo ecclesiale: l'identità ritrovata," 50; KASPER, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 42.

⁵⁷KASPER, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 42.

⁵⁸POPE FRANCIS, "Salute negata." *L'Osservatore Romano*, 8 May 2016, 1.

from the kingdom of God.⁵⁹ ^{For the} The Pope, every faithful has a participatory role in the Church. He reminds the Church leaders that lay people are “the protagonists of the Church and of the world.” Pastors or Bishop Conferences cannot usurp their place. It is important to ask ourselves: Where are the laity today? Do they have a say in their Church? Who represent the Church in political and cultural spheres? According to Pope Francis, clericalism fails to notice the talents and competence of the laity because it is more concerned with dominating spaces than with generating initiatives: “In reality, lay people who have an authentic Christian formation should not need a helmsman-Bishop, or pilot-monsignor, or the input of clergy in order to take on their proper responsibilities at all levels, from the political to the social, from the economic to the legislative! They have, rather, the need of a Pastor Bishop!”⁶⁰ In short, what the Pope seems to be aiming at is not a Church *for* the people, but a Church *of* the people.⁶¹

Finally, experience and discernment have a key role in Pope Francis’ way of proceeding. For him, faith enters the Church through the living experience of the ordinary people, not through the heads of intellectuals. “Ordinary people always have room to

⁵⁹R.P. MCBRIEN, *The Nature and Mission of the Church According to Bishop Robinson*, 143.

⁶⁰POPE FRANCIS, “A Clear Voice against Corruption,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 29 May 2015, 15. In another occasion, he cautioned the Church leaders: “It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God. To forget this carries many risks and distortions in our own experience, be they personal or communitary, of the ministry that the Church has entrusted to us.” POPE FRANCIS, “The Hour of the Laity Has Come,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 29 April 2016, 5.

⁶¹A feudalistic elite form of orthodoxy visualizes a ‘Church *for* the people.’ Clericalism is one of the signs of a ‘Church *for* the people’ where the hierarchy acts as protagonists and the faithful are reduced to pure recipients of the benevolence of the clergy. In contrast to this understanding, as political theology holds, faith in the order of Jesus Christ (real “orthodoxy”) advocates for a ‘Church *of* the people,’ in which the people themselves have come of age and have become the subjects of their religious identity. For more details, see J. B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 269-70.

take in the mystery. Perhaps we have reduced our way of speaking about mystery to rational explanations; but for ordinary people the mystery enters through the heart. In the homes of the poor, God always finds a place.”⁶² The pope says:

“A Church that follows this path learns how to walk with everyone. There is an ancient rule for pilgrims, which Saint Ignatius adopts, and which is why I know it! In one of his rules he says that the person accompanying the pilgrim must walk at his or her pace, not going on ahead or falling behind. In other words, I envisage a Church that knows how to walk with men and women along the path.”⁶³

Those who embark on the journey of accompanying of the pilgrim people of God take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice (EG 24). That perhaps is the reason why Cardinal Kasper draws this conclusion:

[Pope Francis] is a Jesuit through and through. In the spirit of the founder of his order, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), he proceeds not from doctrine, but from the concrete situation. Naturally, he does not simply intend to accommodate himself to the situation; rather, as is envisaged in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius, he attempts to evaluate the situation according to the rule for discernment of spirits. With the help of such spiritual discernment, he then comes to concrete, practical decisions (EG 50-51).⁶⁴

⁶²POPE FRANCIS, “A Church that Accompanies Man on the Journey Home,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 31 July 2013, 12.

⁶³POPE FRANCIS. “Following Man into the Digital Age,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 25 September 2013, 9.

⁶⁴KASPER, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 10-11.