

## AN ACTIVE LOVE FOR LIVING NEW HORIZONS

Pope Francis' language, styles and projects for the Church

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It is very difficult to interpret Pope Francis: he keeps on changing the guidelines. It seems that he has both lots of imagination in altering the structure of a sacralised ecclesiastic system, and is rich with creative passion in rebuilding the ecclesial identity starting from the Gospel.

He does not do this with theory, rather with a practical wisdom, prophetic gestures, and original choices, even through neologisms: situations, habits, terminology, practices once considered eternal, places and the pace – he changes everything without any problems. We know this well and every day we receive signals. Perhaps this is at the origin of the enthusiasm of the common people, who do not follow precise theological schemes, rather a particular instinct. They feel that Pope Francis has touched upon certain concerns and speaks a language that the heart was waiting for<sup>1</sup>. We may describe him with the words he himself used regarding the mission of the Church: “God’s leaven in the midst of humanity” (EG, n. 114).

Two years from his election (March 13, 2013), many people have proposed an interpretation of the “Pope Francis Phenomenon”<sup>2</sup>. Already last year some had made an attempt to “decipher him” or “domesticate him” according to the usual parameters. However, everyone realises that as soon as they have deciphered his ways with a valid explanation, new themes and events that change the entire situation come up. On the same day celebrating the second anniversary of his election, through the bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, he rendered obsolete the biographies of those who believed to have given a clear definition of him. He relaunched even further his ecclesiology and his reform of the pastoral aspect and spirituality in the Church.

Here are some examples. Just think of the way he called the Synod on the Family, to the ecclesial geography he followed in choosing the Cardinals, to the *Jubilee of Mercy* which will certainly not be centred around Rome, rather on the local churches, to the original way he celebrates Mass at *Santa Marta* (that has become an original source of information for journalists). Let’s not forget the almost offensive freedom of speech used in addressing the Roman Curia and the clergy, to his telephone calls to anticlerical people, to his strong-arm policy against sexual abuse, to the self-definition in his message to the *Expo* of Milan: “the voice of the poor”, in an assembly of “the powerful”. And so on... This is truly an identity that is *in progress*, an open thought and a creative skill that leave us all astonished.

### I. THE FRANCIS EFFECT

#### 1. Unsuitable approaches

1. *Not much is understood* about Francis if one compares him to his predecessors: John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It seems as though we are forcing the situation, yet however this is frequent. Of course he inherited church problems and sensitive issues that have been faced time and time again under the earlier Popes. John Paul II had

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<sup>1</sup> . A.M. VALLI, *L'alfabeto di Papa Francesco. Parole e gesti di un pontificato*, Ancora, Milan 2015.

<sup>2</sup> . Only a few publications are cited: W. KASPER, *Papa Francesco. La rivoluzione della tenerezza e dell'amore*, Queriniana, Brescia 2015; R. LA VALLE, *Chi sono io, Francesco? Cronache di cose mai viste*, Ponte alle Grazie, Florence 2015; G. F. SVIDERCOSCHI, *Un Papa solo al comando e una Chiesa che a fatica lo segue*, Tau Editrice, Todi 2015; A. IVEREIGH, *The Great Reformer. Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2014; R. LUISE, *Con le periferie nel cuore*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2014; M. POLITI, *Francesco tra i lupi. Il segreto di una rivoluzione*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2014.

characterised his pontificate with the fight against an oppressive Communism in the beginning, then he later emphasised the globalisation of the Church and the continental Synods. In the end his prolonged illness exalted the image of a suffering servant. However when he passed way, he left a Church that was excessively marked by a Movementism together with an identity within globalisation that was very fragile. The Curia had also seized excessive power. Benedict XVI, given that his nature and personality were very different from his predecessor, concentrated more on doctrine and the liturgy. He was very astounded by the downfall of the Christian civilisation and disheartened by the church scandals that exploded like an infected bomb. We may say that these two popes were the apotheosis of the 1900s, in its tragedies and its genius. The resignation of Benedict XVI brought an end to the Church of the 1900s.

Francis did not continue the fight against the dissolution of the “Christian” system, in order to recuperate an *identity* lived and set in rigid figures and certain definitions. He chose the *ethos* of welcoming and of mercy - promoting a new sense of belonging and participation: starting with the paradigm of *mercy*, and giving particular emphasis on the *joy* of the Gospel. For him the Church can not be a small besieged city, a compact system of dogmas and regulations. Instead it is a home that welcomes, a network of friends, a *field hospital*, a people on a journey who live the *ethos* of hospitality, trusting dialogue, of differences that are accepted and respected (see the famous symbol of the *polyhedron*).

2. *Francis lives* his identity without the obsession of being “different”, measuring himself with the characteristics of those who preceded him. He has no inferiority complex or of dissimilarity: he is simply himself. He enjoys meeting with Benedict XVI – almost a “wise grandfather”, as he defined him – and, as a matter of fact, he asks for his advice, goes to visit him and invites him to the more important Church events. Francis also likes to refer to the figure of Pope Paul VI, especially to *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, one of the sources for his model of evangelisation<sup>3</sup>. There are no signals that demonstrate that he is worried about being compared to others: it is we who make comparisons, with the risk of manipulating his person with categories that are not for him.

Not even his *popular option* can be attributed to the great theological and pastoral current of the *theology of liberation*, so famous in Latin America, although there may be reciprocal contamination. Instead it seems as if he has assimilated the Argentinean current of the *theology of the people*, this “people” being intended not sociologically speaking as Marxist or populist and not even clericalist, rather as a collective *ethos* imbued with religiousness, devotion and transcendency<sup>4</sup>. The *religiousness of the people* is owing to an elevated value, and the task of theologians is to listen to their wisdom and shuddering. And Francis demonstrates it continuously in his speeches, in his gestures and in his recommendations to stay “among the people”. In the programmatic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* he explicitly speaks of “keeping his ear to the people” (n. 154), of feeling the “the spiritual savour of being a people” (n. 268-274).

3. *It is difficult to understand* Francis when trying to give an evaluation of him in light of the European Church and ecclesiastical categories. However much he is of Italian origin (his family), and however much his studies were related to some European theological and cultural currents, he expresses himself in a completely different manner. All reference

<sup>3</sup>. Cf. the course for spiritual exercises he preached to the Spanish bishops (2006): PAPA FRANCESCO, *In Lui solo la speranza*, Jaca Book-LEV, Milan-Rome 2013.

<sup>4</sup>. The now-renowned reference is to the thought of some theologians such as Lucio Gera, Rafael Tello and Juan Carlos Scannone, Carlos M. Galli and others. Cf. for an early approach: C. SCANNONE, *Papa Francesco e la teologia del Popolo*, in *Civ. Catt.* (2014/I) 571-590 and *Il soggetto comunitario della spiritualità e della mistica popolari*, in *Civ. Catt.* (2015/I) 126-141.

made to Guardini or to Dostoevskij, to Manzoni or others is confronted with his own cultural synthesis, typically connected to the Latin American *ethos* and even more specifically the Argentinean one. His theological approach emphasises the specific Latin American basis (i.e. popular religiousness, the people's mysticism, meeting, compassion, the outskirts, the poor, the multi-cultural aspect, the megalopoli, etc.), which are not always interpreted in a correct manner in Europe. We are too convinced that our theology is "the theology" *par excellence*. However this is not the situation today, if looked at from a Latin American point of view.

Now we can truly speak of "post-Colonial" theologies, and not only for Latin America, but also for Asia and Africa<sup>5</sup>. Francis represents this new description, which is not a by-product that is not very academic. He has other prolegomena and other priorities: those connected to emerging cultures, to the masses of those impoverished, to global corruption, violated traditions, to women and the poor, tribal conflicts, all sorts of dictatorships and to ethnic differences.

4. *It is difficult to understand* Francis if one reduces his style as pope and his Church concerns to the priorities of the *reform* of the Curia. Many have this "litmus test" in their heads to take stock of and predict his next moves. I believe that this criterion is completely wrong. The reform of the Curia is not a "priority" for him, even if he is well-aware that it is one of the tasks he must tackle. In fact he openly states that for him it is a heavy burden to imagine himself seated at a table. Many are on the look-out to sense and intercept the signals of the "reform of the Curia". So they make a distorted reading, European-style, that does not fit him. Just as back then in Buenos Aires where few people were employed in the office, so he continues to feel that there is no need for all this grand apparatus, and he encourages a Church made up of people and not structures...

It is evident that Francis does not tolerate such a sick ecclesiastic introversion, and that he wants a "Church that comes out" from its obsessions, from its art of "watering down one's faith in Jesus Christ" (his phrase was: *no licuen la fé en Jesucristo*) to then offer it in bloodless documents that are harmless and encyclopaedic. His communication, so original and direct, is the first revolution that he brought to the Curia: from the choice of the name *Francis*, to the informal greeting *good evening* (*buona sera*), from his request to *be blessed* by the crowds in the square, to his return home on the *little bus* with the other cardinals, from his black and deformed *shoes*, to the *cross* that he wears, and the *Casa Santa Marta* where he lives and so on....

Looking at the ecclesiastical structures and the hierarchies, at times he truly seems "one man alone in charge". This is so because there are a number of bishops and priests – even some of the more authoritative collaborators closest to him – who struggle to follow him in his anticipations. Also, as regards his off-the-cuff "comments", his spontaneous language, his direct approach towards people and issues - there are few who follow him. All the more they struggle to naturally put into practice his style and freedom: and this is certainly a problem that is obvious and from which stem doubts concerning the "resistance" that holds back innovative incentives<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Seeing from a point of view almost "from the ends of the earth"

1. *There is the impression* that many observers of ecclesiastic matters and the tendencies underway in the Church are still incapable of understanding the specific nature of Pope Francis' style. Many think of his open and liberal personality, that is not so formal,

<sup>5</sup> . Just read the booklet *Concilium* 2/2013 dedicated to the "Teologie postcoloniali" (Post-colonial theologies).

<sup>6</sup> . G.F. SVIDERCOSCHI, *Un papa solo al comando e una Chiesa che a fatica lo segue*, Tau Editrice, Todi 2015.

or his professional background: he has lots of experience in both the educational fields as well as that of being a leader, often even in complicated circumstances, such as under the military dictatorship in Argentina. His very age allowed him to participate in many important events of the Church, both in Latin America (I recall above all *Aparecida* 2007), as well as in Rome (the Synods of Bishops).

Now that he has become Pope many of his writings, which before had remained at the margins, have been translated – and therefore have become known, and that are instead illuminating in understanding the *mens* of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, before he became Pope Francis. Even so, because he himself loves to repeat his words in concepts and similarities. Therefore, that which seems improvised reveals itself instead to be the usual mature style and typical language. It is not simply the normal editorial emphasis that always takes place: each time someone becomes a Pope all that which he has written enters the editorial market. In the texts written before becoming pope, we find a richness of sensitivity and perspectives that demonstrate a line of continuity and a specificity that developed in Argentina and Latin America. It is a cultural lucidity - the theological, spiritual and pastoral quality of which - was unknown up until two years ago.

2. *Others put emphasis on his Jesuit*<sup>7</sup> origins. He certainly does not hide it: “I feel like a Jesuit and I think like a Jesuit”, he has affirmed many times, even if it is no secret that there was some distress on behalf of his Argentinean brothers. He lives this identity profoundly and naturally: in moral care, in exercising discernment, in generative restlessness, in the serenity in the midst of ambiguity and in the natural ability to open oneself to novelties, with the so-called “open-mindedness” that is knowledge of orientation in complicated situations. Certainly his Jesuit matrix – and his belonging to the religious life in general – have enriched him with an ability to adapt and with an intuition that those who come from the diocesan clerical groups do not often have.

He whole-heartedly affirms that he is Jesuit and a religious. He does so not as to create a shield or to strengthen his function, rather as a beloved specificity, however placed at the service of the universal Church. And he repeats this without pretence. Yet, he does not omit repeating that it is an identity that also needs to be re-read continuously, and that the charism must be called upon and discussed within the new situations, and not to be fixed upon a parchment. He does not want to make himself a model for anyone to follow, rather a co-protagonist with each person in an adventure that involves all, and requests everyone’s co-responsibility and imagination. It is not a resource to be able to stand out, rather to put oneself at the disposal of others in a diversity that is open to communion, such as, precisely speaking, a *polyhedron* does.

This image of the *polyhedron* is his favourite, and he uses it in many situations: both for the variety of *charisms* of religious life, both to ask the movements to accept the originality of others, and in general as a journey of diversities that dialogue for all. Until now this image has remained as his own way to explain himself. It has not yet become a part of the categories of reference. It has not made a breakthrough. We are used to a more abstract and conceptual language, and certain comparisons do not work well with our mentalities that are more of concepts and ideas.

3. *There are not many people* who know how to recognise and underline that he knows how to express the *Latin American ethos* of faith and Church experience very well: situations in which spontaneity, the joy of believing, the sense of being a “people”, the warm and direct relationships, the multiple cultural and religious souls of the population,

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7. V. V. ALBERTI, *Il Papa gesuita. "Pensiero incompleto", laicità, libertà in Papa Francesco*, Mondadori, Milan 2015.

long colonial humiliation, as well as the wave of migrations from Africa (forced) and from Europe (favoured) all stand out. There are many other characteristics that we all know.

For some of those connected to the Roman or European schemes, his extemporaneous remarks are considered folkloristic expressions, factors that are unrelated to a solemn perpetuity of a sort of a style that is sacred, theatrical and of the court, considered essential to the nature of the Holy See. And they continue to categorise him as a person unrelated to the classical “scheme” of the figure of Pope. This interpretation is the fruit of a dangerous distortion, and perhaps also of a prejudice that is hostile to the variety of models of a Church and pastoral procedures that are not “European”.

He is the first truly *postmodern* Pope. The spontaneity in his relations and his demythicisation of making “a good impression”, with which he protects (in the Curia and its surroundings) the sacredness of living ecclesiastically, emerges in a bewildering way. He often repeats that he is a sinner; he admits the fragility of his health and age, and spontaneously asks for forgiveness and prayers. His direct communication by phone or in the square, and all the rest, break the eternal symbolic order, in other words the sentimental, cultural, linguistic, intellectual and narrative world of the Church. Doing so, he is producing a new sense of belonging and participation: the Church is a hospitable home, not a customs office or museum of obsolete traditions. His words and gestures prefigure the Church as a “hospitable and trustworthy community”, where one can find brothers and sisters, but also the loving empathy and care (just as in a *field hospital*).

4. *He is instinctively bothered by* all the “formalities” and conventionalism of the Roman Curia. In Rome – but not only in Rome – the organisational superfluous elements and Baroque rituals of the Catholic Church have ended up substituting the vital sense of faith, becoming sacred in an excessive manner. From a disenchanted point of view – let's say with Francis, “from the outskirts” – the entire Vatican apparatus is truly a “court”, a jumble of obsolete rules and styles, equipped with a plush and coded language. What's more, it is protected by a Baroque ritual that immobilises emotions in an eternal void. Therefore, faith as an experience of life is an ideological presupposition on the background, in a hazy fog, in the rhythmic formulas, expressed in Latin of the court. Perhaps Francis was thinking of this when he spoke of “God spray”, of “arm-chair Christians”, of “spiritual worldliness”<sup>8</sup> and certain illnesses of the Curia...

This is the starting point of many marvels, surprises and also resistance – besides the irony and talk – towards his way of living as a Pope in Rome. The crowds of believers, and also many other non-believers or those who belong to other religious traditions, have come to like him. This is because he is *a man who became Pope* and not a “character” made of plastic or of the theatre, a clothes hanger mannequin, dressed up in an absurd and even ridiculous manner. Even less so is he an angel-like ghost, surrounded by bloodless servants without emotions, protected by bodyguards with marvellous coloured clothes and armed with inoffensive halberds. He is a *normal* man, and at times he wants to remain so, even in the way he lives, dresses, in his relationships and emotions.

### 3. He is a happy man

1. *It is precisely this resurrection of "humanity"* full of warmth and emotions that has aroused fondness and expectations in the people. Many believe that through him faith is not an abstract formula, a protective suit; it is not a bookshelf, nor a long list of vetoes and warnings. Rather faith is freedom and spontaneity, a clear sky, but it is also eyes searching

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<sup>8</sup>. A nice comment applied to consecrated life in: L. GUCCINI, *Vita consacrata e mondanità spirituale. La Parola di Papa Francesco*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2015.

for others eyes that search and beg. It is a kiss to a child, a caress for the sick, giving the thumbs up to express joy and the will to make some noise that all leave the dismayed bodyguards as if embalmed. I am so struck to see that sharp-eyed and sulky look of the gendarmerie accompanying him. I see no difference with the other politicians surrounded by similar faces. I am very sorry about this similarity, which greatly contrasts the spontaneity of Francis, his big smile, and his happy excitement.

That which perhaps not everyone grasps in Pope Francis' style, which is certainly unusual, is that it is not an end in itself. It is not a theatrical skill. It is not shrewd communication. It is not a well-managed forced action. It is a passion for the Gospel almost incandescent, in the conviction that Jesus Christ "is for ever young and a constant source of newness" (*EG*, n. 11). This is the evident source of spirituality lived by him and by the Church desired by Pope Francis.

It is no surprise that there are also various feelings revolving around him, and it is not a problem. This has happened with every Pope, even the recent ones, as we all know. This is logical: there are personalities and cultures, different experiences and sensitiveness in the heart of each government. This is even more so in a body so complicated as is the Holy See. It is just that in this case, often the cognitive dissonance and that of perspective are reflected in various theological and ecclesiological systems. Hence, a certain hint of "supernatural" and "dogmatic" thinking prevents one from recognising moods and obsessions that are very human, very debatable. Everything is (and I would say even better, was) organised from top to bottom, in excess. Pope Francis described it in a sarcastically, yet very pertinent manner, in his famous speech on the fifteen "curial diseases". That speech ruined the Christmas holidays of 2014 for many in the Vatican: and still today some still feel scorched by the descriptions that were so brutal and strong.... But in that same speech there were then proposals as a *therapy*, which however no one remembers.

2. *In this context* it is logical that Pope Francis feels a bit uncomfortable. Yet he goes along his way. He speaks straightforwardly and even simplifies, at times even exaggerating, with his remarks "from the streets" (as some say). This mentality "distilled" by a thousand quibbles and the habit of hypocrisy and poisoning talks – typical of the environment that surrounds him, and he calls it the "terrorism of gossip" – is perhaps the most unbearable problem for him. However he also tolerates very little the "theological narcissism" and above all that which he calls "spiritual worldliness". This expression was not made up here in Rome. He had already used it other times, even in his Buenos Aires. This must mean that the world is the same wherever you go, and certain tendencies toward hypocrisy are transmitted easily. Or perhaps they are also pathologies essential to the clerical world?

Even more evident, in my opinion, is the difference of *Weltanschauung*, of the cultural and human *ethos*, of an approach towards life and the religious meaning. For this reason some hateful critics continue to say that perhaps he is an excellent Archbishop of Buenos Aires, what a shame however that he is in Rome, and this is not taken into consideration... With his way of acting, speaking, calling, living, meeting, etc., he demonstrates not only that the western (and Roman) tradition is not a divine absolute, but there is the risk of transforming it into a Pharisaic framework that is also pagan and even atheist. Hence, he voluntarily mocks certain illusions - veiled with sacredness, certain habits used in the past, privileges of princes, networks and lobbies, just like the mania for order, efficiency, and falseness. Among the 15 "curial diseases" there is an irony that is not so hidden, which however reveals its refusal of that way of being and acting and all together a void ecclesiastical scenario...

3. *His obsession of an "outward bound Church"* is famous: he repeats this concept in every way and on every occasion possible. It is not an obsession with being extrovert, his

need to flee solitude, advice to avoid a neurosis or to pass the time and be at the centre of attention. He is convinced that only by going outward, searching, stumbling, risking, and dialoguing may the Church be faithful to its identity. Already Charles the Great at the end of 500 A.D. warned that "*Roma in se ipsa marcescit*": in other words, closed in its fears and its past glories Rome was rotting away.

All the more so does the Church: it does not exist for itself, to preserve itself from evil and risks. It gets involved to work, lift up the injured, listen to the worries, to stay together outside comfortable securities. In a word, it is the ferment and sign of a different world, of a future of proximity and hope, solidarity, freedom and fruitfulness. The exact opposite of the "educated arm-chair Christians, who do not know how to be children to a Church through the announcement and apostolic fervour"<sup>9</sup>.

He made a *strategic choice*: the concerns of the Church must not be those within itself, its organisation, its documents, its ceremonies, its structures. This risks becoming a "house of cards" without the "fragrance of the Gospel" (*EG*, n. 39). The only reason why the Church exists is to bring God's embrace to humanity, especially that which suffers the most because it is excluded and is considered "waste". It is among those abandoned, the poorest of the poor, that God awaits the disciples of His Son the Redeemer. Going forth as a total paradigm is reflected by the same *going forth* of God towards us, within our weaknesses and nights of confusion. This relational *ad extra tension* is part of the nature of the believer and belonging to the Church.

He also used a beautiful image to say this: "But ask yourselves this question: how often is Jesus inside and knocking at the door to be let out, to come out? And we do not let him out because of our own need for security, because so often we are locked into ephemeral structures that serve solely to make us slaves and not free children of God. In this "stepping out" it is important to be ready for encounter. For me this word is very important. Encounter with others."<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. With the outskirts in his heart

1. *Besides all this*, I would also like to add: his Latin American *identity* as a Christian and man of the Church, and now also his style of being "Pope", above all as "Bishop of Rome", is an original contribution. It is a contribution to the true universal aspect of the Church. It is a providential corrective measure to shake "European" situations that are stiffened and unjustly sacralised. He carries within his heart the joyful pleasure of being the people of God, not a man of the Palace, rather it is natural for him to remain *in medio Ecclesiae*. And he does this starting from the Gospel, from the original mould. For him the fundamental issue is the Gospel to be incarnated with transparency and totality. The very choice of the name *Francis* is emblematic: it is an inheritance of the *evangelical spirit* and *passion for the world*, to be seen through the eyes of mercy and brotherhood. We may say that the very name he chose is an indication of the *evangelical revolution* the feel of which we had lost during the last centuries. He has restored the Church of its more intimate identity: Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. ...nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy" (*MV*, n. 10).

2. *He is the first Pope* who did not directly experience the Council. He is, however, a mature fruit of Vatican II. He acquired the method and has its charismatic spirit and breath of wind. And he feels in no way obliged to justify his hermeneutic choice in this regard. All

<sup>9</sup>. *Homily*, at Santa Marta: 16 May 2013.

<sup>10</sup>. This is the speech to the Ecclesial Movements, New Communities and Lay Associations on the Vigil of Pentecost, 18 May 2013.

of the sudden with Francis the Church tensions on the correct *hermeneutics* applicable to the Council – so evident with Benedict XVI, and sources of problematic conflicts during his pontificate – disappeared. He puts into the practice the multiple expressions of the Church outlined by Vatican II, without enforcing anyone in particular.

At most, the variety continues, starting however from the guiding paradigm which is that of the *people of God*, and from the guiding image of Christ, in other words the *messianic prophet of the poor*, knowing that such perspectives during the last decades have been a bit mortified and devitalised for various reasons. He does not like to waste time with issues concerning a more appropriate and binding hermeneutics. He leads them all back – the millenary heritage of the West and the freshness of the Churches in the southern part of the world, the quest for theologians by profession and the different religious traditions – to the close analysis with the Gospel, to the incarnation of the needs there expressed by Jesus. This is so because in the end this was also the *first intention* of Vatican II: then the diatribe on the hermeneutics mixed everything up.

He is convinced that among the people of believers – but also in the hearts of all honest people – there is an opening towards transcendence, an openness to what is true and what is good, a *sensus Dei et fidei*, that often the professionals of faith and ecclesiastic structures do not demonstrate (or perhaps he suspects do not possess at all?). If anything, they demonstrate it by mixing everything up with the systems of thought and the forms of precepts and vetoes, drawing away from the life of the people and religious *ethos*. His frequent critical *points* toward the theologians by profession, who have many degrees but perhaps little faith and pastoral meaning, demonstrate that they are not afraid to shake illusions and bare vanity. We can say that doing so, he pushes himself much further: he reopens the *issue of God*, and in an unusual manner: he does not accept that he is seized in the clergymen's temple, professional storytellers of an impassive God, within a society that seems now to do without everything<sup>11</sup>.

For this reason his Christian proposal puts values such as *mercy, nearness, care, meeting, companionship, the journey, temporariness and empathy*, at the centre, to indicate that we are in the fragility of all the *viatores*, just as all the *peccatores*. This is not only an alternative terminology that is almost ignored by the classic tutors of academic theology. It is instead a *forma ecclesiae* that faithfully follows the *forma Christi*. It is a *reformatio* that re-elaborates the *conformation*, according to the evangelical profile, for a new *transfiguratio Ecclesiae*. In the background it is easy to sense the paradigm of the spirituality of the Exercises of St. Ignatius.

3. *As for the existential categories*, he prefers to put the *poor* in first place, those who in society are at the margins, those rejected, excluded, the last, those refused, the victims, the lonely, the useless. This option is purely evangelical, and not sociological. For those coming from Latin America this is a choice that includes a great majority of the population. It is also the field of preferential evangelising exploration of the last decades, cadenced within the large Conference of the Assemblies of the *CELAM*. Pope Francis is a witness and coherent heirs to this: and for the most part recently, in particular for *Aparecida* (2007), he is also a recognised protagonist.

For the Western world, around the supremacy of the poor in the life of the Church, there are splendid memories and bloody scars, raw nerves, perverse Messianisms and also historical responsibilities, mechanisms of justification and worship systems. For this reason Pope Francis' gestures and terminology concerning the "poor" are read and interpreted in a totally different manner in the western culture (with its memories and tragedies), as well as in other emerging cultures. Then there are the conflicts, suspicion and

<sup>11</sup> . Cf. R. LA VALLE, *Chi sono io, Francesco? Cronache di cose mai viste*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milan 2015.

accusations of Communism, Populism and Anti-liberalism. However, Francis gathers inspiration directly from the Gospel: there is an intrinsic bond, according to the Gospel, between the mission of Jesus – and therefore of the Church – and the preferential choice of the poor, and all their existential problems.

The reason is that this does not only deal with the material shortage of foodstuffs, money, employment, health, etc. This deals with the constellation of their *dignity*, for a life “worthy” of being lived, just as he well-emphasised in the recent *message* for the opening of the universal *Expo* of Milan (May 1, 2015). In that message he invited everyone not to reflect on “hunger” in theory and abstractly, rather to imagine the humiliated faces of the hungry, the exploited, the new slaves, the unemployed, who are therefore without *dignity*. And he asked “to globalise solidarity” to contrast the “globalisation of indifference” (of which he had spoken at Lampedusa).

4. *The hermeneutic and heuristic criteria*: to therefore use the word “outskirts” – and all the implications that go along with it, from a geographical, existential, cultural and anthropological point of view – does not mean only making an appeal to a sociology of marginalisation. It means introducing a true and proper *hermeneutic criterion*, and even to a heuristic process. It means interpreting, but also “discovering” values which we need – “The poor are a treasure”<sup>12</sup> – and to begin a process of evangelical discernment. However it is also a call to take responsibility in the face of mechanisms that are financial, cultural, social, anthropological, etc., which such outskirts produce, or corrupt or conceal or exploit. We may say that even for Pope Francis, Jesus was a “marginal Hebrew” – as He is defined in the famous work by J.P. Meier<sup>13</sup> – and even the Church must have this characteristic: putting itself on the “margins”, becoming itself by living in the geographical and existential geographical outskirts, and living a state of evangelical re-foundation and reinvention.

In massive globalisation that risks conforming everything to the criteria connected to the dominion of a few “bullies” over the weak, overshadowing not only the negative facts, but also the conscious of one’s own responsibility in front of them, he asks the Church to be capable of *dislocating itself* towards those places that his Master and Founder was fond of. Therefore, it demands not only seeing reality and judging it *from the outskirts*, where, after all, he believes situations are even better understood. Rather it means rebuilding its very identity as a Church of the Lord, courageously from this point: that is why he wants an *outwards bound Church*. The reason is not to just do something for these people, showing kindness towards those who are there, looking at those who suffer and are excluded with compassion and empathy. On the contrary: he wants to explore from this point the sense and language, the style and works, the utopias and faithfulness: in a word, for a true and original re-elaboration of the Church’s very identity. This is his true Copernican revolution: not a Church that *also goes out to the outskirts*, rather one that re-interprets itself, its identity and prophecy, from that situation, well-rooted within the grief and concerns of the poorest of the poor. This is where one starts anew, with radicalness.

His apostolic trips – from Lampedusa (July 8, 2013) onwards, almost always to the outskirts, limiting himself the least possible to institutional obligations and formalities – are proof that he does go the *outskirts*. He feels at home in this context. He snubs the triumphant dramatising scenes and honorific privileges<sup>14</sup>. Even when he is at home he is very discreet, and almost avoids all triumphalism, while giving great attention, inventing

<sup>12</sup> . “You are not a burden for us. You are the treasure without which our attempts to discover the Lord’s face are in vain”: video message to the participants of the evening “*Se non fosse per te*” [If it weren’t for you], in a play at the Brancaccio Theatre organised by the Caritas of the Diocese of Rome (28 April 2015).

<sup>13</sup> . This brings to mind the more than 3,000 pages of the 4 volumes by J.P. MEIER, *Un ebreo marginale. Ripensare il Gesù storico*, Queriniana, Brescia.

<sup>14</sup> . Cf. R. LUISE, *Con le periferie nel cuore*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 2014.

initiatives and creatively taking action to solve situations of pain and humiliation. He pays great attention and is very committed to the existential “outskirts” near his home as well.

We all see that he fulfils courageous and audacious actions in favour of the poor and homeless, even near his home. Just think of the concert held in the Vatican Museums or in the Audience Hall, where the front rows are for the poor. Keep in mind the showers and barbers right behind the colonnade. Think of how he “changes plans” when he visits Roman parishes. Think of all the work that the Almoner carries out in the field, etc. These are not only *news stories*; they are actions that inspire another style, other priorities, and other ways of being true disciples of the Lord. This is where another Church is born: from modesty, not following a pattern or system, one that is creative and serving, not rhetorical, rather calling all to cooperate, from the bottom level. Those who resist him the most are precisely those of the ecclesiastical apparatus, who have a fixed image and tasks of the Church that suit them and their needs....

## II. APPLYING THIS TO US CONSECRATED

The report by the General Master, Fr. Bruno Cadoré op – a general outline of which I received beforehand – will put into light the many things that instead I must here consider implicit. It is in light of the considerations that I have made up until this point, and without intruding upon the Fr. Cadoré’s territory, that I would like to say something regarding the repercussions that this *Pope Francis Phenomenon* has had on consecrated life.

1. *Just like the hunchbacked woman*: I would like to begin by citing a small icon of the Bible: the healing of the hunchbacked woman, in the synagogue on the Sabbath (*Lk 13:10-17*). We all know this episode that provokes exultation among the crowd and irritates the leader of the synagogue, who considered it to be a disturbance of the sacredness of the Sabbath. Cardinal Bergoglio quoted this episode precisely during the preparatory assemblies before the Conclave: “When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referent and then she gets sick, just as the hunchbacked woman mentioned in the Gospel of Luke... The self-referent Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him come out”. He was speaking for the entire Church; however I perceived that it pertained to the consecrated life as well. It reminds me of the situation of consecrated life over the last few decades.

Consecrated life has been excluded from the continental Synods and those based on specific themes, already weighed down by its lack of strength and crisis in forming new projects. However, within this mechanism consecrated life has continued its service. It faced humiliation being almost completely ignored. It was made invisible and put *sub tutela*, in order to favour instead the leading role of other rampant groups, while being accused of allowing itself to become more bourgeois. It has also been gratuitously criticised as being superfluous and dying out. Instead, now with Francis it is called to take a new spot on the forefront, ripped from its marginal and invisible role, to participate in a new *forma Ecclesiae*, with prophetic courage. It is looked upon with joy and love, despite the efforts and concern for the uncertain future of many initiatives. It is no longer a sort of historical find in a museum, rather it is invited to *primerear*, to take the initiative, to stand tall with all its originality, to “wake up the world”, to live the megalopoli with all their ambiguous aspects, complex situations and wide-ranging challenges.

We may say that winter has passed: but in order for the new spring to bloom fresh resources are needed, “spring rain that waters the earth.” (cf. *Hos 6:3*). Pope Francis’ demands for a new period at the centre of attention, imply a serious and purifying return to the centrality of the *sequela Christi*, to an ecclesial sense no longer based on efficiency and

playing the field, but rather on the empathic listening of new demands, within the new contexts, so as not to give old answers to questions that no one asks (cf. EG, n. 155). “Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems... You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love”<sup>15</sup>.

2. On the specific theme of the *identity* and *mission* of consecrated life in his strategic project of the *Church*, until now Pope Francis has not supplied an authentic systematic explanation. Of course we have a multitude of very interesting as well as wise affirmations, but they are always *in progress*. Meetings, chapters, dialogues, messages, celebrations, interviews, informal contacts, etc. have all been proposed in contexts that are for the most part occasional, and are therefore somewhat fragmentary<sup>16</sup>. We may also create a *silloge*: in other words a collection of many fragments, thus creating a complete organic framework of his suggestions. However, this would be an almost useless effort, quite far from his method, that instead shuns omnicomprehensive schemes, that puts everything on the same level.

We may truly say that, being the good Jesuit he is, he has and puts forward an *open mindset*, which is continuously adapted. It is not that he does not have a clear global vision – in truth it is understood that in context he does<sup>17</sup> – but that which interests him is to focalise at the moment on some aspects, to figuratively emphasise them, with images that are a bit sharp, in order to leave further explanations open. He is not interested in fixing these thoughts, rather focalising on a situation or problem, using his imagination, calling in his good common sense and not caring about hypocrisy. It is also important to mention this frequent exclamation: “Ah! ...”. This calls everyone’s attention and gives his words a tone of interrogation, almost as if expecting a nod of the head...

Using this method this allows him to not feel bound to a theoretical compact and exhaustive thematisation, with a rigid contour that is not *liquid*. We Westerners usually bear in mind this need of having clear and distinct theories that raise concerns even for some Roman Dicasteries, who feel the mission of “giving theological structure to the papacy...”. He prefers to leave many issues unresolved: sometimes he doesn’t even finish his sentences. This is perfectly coherent with an elaboration that develops, absorbs new points of emphasis and tends to become established, yet without ever being concluded or completed.

3. *He tends to repeat* original expressions, images and comparisons. For this reason, if one is familiar with his writings and speeches – of the past and of the present – there are many repetitions, not idle rather intense, of images and provocations. He has no difficulty in recalling – even word for word – the expressions he has already used, sometimes even adding some original touch.

<sup>15</sup>. POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 21 November 2014, III,4.

<sup>16</sup>. His thoughts on the theme in the period during which he was provincial have been gathered in the book: PAPA FRANCESCO, *Nel cuore di ogni padre. Alle radici della mia spiritualità*, Milan, Rizzoli 2014. Great importance is also given to the summary of the long conversation held with the Superiors General (USG) on 29 November 2013: A. SPADARO, “Wake up the world!”. *Conversation with Pope Francis about the religious life*, in *Civ. Catt.* (2014/I), 3-17. The proposal for a transversal reading of his thoughts on the theme, expressed on various occasions, may also be the Letter: *Rejoice!* of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, LEV, Vatican City, 2014.

<sup>17</sup>. As a matter of fact the project of the *Jubilee of Mercy* is an explosive element that forces one to rethink many of the previous understandings already proposed. For many it still represents yet another of the many “Holy Years”, although “extraordinary”. In truth it is a strategic choice for a new ecclesiological season: in the original intention it is a true ecclesiological “refoundation”: the bull *Misericordiae Vulnus* emphasises it (cf. Nos. 10-12), even if it is not explicitly expressed. Here consecrated life could find its new place in the spotlight: no longer in its own works, and in competition with society, rather through Church *animation*, with generosity, contemplation and creativity.

I would just like to recall a concrete *example*. Speaking of *charism*, to the religious he had said that "charism should not be preserved like a bottle of distilled water, it should be made to bear fruit, courageously comparing it with current reality, with cultures, with history"<sup>18</sup>. Speaking again on the same theme at the audience with the *Communion and Liberation* movement, he added: "Thus the charism is not preserved in a bottle of distilled water! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean "to petrify it" — the devil is the one who "petrifies", do not forget! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean to write it on a parchment and frame it." (7 March 2015).

We may say that he has his own typical lexicon, or better his own heuristic art of transforming an idea into an image, with the tendency of a *mise en scène* of hypocrisy and obsessions of the Church, and of the religious in particular. He frequently follows a Jesuit pedagogical outline that resorts to argumentation (verbs, words, concepts, etc.) supported by three *focus points*. He himself at times smiles at how he sets everything in groups of *three*. When, however, he must make quick reference to practice – both in the positive and negative sense – he tends to accumulate a greater number of examples. Let me make an example, when citing *Evangelii Gaudium* he said: "...This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality: angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of a historical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom" (*EG*, n. 231). This is his style, an example with a cascading effect, which indicates a sharp and creative mind.

4. *A sort of introduction* interpreting his reading of consecrated life may be found in the intervention to the Synod on Consecrated Life in 1994, which Archbishop Bergoglio participated in as Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires<sup>19</sup>. In that intervention he clearly presented the issue of the "multiform aspect" of consecrated life: not so much in the variety of charisms and ideals, rather in the problems it must face. He mentioned three. The first was that of staying among the *people of God*, in a specific local Church, contributing with its own charism, to building up together in faith. The second problem is found among the *urgencies* of the present and conserving its own identity: not isolationism, not becoming uniform, rather the presence of a clear identity. Indeed direct responsibility must also be taken, avoiding "an attitude of spiritual worldliness that destroys consecrated life". The third problem to solve is that of an *eschatological reserve*: to delve into the historical reality without hypocrisy, but also being capable of spoiling it all in view of a completeness that is realised beyond time. It is a "world to come" not only of words, but also demonstrated, lived, prophetically challenging with the ability to communicate.

His intervention of the identity and struggles of consecrated life pronounced at the famous meeting with the Superiors General (29 November 2013)<sup>20</sup> are much more articulated and pertinent. Yet if they are re-read, as was done in his Letter Rejoice! (2014), many other parts of the speech – on the occasions of chapters, assemblies, commemorations, celebrations, groups, travels, visits, even only rare actions – it is possible to note that the themes increase, touching on many other aspects of consecrated life. Perhaps the most consistent and well-thought text is his Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People (21 November 2014) at the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life. However, in this letter – as is his style – he does not propose a general theory on consecrated life, rather the dynamic orientations for the special Year that was just beginning. Within his specific guidelines, of course there were also themes that he wanted to privilege: indeed as

<sup>18</sup>. POPE FRANCIS, *Message* to the National Assembly of the Italian Conference of Major Superiors (CISM), Tivoli, 7 November 2014.

<sup>19</sup>. A detailed description may be found in a recent article by A. SPADARO, "Uomini e donne che illuminano il futuro". *Sette sfide della vita consacrata secondo Papa Francesco*, in *Civ. Catt.*, 2015 II 153-155 [153-169].

<sup>20</sup>. Later summarised and published in the article by A. SPADARO, "Wake up the world!", cited above.

dynamic paths, not abstract and cold affirmations in principle. It is the solicitation for an *orthopraxis* that is not mummified.

5. *The focal points of the Apostolic Letter*: in a brief summary, we must not only reveal the usual and well-known, more or less harmonic sub-division into three parts: 1) The objectives; 2) The expectations; 3) The future goals. Nevertheless, most of all one must underline the dynamic and project reading of the past periods, the constant and distinctive centrality of the *sequela Christi*, as the supreme law, a bearing witness to communion and an invitation to “join in finding new ways of living the Gospel and responding more effectively to the need for witness and proclamation” (I,3). One must also insist on the *joy* that stems from generously following Christ, the challenge to “never abandon prophecy” and “create ‘other areas’, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive (II,1-2). Opening one’s heart to new paths of inter-cultural experiences, solidarity, closeness, new use for large religious houses for works which better respond to the new needs of taking in and answering to the call for help of the poor (II,3-4).

The third part of the letter opens to a dialogue with all the components of the Church: the new forms of “charismatic families” extended also to lay people and between institutes and being included among the people of God and agreeing on the heated theme of the family in this “synodal” period. The horizons are also opening up to other forms of fraternities and communities present in the non-Catholic churches and in all the great religious traditions (III,1-4). In this manner, Pope Francis believes that religious life in its various forms represents a precious resource for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and “can open new paths to relationships between peoples and cultures” (III,4). Finally, in addressing the Bishops, he repeats the phrase expressed in the Synod of 1994: “Consecrated life is a gift to the Church, it is born of the Church, it grows in the Church, and it is entirely directed to the Church”.

Therefore we are offered a peaceful representation of consecrated life and of its charismatic, ecclesiastic and prophetic identity. Without denying that it has fragile and unclear aspects, mentioned with the request to overcome them, Pope Francis underlines the original and fruitful contribution of a style of life that is evangelical, planned and prophetic. He does not believe that this life style has reached the end of its line – as it seems over these past years the Synods (as well as certain Roman Dicasteries) have tended to believe – rather it honestly recalls the risk of rendering the given frameworks sacred. We may say that it requires constantly applying a clear identity and explorative prophecy, to brilliantly combine *lumen et numen*. In other words, it means giving form to a transfigured existence where the radicalism of the Gospel of an authentic and not a plasticised *sequela Christi* glows (*lumen*), without deception. It also implies offering an epiphany of the mystery of transcendence (*numen*) that lives history and leads it to its future goal. This recalling of the future – the traditional *eschatological* perspective – is perhaps one of the grave deficiencies that weaken the entire planning of the Church today. Here there is room for a creativity that no one knows how to render fruitful. However, even reclaiming *mercy* as the central characteristic of the revelation and the Gospel needs new inventive, creativity of paths and styles. This is a great opportunity for historical charisms that have already been capable of realising works and styles around this value. Nevertheless, today it is necessary to re-elaborate everything with a new *parrhesia* and explorative creativity.

**Take courage; get up! He is calling you!**

I would like to conclude with a second icon that I shall take from the Gospel of Mark. It is the healing of the blind man of Jericho, Bartimaeus. Mark makes a colourful description (*Mk* 10: 46-52), better than the other Synoptic Gospels (cf. *Mt* 20:29-34; *Lk* 18:35-43). In this scene first of all there is a sort of aggressive dialogue: Bartimaeus lives on the outskirts of the city, he screams and begs for “pity”, the large crowd with the disciples scold him and tell him to be quiet. Then the situation is overturned: Jesus stops and wants to meet the blind man saying: “Call him!”. So the crowd changes its attitude and encourages him: “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.” Bartimaeus responds with three actions: he throws aside his cloak, springs up, and goes to Jesus. In the end there is a dialogue between Jesus and Bartimaeus: he asks to “see again”, Jesus responds that his courageous faith saved him. Then Bartimaeus who was healed follows Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

To me this seems a summary of what religious life has suffered and implored during these past years. It has been forced to live on the *outskirts*, just like the blind man, scolded and obligated to keep quiet for a long time, or accused of disturbing the “communion” and the peaceful *management* of the system. Consecrated life has lived surely unhappy times in which it was invisible. Now Francis wanted to understand the suffering, meet with the consecrated people, and appreciate their desire of a new era of healing and of following Christ. It is as if, he himself, Pope Francis, thought the *Year of Consecrated Life*, has said: “Take courage, get up!” to all consecrated people. He has invited them to get up, throw aside their cloaks and guards, idleness and resistance, alibis and worldliness, in order to reciprocally gain understanding of the truth. It is also for a new freedom in following Christ, within a Church that at times risks becoming rigid in its sacralised self-referentiality.

Pope Francis commented upon this episode at *Santa Marta* last November, and he did so in his style. In fact, he insisted on the risk that the Church runs of fencing itself within itself, closing itself to the cry of the poor and drawing away from God Himself. He spoke of an “ecclesiastical microclimate”, of “small worlds” within which to enclose oneself, within the privileges, refusing to hear the cry from the outskirts, of the children, the marginalised... (17 November 2014).

Like Bartimaeus, even we must implore pity, but we must also have the courage to not fence ourselves within our “ecclesiastical circles”, in which everyone “babbles”, to shut ourselves within a scared and selfish sacredness. What’s more we must throw aside our cloaks, spring up to meet with our friend Jesus who is compassionate, not His ghost, not a convenient simulacrum. We should allow ourselves to be led towards a new vision, in a dialogue with Him: once again finding the freedom to follow Him in a trustful intimacy, the joy of belonging once again, the creativity of a new proximity with all those who cry out and ask for pity. We too must become capable of pronouncing words of encouragement, to throw cloaks aside and demolish sacred illusions, to get back up on our feet and help one another to get back up on our feet. We must also follow the Master, with a bright and redeemed gaze and a bold and prophetic heart.