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**POPE FRANCIS AND THE CHALLENGE OF ECCLESIAL  
INTROVERSION: WHERE IS HE COMING FROM?  
WHERE IS HE GOING? \***

Papa Francisco e o desafio da introversão eclesial: De onde ele vem? Para onde ele vai?

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**ABSTRACT:** The presentation focuses on the reception of Pope Francis's ecclesial reform and his persistent call for comprehensive pastoral conversion as outlined in *Evangelii gaudium*. The author discusses the reforms as rooted in the Church's identity and mission to evangelize in the fullest sense of the word as understood in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and developed in the subsequent magisterium. The author addresses the toxic environment created by social media, a primary source of misinformation and fearmongering which leads to growing resistance and polarization among some church leaders and faithful. The resistance to accepting Pope Francis's remarkable ecclesial vision for some sectors of the Church revolves around a harmful reaction which Pope St. John Paul II called *ecclesial introversion*. The unfamiliarity and even strangeness of his Latin American and Jesuit roots and to the legacy of Medellín and the subsequent CELAM gatherings at least partially explain the challenge Francis's bold reforms present to the global Church.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Media. Pastoral Conversion. Ecclesial Introversion. Synodality. Ecclesial Discernment.

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\* The current article was originally a lecture given at a meeting of North American bishops on the occasion of the Catholic Extension Society's Conference of Mission Bishops on September 20, 2021, in Chicago. This presentation focused on the reception of Pope Francis' ecclesial reform and his insistent call for a broad, pastoral conversion, as outlined in the *Evangelii Gaudium*. Disponível no link: <https://crs.lmu.edu/media/lmuhrs/documents/Pope%20Francis%20and%20the%20Challenge%20of%20Ecclesial%20Introversion%20rev%2020211022>

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**RESUMO:** O artigo focaliza a recepção da reforma eclesial do Papa Francisco e seu insistente apelo a uma abrangente conversão pastoral, conforme delineada na *Evangelii Gaudium*. O autor apresenta as reformas como radicadas na identidade e na missão da Igreja de evangelizar no sentido mais pleno da palavra, tal como entendida nos ensinamentos do Concílio Vaticano II e desenvolvidas pelo magistério que se seguiu. O autor aborda o ambiente tóxico criado pelas mídias sociais, fonte primária de desinformação e atemorizante desorientação, que geram crescente resistência e polarização entre algumas lideranças eclesiais e entre fiéis. A resistência em aceitar a notável visão eclesial do Papa Francisco, por parte de alguns setores da Igreja, gira em torno de um tipo de reação nociva que o Papa São João Paulo II chamou de introversão eclesial. O desconhecimento e até mesmo a estranheza em relação às raízes latino-americanas e jesuíticas de Francisco, bem como à herança de Medellín e das posteriores assembleias do CELAM, explicam pelo menos em parte o desafio que as audazes reformas de Francisco lançam à Igreja de todo o mundo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Mídias Sociais. Conversão Pastoral. Introversão Eclesial. Sinodalidade. Discernimento Eclesial.

## *Introduction*

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis's election as Bishop of Rome and Vicar of Christ it is fitting to address the question of his remarkable ecclesial vision and the context affecting its reception in the Church. To place this task in its proper framework I begin juxtaposing two quotations: one from St. John XXIII and the other from Cardinal Avery Dulles. At the outset of his Petrine ministry which was to leave us the reform legacy of the Second Vatican Council St. John XXIII insisted on the need for a loving, trustful attitude and predisposition for dialogue in the Church when he said that: "...the ties that unite the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them: let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything" (GS, n. 92).<sup>1</sup>

Cardinal Dulles expressed his heartfelt desire for a truly evangelizing Church when he wrote. "We need a more outgoing, dynamic church, less distracted by internal controversy, more focused on the Lordship of Jesus Christ, more responsive to the Spirit and more capable of united action" (DULLES, 2010).

These comments stress the Church's urgent need for dialogue, charity and a forward-looking commitment to mission. They provide the basic elements of a hermeneutic of generosity that allows one to fully appreciate the stimulating ministry of Pope Francis. I raise these comments by two

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<sup>1</sup> See too: JOHN XXIII, Pope. *Ad Petri Cathedram*. Rome: *Acta Apostolica Sedis*, June 29, 1959. v. 55. p. 513.

great churchmen at the beginning of these reflections in order to put this conversation in the context of our love of the Church and keen desire that she accomplish her divine mission.

## *1 The Toxic Environment of Fear*

Unfortunately, the partisan climate in which we live is anything but dialogical, charitable and focused on mission. This situation negatively impacts our receptivity. Regrettably, in the current environment positive attitudes are often undermined by fear and the toxicity of our echo chambers. Our perspectives are constantly formed by polarizations and division, implicit bias, misinformation, deficient analyses, and media that play on our ideological head and heartstrings. This leads to the closing of minds and hearts, to dismissive attitudes, hasty conclusions and the taking of sides rather than respecting the views of others, much less giving them the benefit of the doubt. Even more deplorable is the constant assignment of motives and the demonization of those with whom one disagrees. Cleavages of this sort are quite notable now even in the Church where it is no secret that Pope Francis's reform vision and initiatives have been met with resistance (KEANE, 2021). Even worse, there has arisen among some ecclesiastical leaders a kind of benign silence that masks mere toleration of his leadership and a simmering passive aggression against the Holy Father's actions in the promotion of pastoral conversion and the synodal way.

The attitudes created by today's polarizations, judgmentalism and demonization amount to a debilitating assault on the charity demanded of the followers of Christ. Marching to the drumbeat of culture wars, we failure to foster an environment of mutuality and dialogue, and thus betray the ardent desire for the "fullness of charity" regularly invoke in the Second Eucharistic Prayer. Ideological obsessions distract from ecclesial communion and the *equilibrium* necessary for communal discernment and spiritual maturity. Life in the Risen Christ, life in the Spirit, is ordered toward openness of mind and heart, to balanced thinking and magnanimity that lead in turn to discernment, not rigid adherence to formulas and partisan positions. Life in Christ requires the ability to think and act dialogically rather than dialectically, in other words in terms of positive human relationships, emphasizing what is shared, mutual, common and life-giving, and not first of all in terms of oppositions, divisions, grievances and fears.<sup>2</sup> I do not think I need to name the media groups and initiatives, progressive

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Washington: USCCB Publications, 1994. n. 1879: "Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation."

and traditionalist, left and right, which overtly or covertly advance their ideologies in civil society as well as in the Church. Sadly, in the Church, particularly in its European and North American sectors, today we have polarities, each fed by resourceful and well financed enthusiasts who do not often demonstrate a serious commitment to either dialogue or even charity. Yet dialogue is central to life in the Holy Spirit as a way for the Church to proceed today more than ever in realizing its evangelizing and synodal mission.

## ***2 Saving the Proposition of the Other and Understanding Pope Francis***

In this connection I cannot help but recall annotation 22 of the *Spiritual Exercises* where St. Ignatius of Loyola says that *defending the proposition of another*, openness to others, is a fundamental principle for fruitful spiritual accompaniment, growth and maturity (GANNS, 1992, n. 22). Indeed, this principle is recommended to us as well in no. 2478 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, interestingly enough in the section that deals with offenses against truth. The point is that harsh and hasty interpretations of others' thoughts, words, intentions and deeds contribute to the spread of exaggeration and falsehood.<sup>3</sup>

In 2020 I made my annual retreat at Santa Rita Abbey, a monastery of Cistercian nuns in the high desert grasslands of Southern Arizona. Every morning I concelebrated Mass with Father Mark Scott, a former abbot serving temporarily as chaplain to the sisters. My chance acquaintance with Father Mark was a providential because it allowed me to share with him my work on an upcoming conference for bishops then in preparation regarding Pope Francis' vision of the Church. I confided in him my hesitancy in deciding how to best approach the subject. He simply observed that it seemed to him that "some people, including some bishops, especially in Europe and the United States, do not understand this Pope. People struggle to connect with him at times, to understand where he is coming from." This observation seemed honest and well balanced. It helped me formulate the approach I chose to take with the bishops and repeat here. Fr. Mark's honest comment on the situation seemed to me a good place to start.

The Holy Father's background, so different from every other pope in the Church's long history cannot simply be glossed over. To appreciate why,

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2478: "To avoid rash judgment everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbor's, thoughts, words and deeds in a favorable way."

one needs only remember Francis's status as first pope from the extreme Southern Hemisphere, "the ends of the earth," the first from Latin America, the first pope formed during and after Vatican II, and the first Jesuit pope. All these firsts make him an unknown, a new and unaccustomed presence in a long-established Catholicism centered in Europe and in recent decades in the wider English-speaking world.

There is no question, but that Jorge Mario Bergoglio's election came as a tremendous shock to many, not least of all to the Jesuits themselves. Ironic as it may seem, given Pope Benedict XVI's reputation and scholarly expertise in the Catholic tradition juxtaposed with his bold decision to resign as Supreme Pontiff, he unquestionably set the stage for what has unfolded. From the beginning, the new Pope's actions and gestures indicated that he was going to be different, starting with the name he chose and to his astonishing unconventionality: paying his own hotel bill, shunning the use of the finer papal attire, refusing to live in the papal apartment, driving around in little cars, offering sandwiches to his Swiss Guards, serving coffee to guests, and downplaying the formality, *gravitas* and display associated for centuries with Vatican protocol.

These external gestures were matched, if not surpassed, by his Vatican II inspired ecclesiology and reforms. He informed us that the pre-Vatican II concept of the Church as "perfect society" and as a hierarchical pyramid with the Pope and bishops on top has to be inverted giving pride of place to the holy, faithful people of God- all the baptized who constitute the Church in its entirety. He suggested that the old distinction between clergy and laity needs reformulation in light of the one baptismal and priestly vocation of *missionary discipleship* proclaimed in *Lumen gentium* (LG, n. 10-11). His ecclesiology stresses a *dynamic* understanding of the Church and the need for *creative fidelity*; it is an ecclesiology that involves greater openness and inclusivity, a better balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, less defensiveness and more transparency than we are accustomed to. One of the most vibrant forms of theological reflection today is in what are called contextual theologies such as liberation theology or U.S. Latino or feminist theologies. They are not optional for a Church that seeks to pay attention to the world around it. It means seeking to build a community of faith which assumes a *pastoral* stance first and foremost, one of compassion, mercy and inclusion, rather than leading with doctrinal propositions, moralism and rules which end up disinviting and excluding too many people.

While Francis's immediate two predecessors often stressed the *continuity* of the faith tradition, Francis, true to the ancient biblical metaphor of journey and pilgrimage, follows Vatican II and seeks to address *dislocation*, the reality of epochal change whose signs abound in these dramatic times. Many Catholics, even now are, nevertheless, unaccustomed to taking this vision



so seriously, with such energy and emphasis. With Pauline *parrhesia*, Pope Francis projects a dynamic rather than static understanding and image of the Church. I believe that many, nevertheless, continue to experience a sensation of bewilderment and growing discomfort with his leadership nine years into his fast-moving papacy. For the Church after centuries of defensiveness, introversion and self-referentiality is being challenged to move on and unfold as never before in its history.

How did Pope Francis develop his dynamic vision of the Church as *siempre en salida*, always reaching out, as a “field hospital on the battlefield?” He took his cue from the Latin American bishops, the largest regional assembly of bishops in the world who shepherd 40% of the world’s Catholics. Pope Francis and his brother bishops meeting at Aparecida in 2007 were convinced that the old paradigm of Christendom that held the medieval, baroque and Tridentine Catholicism of Latin America together for five centuries was simply exhausted and needed to be replaced by something more agile. Paragraph 12 of the Aparecida Document captures the spirit of Aparecida and gives us a preview of the tumult Jorge Mario Bergoglio brings to the universal Church as Bishop of Rome:

A Catholic faith reduced to mere baggage, to a collection of rules and prohibitions, to fragmented devotional practices, to selective and partial adherence to the truths of the faith, to occasional participation in some sacraments, to the repetition of doctrinal principles, to bland or nervous moralizing, that does not convert the life of the baptized would not withstand the trials of our time. (Here Aparecida quotes Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger directly.)

Our greatest danger is the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the church in which everything apparently continues normally, but in reality the faith is being consumed and falling into pettiness<sup>4</sup>. We must all start again from Christ, recognizing that being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life to a new horizon and a decisive direction (CONSEJO EPISCOPAL DE AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE, 2008, n. 12).

You may recall the unusually candid conversation that the cardinals had about the Church’s worldwide decline and the growing alienation of many, especially youth, from the Church during the consistory just before the conclave that elected Pope Francis. Cardinal Bergoglio’s brief remarks there stressed the need to move beyond a complacent and self-referential, even narcissistic, mindset that holds the Church paralyzed (FRANCIS, 2017). He was referring to the beguiling “spiritual worldliness”, tired attitudes and rigidity that often constrains our fidelity as Church. As God’s holy, faithful people in history we require authenticity, humility, openness and

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<sup>4</sup> Words in italics by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in “Situación actual de la fe y la teología.” Conference given at the meeting of Presidents of Bishops Commissions of Latin America held in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1996. Published in *L’Osservatore Romano*, November 1, 1996.

innovation in the communication of the Gospel and the Church's ancient but *living* tradition. The Gospel, above all, must be communicated in today's circumstances to today's peoples, times and places with a new "freshness;" as St Francis, this papacy's patron saint, exemplified in deeds rather than simply words. Our tradition must be applied in ways that address new situations and challenges brought about by new knowledge and technologies, and with respect for the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful. In thus proceeding this papacy resonates with the teaching of Christ in Mark's Gospel:

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. And nobody puts new wine in old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine into fresh skins! (Mark 2:21-22)

### ***3 Evangelization in the Context of Epochal Change Is the Key***

In my own efforts to understand Pope Francis's roots and frequently challenging words and gestures I had a clear "aha!" moment as I was reading his reflections on the Aparecida Document and the importance they give to the process of inculturating the faith and evangelizing cultures. In his communications Francis speaks of Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Letter *Evangelii nuntiandi* as "the greatest pastoral document that has been written to this day" (FRANCIS, 2013). To understand Pope Francis, consequently, it is necessary to realize how seriously he takes the teaching of Vatican II and of his predecessors who embraced the evangelization of culture as the Church's primordial mission and identity. Evangelization, if taken seriously, becomes a catalyst for openness, dialogue, innovation and change centered on making a real *encounter* with the living Christ (and all the transformation that flows from that) more accessible especially to people on the margins.<sup>5</sup>

At this point it is helpful to note that Aparecida clearly distinguishes between "a time of change" and "a time of change of epoch." I am not sure, however, that everyone grasps this distinction. The ever-present awareness

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<sup>5</sup> See CAMELI, L. J. *Church, Faith, Future: What We Face. What We Can Do*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017; especially Chapter 3. In this speaker's view, Father Cameli has produced a most insightful exposition of what Pope Francis's and his predecessors' commitment to evangelization as the Church's identity and mission *properly and adequately understood* really entails. His analysis is careful, well-grounded and immensely creative. He outlines a promising pastoral strategy for moving forward called "Renew My Church" which applies Pope Francis's vision for the local church of Chicago, a process also applicable to the wider U.S. Catholic Church. He has received the endorsement and support of Cardinal Blasé J. Cupich.

of epochal change as providing the context for pastoral conversion helps explain Pope Francis' initiatives leading to transformation of ecclesial structures. Perhaps the most comprehensive and bold of these initiatives is the synodal process that is taking place worldwide which involves (along with many other issues) development in the canonical status of woman and their possible roles in governance and participation in the Church. Another point of conversion relates to the need to adequately address the pastoral reality of sexual and gender identity issues, as well as matters of divorce and re-marriage. Following the lead of the Latin American bishops Francis understands the context of our times as not only involving change *as usual* but change that sometimes goes beyond the inadequate paradigms or models which have provided our mental frameworks. This is what is meant by epochal change.

A change of epoch refers to an especially challenging kind of change. It involves a change in equations, not only a change in the factors that make up the equation. It involves new formulas demanding adjustment to new ways of thinking. It means new horizons that emerge with new data and insights never before encountered by the Church. I am not referring just to the challenges that modernity has presented the Church over the past several centuries, but to those of postmodernity, post-Christianity and beyond: mindboggling developments, hybrid cultures and societies, unprecedented ways of thinking and new ecological challenges to our very existence along with technologies like artificial intelligence and biological breakthroughs that arise and question our firmly held suppositions and norms.

Of course, what first comes to our mind is the question, Can the Church as God's holy people respond to this new epoch while also remaining faithful to God's Word, to the revelation and call received, to the deposit of faith with which it is entrusted? For Pope Francis the stance taken by the Church in *faithfully* responding to these unprecedented developments cannot be *ecclesial introversion*, a circling of the wagons, a retreat into nostalgia and practices of the past. His decision to curtail the extraordinary rite was a clear demonstration of his resolve to follow the direction of the Second Vatican Council's liturgical reform. Rather than retreat into the past, the Church must energetically foster encounter, what Francis calls "a culture of encounter," a faithful and courageous, even loving engagement with today's world and realities no matter how disconcerting they may be. Is Christ not with us to the end of time? (Mt. 28:20) This moment of worldwide transition readily evokes the teaching of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus proclaims the balanced need for both the old and the new: ...every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom new things as well as old. (Mt 13:52)

The process by which the Church unfolds over time and brings forth "new things" is grounded on the Catholic concept of a *living* tradition. Vatican



II understood this well and captured how our tradition remains a living one by its correlation to the “signs of the times” (GS, n. 3-4).

One often neglected requisite for paying attention to the signs of the times is found in the simple distinction between the teaching church and the listening or learning church—*ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*. For the Church cannot proceed to discern its response in light of the Holy Spirit to present and future challenges without paying attention, listening and learning about the realities around it.<sup>6</sup> An effective response to the challenges of this new epoch gives pride of place to *Gaudium et spes*’ deeply rooted inductive pastoral methodology rather than to the persistent, deductive, doctrinal and regulatory one that predominated in the Western Church for centuries and still shows signs of life despite its ineffectiveness.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Francis hardly loses the opportunity to invoke the importance of an engaging pastoral methodology. He signals this with his intriguing assertion that “reality is more important than ideas,” and “time is more important than space.” Time is greater than space because the pathway to authentic human progress and to discovering where God is acting in human history is *process* which is itself a function of time (RUSSELL, 2017). And, of course, this pastoral approach is closely linked to the synodal way, a *discerning* way of proceeding which, of course, includes more than just listening. *Ecclesial discernment includes knowledge, consultation, dialogue, reflection, prayer and time-- all carried out in the context of community.* A Church that short-circuits the process and has ready answers for everything cannot be a listening, dialogical, or discerning community of faith. The burden of Pope Francis’s papacy, in my mind, revolves precisely around the success of his and all of our efforts to move from a command-and-control concept of church to a discerning one. This demands always cultivating a *balance* among theological extremes *and* between the *teaching Church* and the *listening Church*.

In connection with this, let me share a rather lengthy quote from an article that Cardinal Bergoglio wrote in a collection of essays on the meaning of Aparecida. For me they capture best his thinking and action. They express what has become his remarkable project as 266th Bishop of Rome:

In order for the Church to assume the grand project of God’s Reign in the style of Jesus, it will have to renew the ways in which it approaches, relates to and

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<sup>6</sup> The signs of the times are numerous: among them the growing inequity in wealth and human resources between the rich and the poor, especially poor women; ecological degradation, the global disregard for life, human dignity and rights, and many other pressing concerns addressed in Catholic Social Teaching and especially in Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*.

<sup>7</sup> See: Frans Wijzen, Peter Henriot, and Rodrigo Mejía (Eds.). *The Pastoral Circle Revisited*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005) for an expansive review of how the “turn to the pastoral impacts upon the life of the Church.”

interacts with others. The Church must also discover within the existing culture itself the places upon which to anchor itself. The evangelization of today's postmodern culture demands a pastoral response both within and outside the Church, one that is mindful of words, actions, signs and symbols—the imaginary which gives expression to the option for the truth about God and the human person. This implies the creation of a *new cultural paradigm* as a real alternative to the dominant way of thinking. This new paradigm takes into account the major concerns and points of interest of today's humanity: the social reality, ecological thought, modern cosmology, ethnicities, the issue of world peace, and an ethic of care for others, of mercy and compassion (BERGOGLIO, 2009, p. 318).

#### ***4 Some Implications: Missionary Discipleship and Reconfiguration of Ministries***

There are two features of the Second Vatican Council's understanding of the Church's identity and mission that serve as catalysts for Pope Francis's vigorous reform vision: The first is the *promotion of a missionary, outwardly engaged focus* that seeks to offer all the baptized the prospects of a personal encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ and the invitation to follow him (PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION, 2020, p. 28-29). This is the encounter that *Evangelii nuntiandi* insisted upon as the primordial first step in the process of evangelization. The second is the enabling of the missionary disciples to truly exercise their common priesthood with Jesus Christ. This creates the necessary conditions on the ground for real evangelization to happen. What this in turn requires, however, is the *reconfiguration of ministries*, new ministerial structures that allow the Church to reach out effectively.

For Pope Francis and for the Latin American bishops at Aparecida it was clear that the longstanding clerical structure of the Church is a major obstacle for achieving the Church's very mission, and it must be seriously reformed. The Church cannot continue to proclaim evangelization as its identity and mission as well as synodality while at the same time perpetuating a clerical system which certainly was not given us by Christ in its current form but evolved (sometimes for good reasons, other times for bad ones) over centuries. This clerical configuration has now clearly become counterproductive. Today the Church's highly clerical ministerial structure needs to be reconfigured to reflect the central importance of the common baptismal vocation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See: DECK, A. F. Clericalism: Neuralgic Point for Church Reform. In: BINGEMER, M. C.; CASARELLA, P. J. (Eds.). *Pope Francis and the Search for God in América*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2021. p. 310-344.

In this connection I cannot help but recall the words of a pastoral leader among the Latino community at a parish I helped out at for years. Referring to one of her parish priests she captured the dilemma of clericalism when she observed in Spanish that her parish priest “No hace y no deja hacer.” “He doesn’t do and he doesn’t let others do.” A church that claims to be evangelizing to its very core and in its entirety must be structured in such a way as to facilitate “doing.” The current ministerial structures of the church are too often not responsive to this missionary impulse that the magisterium itself increasingly insists upon. Despite progress in partnering with missionary disciples in recent decades, parish and diocesan structures tend toward clericalization to which the un-ordained leaders often succumb themselves. The ecclesial institution becomes focused on “occupying spaces rather than taking initiatives,” and, in my view, too fixated on ministry as part of the hierarchical order, as *status* rather than *service* (EG, n. 105). Already, Pope John Paul II had indicated what is at stake for the Church in its desire to fully involve the laity in the Church’s mission. While acknowledging the distinction between the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood, Pope John Paul II makes this rather obvious but evocative assertion in *Ecclesia in America*: The renewal of the Church in America will not be possible without the active presence of the laity. Therefore, they are largely responsible for the future of the Church (JOHN PAUL II, 1999, n. 44).

In his relentless drive to follow through on Vatican II’s vision of the Church’s future centered on evangelization and service rather than on institutional maintenance, Pope Francis insists on broader consultation with the whole Church in the use of regional and local synodal processes that engage every sector of the faith community in consultation, conversation, study and discernment from the top down and bottom up (GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, 2021). These are the conditions of possibility for the participation, communion and mission at the heart of synodality. The emphasis here is given to enabling and empowering the missionary disciples, to deploying them for service *ad intra* and *ad extra*. This includes the promotion of their wider participation in leadership, including the incisive participation of women in church governance. This correlates with a seminal conviction expressed in Aparecida but repeated by Pope Francis in his blueprint for reform *Evangelii gaudium* where he insists that a successful process of evangelization must be invitational and not an imposition, and carried out not by painting an ecclesiastical veneer on those being evangelized, but rather on deeply rooting the faith in today’s cultures, the real-life contexts of the holy, faithful people of God.<sup>9</sup> To do this we obviously must wrestle with (discern) the changing roles and understanding of women and other thorny issues.

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<sup>9</sup> In this, Pope Francis echoes Pope St. Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, (n. 20) where he states:... “...” what matters is to evangelize man’s culture and cultures not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots.”

In my conversations with people who have worked with Pope Francis over the years some have candidly observed that Francis is much admired but at times challenging and even frustrating. Francis wants concrete results and yet at the same time when his collaborators ask him what the plan is, he seems to downplay that concern. He speaks of his efforts and those of his coworkers as simply planting seeds and beginning processes. The Lord will give the harvest. This admirable evangelical attitude leaves matters open-ended and co-workers sometimes uncertain. Yet is not this normal for life in the Spirit: we doubt perhaps as Peter did when Jesus' instructed him to "put out into the deep water and pay out your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4)? Peter probably was thinking it would be a futile exercise. What did Jesus know about fishing?

We have experienced this discerning, Spirit-driven orientation exemplified in Pope Francis' efforts to stimulate change of attitude in the Church toward thorny issues like the pastoral care of people with same-sex attraction and of the divorced and remarried. We see it as well in the conversation about the permissibility/advisability of having women deacons or married priests in the Western Church. In these and other matters Pope Francis is focused on the conversion of attitudes that comes first, that lays the necessary foundation for true discernment, for prudential decisions and action rooted in God's love and mercy.

If one steps back and tries to understand Pope Francis, one may detect that his *modus operandi* gives first place to discernment in the Holy Spirit. Consequently, in our personal lives as well as in that of the holy, faithful people of God, the "plan" can never be quite fixed or finished. Francis has mentioned that he loves the metaphor adopted by the Fathers of the Church in the Patristic Age whereby the Holy Spirit is imagined as a sailboat propelled by mysterious wind and water currents that crop up and demand of the crew the ability to tack with those currents in order to reach the destination. To lead discerning lives in an Ignatian sense is precisely to navigate such waters, leading magnanimous, generous, open-ended lives, life in the Spirit of the Risen Christ (FELASCA, 2007).

### *Where Is This Leading? Pastoral Conversion*

I began my reflections here attempting to spotlight the unprecedented roots of this papacy, roots that help us grasp why it is both widely admired and at the same time a source of puzzlement and even distress for some. To recapitulate as I come to an end: For me the greatest cause of disconnect with this Pope's vision has to do with three sources of deepest meaning and direction in his life: 1) His vision rooted in his Latin American cultural and ecclesial experiences combined with 2) his



being steeped in the dynamic, Christ-centered spirituality and focus on discernment of the Ignatian Exercises, and 3) the fact that he is the first pope religiously and theologically formed during and after the Second Vatican Council.

More fully appreciating the sources of this extraordinary Pope's ministry in light of these distinctive sources and contextual factors may still not reduce the concern and even alarm that some feel about Francis. My hope is that this review of some of these roots may help everyone discover the underlying values and inspiration of his strenuous efforts to lead the Church in the direction of pastoral conversion in this fraught moment of Church history.<sup>10</sup> If there is one phrase that captures the Second Vatican Council's and this Pope's project of renewal it is *pastoral conversion*. I end my presentation with these rather stunning and breath-taking words of our indefatigable Pope from his *magna carta*, *Evangelii gaudium*, where he describes his project with Pauline *parrhesia*, that is, with candor and courage echoing the words of his esteemed predecessor St. John Paul II:

I dream of a "missionary option," that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth, and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As John Paul II once said to the Bishops of Oceania: "All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion." (EG, n. 27).

## **Abbreviations**

EG = *Evangelii gaudium*

GS = *Gaudium et spes*

LG = *Lumen gentium*

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<sup>10</sup> More detailed analyses of this Pope's remarkable roots and agenda can be found in Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014); and in *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2019). See also *Francis, Bishop of Rome: The Gospel for the Third Millennium*, Allan Figueroa Deck, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2016); and by same author *Francisco, Obispo de Roma: La Revolución de la Misericordia*, (México: Editorial San Pablo, 2016).



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