

Protective Love: An Attempt to Understand Pope Francis

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The aim of this essay is to try to understand what gifts Pope Francis brings us at this time in history. It is indeed a risky attempt, for the future is hard to predict. Nevertheless, life is an ongoing process. We will understand more deeply one's life history and choices if we are able to see the connections among various episodes of his life. We firmly believe that the question of what "a pope will bring to us" is actually the question of how he cooperated with God's divine plan in the past, which in turn, makes him "what I am today". (1 Cor. 15:10) In other words, what we are trying to do in this study is to understand the "ecclesiology" Pope Francis may adopt during his papacy through a systematic reflection upon his life history.

1. Preference for the Poor

Being the descendent of expatriates, Jorge Mario Bergoglio (1936) understood the challenges of settling in a new place. Growing up in the mid-20th century when social changes were rapid, he witnessed the increasingly huge gap being created between the rich and the poor on the South American continent. During his youth, Liberation Theology was prevalent in South America. This was an effort at inculturation, which the Second Vatican Council had called for. Being one of the branches of practical theology, the slogan of liberation theology was to "See, Judge, Act". It sought to understand how God reveals His "grace" and carries out His work of "liberation" in the New World, where the population, mostly Christian, suffered under conditions of political pluralism and the great economic divide between the rich and the poor. Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, took a

different stance from the activists of liberation theology. He lived like the ordinary people. He rode public transportation and lived a frugal life in a simple place. This allowed him to truly “live among the people”. Eighty percent of the population in Buenos Aires is Catholic. This pastor truly carried out the teachings of the Gospel, and took upon his shoulders the suffering of his flock.

In the development of liberation theology, “an option for the poor” is the primary principle. The most admirable thing about Bergoglio is that he did not stop at the level of theory. He freely chose to lead a life of poverty, and put theory into practice. This was the winning point of his ministry. It is not difficult for us to understand why Father Bergoglio won the favor of Pope Blessed John Paul II in the 1980s and 1990s, when liberation theology was less popular at the Holy See. Within less than 10 years, he was appointed Auxiliary Bishop (1992), Coadjutor Bishop (1997), then Archbishop of Buenos Aires (1998), and finally Cardinal (2001). Recently, he was elected as the 266th successor of Saint Peter. However, he still chooses to lead a life of poverty.

Therefore, the adoption of Francis as his papal name is the best way for Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the first Pope born in South America, to express an understanding of his life. Let us recall the first thoughts of Pope Francis in the Sistine Chapel on 12 March 2013, when he received the statutory number of votes to be elected as Pope:

“Don't forget the poor!” Those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, as I was thinking about the poor, I thought of St. Francis of Assisi. Then, until the end of the counting of all the votes, I thought of all the wars that have taken place throughout history. Francis was also a man of peace. That is how his name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. For me, he was a man of poverty, a man of peace, and a man who loved and protected creation. These days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we? He was the man who gave us a spirit of peace, the poor man.... How I would like the Church to be poor and for the poor!

(Pope Francis, 16 March 2013)

The heart of the Lord's Servant is deeply concerned about war, and of the need for peace in the world today. We can imagine that

Pope Francis will consider St. Francis of Assisi as his role model, and “reconstruct” the Church in such a way that it becomes a servant to the poor and a creator of peace. In this way Christians should concretize their Christian faith.

After the inauguration mass on March 19, 2013, the Pope released two tweets on Twitter. In one of them he emphasized once again that in the future the Church would pay more attention to the needs of the poor, because the Church should be “a poor Church for the poor”. He went on to say, “True power is service. The Pope must serve all people, especially the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable.” Indeed, these have been the principles that he has always followed.

The phrase “a poor Church” is not something new in the Christian faith. It is only being recalled once again in this present age. It has become the point of connection between the life of the Spirit and the concrete responsibilities of all Christians. Undoubtedly, this conviction has been introduced into the Vatican, and has entered the minds and hearts of all the people of God.

2. Putting the Christian Faith into Concrete Action

During his pontificate, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI promulgated three encyclicals to the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world: *Deus Caritas est* (2005), *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) and *Spe Salvi* (2007). In the first few days of Lent in the Year of Faith, he solemnly and unexpectedly announced his resignation from his post as pope. At this time, the people of God are beginning to reflect on their faith, since the Holy Father’s retirement has given them a chance to reflect upon the idea of “faith”. No matter who is Pope, Christ is the centre of our lives, and faith is the point where Christians experience an encounter with God. Moreover, Pope Benedict taught us that the starting point of faith lies in our hearts. This starting point is a return to the central core of our being. There we can find truth and experience self-transcendence. The intimate relationship between God and man is established at our inner core centre. At the same time, Christians living in this world must transform their faith into concrete action, and put their faith into real practice. In other words, they express their faith through their actions.

According to the tradition of the Church, the new pope would usually try to fulfill the promises of his predecessor. So how would Pope Francis ensure the continuity between his papacy and that of Pope Benedict XVI?

We can imagine that the new Pope will continue to be a teacher of the faith. He will hold onto his principle of “option for the poor”. He will continue with the low profile he displayed after his election and continue to lead a life of frugality and of concern for the common people. Pope Francis, just like his predecessor, will easily win the hearts of the people of God. In addition, some of the directives given by Pope Benedict in *Porta Fidei* (2011) will be realized, such as practicing the teachings of Vatican Council II and studying the Catechism of the Catholic Church. However, these directions will be concretized in a new way in the Church. The Church, living in accordance with Pope Francis’ slogan, “*miserando atque eligendo*” — “lowly, and yet chosen,” will focus its efforts on “service” to the people of God. This was the central point of Pope Francis’ message at his inauguration Mass on 19 March 2013.

A Church “humble, and yet selected” should strive for a life centered on “prayer”. From his first appearance before the public and in subsequent meetings with Christians, the new Pope repeatedly stressed the importance of “prayer”, and sincerely asked the Christians to “pray for him”. Most importantly, he is a person of deep prayer himself. This simple archbishop obtains peace and strength through prayer. His ministry has received praise from all quarters.

At midnight on the 19th March 2013, the new Pope asked for prayers especially from the Catholics who were waiting for him in the “Plaza de Mayo” in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Buenos Aires. He said that, through prayer, people care for one another. Although he was very far away from his people, his heart stayed close to them through prayer. “Prayer nourishes the Christian’s life,” he said with emphasis. Preceding popes have also taught that the foundation of the Church lies in prayer. However, Pope Francis has reinforced the need for prayer more frequently, and with greater sincerity and naturalness.

3. Ecumenical Dialogue

Pope Benedict XVI considered “dialogue” as one of the missions of his papacy. He had once come into verbal conflict with the Islamic community, and was successful in achieving reconciliation with them. During his papacy, he built up a more harmonious relationship with the Orthodox and Protestant Christian communities, in particular with the Anglican Church, with whom he arrived at a historical understanding. He even accepted a group of Anglican priests, who had sought communion with the Catholic Church, into the Catholic Church.

There is an urgent need for ecumenical dialogue among the different Christian churches at the present time. This was also one of the important teachings of the Second Vatican Council. All the Popes after Vatican II emphasized the importance of ecumenical dialogue. Blessed John Paul II once said that the schism and confrontation among Christians is a very painful and negative example for non-Christians. It fails to give a true witness to the Gospel. Through his unusual gift of affinity for non-Catholic Christians, Pope John Paul II made significant progress in the area of ecumenical dialogue. Established by this Polish pope in 1986, the Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace has been taking place on October 17th every year. It expresses in a meaningful way the awareness of the leaders from different religions of the need for sincere dialogue and for greater cooperation among their adherents.

The Pope from the New World has led a full and colorful life. The faith planted in the New World came originally from Europe, but it has displayed great vitality in the unique setting of the South American continent. After his election, Pope Francis met his flock for the first time in St. Peter’s Square. With great humor, he told them: “they found me in a distant land, and brought me here”. In fact, it was a spiritual home-coming and a return to the original source of his faith — Rome, the motherland of his parents and the centre of the people of God.

The decisions made at the 13th Synod of Bishops (October 2012) are now being implemented. The new pope, who was present at the synod, is making abundant contributions to the faith of his familial home with the lively faith he brought from the New World.

The whole Church, particularly in Europe, will launch the movement for a "New Evangelization". We will see the coming of a new age, one that is hopeful and grace-filled from the blend of the new Pope's Italian ancestry and South American culture. Such is the observation of Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, the current Superior General of the Jesuits and a close friend of Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

For more than 70 years, God prepared this priest through love and faithfulness. The new Pope grew up in the age of the socialist-facist rule of Juan Peron (1895-1974), an autocratic political leader. He had the practical experience of dealing with totalitarian governments in the Third World. In addition, he accumulated the experience of administration and formation while being the provincial superior of the Society of Jesus in Argentina and the rector of the Jesuit seminary. Most importantly, he possessed the toughness to ward off the criticisms of the rulers and the courage to uphold the truth. In recent years, he faced the disapprobation of Fernandez de Kirchner, the current president, for his critique of the inhumane policies of the Argentine government.

All these show that he is a humble septuagenarian, who has gained much experience from his interaction with the world. He is imbued with the spirit of the Gospel and unceasingly defends it. He is a faithful practitioner of the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Undoubtedly, he will manifest to the world a soul formed in the grace of God.

Since the Second Vatican Council, representatives from the Orthodox and Protestant churches have been invited to take part in the major events of the Catholic Church. At the funeral of Pope John Paul II and the inauguration ceremony of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, representatives from the Orthodox and Protestant churches took the initiative to attend the events (the Holy See never sends out invitations for the funerals and inauguration ceremonies of the popes). Political leaders from over 100 countries assembled in St. Peter's Square, attending the ceremonies together. It was a historical moment for political leaders with conflicting political ideologies, from all over the world, to gather together peacefully in one place.

The inauguration ceremony of Pope Francis on 19 March 2013 was not an exceptional case. This also was a gathering of peace.

People from different lands, religions and political ideologies came together and calmly listened to the Holy Father's message of conscience: protect other persons and things with love. It was an occasion which gathered more than two hundred thousand people together at one time in the Square. The event was broadcast live throughout the whole world. What an exciting event! Right at the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has promoted world peace in a beautiful way. Such is, of course, the strength that faith demonstrates. Yet effort is required for the call to protect people and things with love to bear fruit.

4. Protective Love

We should not overlook the fact that the source of the new Pope's spiritual strength: is the spiritual heritage of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The spiritual tradition of the Society of Jesus nourishes the soul of Jorge Mario Bergoglio. In the 1950s young Jorge Bergoglio chose to form his life in accordance with the spiritual heritage of St. Ignatius. At that time, the Second World War was over and the world was rapidly changing. After he became Pope, he incorporated the logo of the Society of Jesus into his coat of arms. Therefore, we can imagine that the slogan, "*Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*," will continue to be an inspiration for him, as he faithfully serves the Church for the rest of his life. How will the Holy Father transform his lifelong spiritual experiences into enthusiasm for God's work? What will he bring to the people of our time?

Undoubtedly, this matter touches upon the definitions of "church" and "mankind". Let us combine the viewpoint of St. Ignatius with the most recent speeches of Pope Francis to see if we can discover the "ecclesiology" that this first Jesuit Pope will manifest to us, and how he will use it in his efforts to serve the world.

In addition to observing the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, St. Ignatius required all Jesuits to take a 4th vow, namely of allegiance to the Pope. In the last chapter of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius demanded that all Jesuits "have the same thoughts as Holy Mother Church" and "have the true sentiments, which they ought to have as members of the Church militant." They

should observe the following Rules: First, their own judgments should be put aside. In all matters they should be ready to promptly obey the true Spouse of Christ the Lord, our holy Mother the Church....The 9th and final Jesuit rule is to obey all the precepts of the Church, keeping always in the mind the necessity of finding reasons to promptly defend them. In no way should they attack them. "For we believe that between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, His Bride, there is the same Spirit which governs and directs us for the salvation of our souls. The same Spirit and the same Lord, Who gave us the ten Commandments, directs and guides us in holy Mother the Church." (Nos. 353-365) Before Archbishop Borgoglio of Buenos Aires was elected pope, we can imagine that the rich spiritual heritage of St. Ignatius has really nourished this loyal follower of his, 400 hundred years later.

As time went by and under the guidance of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, this first Jesuit Pope has elaborated the "ecclesiology" of St. Ignatius in a more profound way. On March 12, 2013, the day of his inauguration, Pope Francis stressed that the Church is essentially a spiritual institution, and the community in which the people of God come in contact with Jesus Christ. This is a typical "Vatican II expression." "The Church exists in order to share Truth, Goodness and Beauty. We are all called not to communicate ourselves, but to share the triad of truth, beauty and goodness." (Pope Francis, 16th March 2013; cf. LG 8 and GS 40-45)

In the same way, St. Ignatius' understanding of "man" inspires the new Pope's zeal for the salvation of souls and his outlook on the world. In the Spiritual Exercises, the four-week spiritual journey, begins with a clear understanding of the principle and foundation of the First Week. All in all, the most important thing to do is to establish a clear understanding of man and of his relationship with God. One can only begin his spiritual journey on this principle. "Man is created to praise, honor, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man and to help him in carrying out the end for which he was created." (No. 23) The point is that human beings make use of material resources without being enslaved by them. Man is different from other creatures because he is endowed with

rationality. He is the temple of God because he is created in the image of God. "God dwells... in me, giving me being, animating me, giving me sensation, and making me understand." (No. 235) The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are solidly based on Christian theology and spiritual tradition. In his inaugural speech, the new Pope used the word "protector" to explain the content of his Christian humanism.

The pope said, "Authentic power is service... and is meant to protect all of God's people, and to embrace with tender affection the whole of humanity." The Church, especially the Bishop of Rome, like St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary needs to protect Jesus. The Church should also protect the whole of creation and everyone in it, particularly the poor. He went on to say, "This is a service that the Bishop of Rome is called to carry out, yet one to which all of us are called, so that the star of hope will shine brightly. Let us protect with love all that God has given us!" The call to protect persons and things is not only the responsibility of all Christians, but the whole humanity, for it means "protecting all creation... It also means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live." In other words, we should show loving concern for each and every person, "especially children, the elderly, and those in need, who are often the last we think about." To all political leaders and to those who have high positions in the economic sphere, the pope said, "Be protectors of God's gifts! Whenever human beings fail to live up to this responsibility, whenever we fail to care for creation and for our brothers and sisters, the way is opened for destruction and for hearts to be hardened." (cf. GS 11, 14, 22)

The theme of "protection" was reinforced not only at the inauguration ceremony, but also in the phone call that Pope Francis made a few hours before the inauguration to old friends, who were waiting for his call outside the Cathedral of Buenos Aires. He said, "I want to ask that we walk together, that we care for one another, and that you care for each other. Do not cause harm. Protect life. Protect the family; protect nature; protect the young; and protect the elderly. Let there not be hatred or fighting. Put aside envy.... [Talk] with one another, so that this desire to protect each other may grow in your hearts."

In this way, Pope Francis elaborated his “theology of protection” as the direction of his ministry, while making sure that it is firmly founded on the whole Christian tradition, especially the teachings of Vatican Council II. He said, “Being protectors... also means keeping watch over our emotions, over our hearts, because they are the seat of good and evil intentions: intentions that build up and tear down! We must not be afraid of goodness or even tenderness! Tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and of a capacity for concern, for compassion, and for genuine openness to others. Jesus Christ conferred power upon Peter because of Peter’s love for Him. However, authentic power is service, and the Pope too, when exercising power, must enter ever more fully into that service which has its radiant culmination on the Cross. Only those who serve with love are able to protect!” (Pope Francis, 19th March 2013; cf. LG 22-27 on the responsibilities of the episcopate and GS 42-45)

No doubt, “protection” will be the main principle of the new Pope’s ministry, just as it was for Christ the Good Shepherd. At the same time, we expect that “protective love” will be the guiding principle not only for all Christians in their actions, but also for the whole of humankind, as they take part in the process of “reconstructing” a life of peace and goodness.

Conclusion

From the summary of the above four perspectives of Pope Francis’ experience, thoughts and recent speeches, we can foresee some of the directions his papal ministry will take. We can see that, like his patron St. Francis of Assisi, he will follow God’s will, and lead the people of God by passing on the teachings of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, which called for putting the Christian faith into real practice. Pope Francis will also give a new theological content to “ecclesiology,” namely by forming a Church that gives herself to humble service, and lives in poverty; a Church that is a loving protector of persons and of all creation.