

Feature Article: JAF1386

## A WINDOW INTO THE THEOLOGICAL VISION OF POPE FRANCIS

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This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 38, number 06 (2015). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

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### SYNOPSIS

Pope Francis seems to be an easy character to come to terms with. Frugal, transparent, and down to earth, he is one of the most popular public figures around the globe. What about the theological vision that permeates his papacy? In order to have a glimpse of Francis's spiritual horizon, one needs to take his Jesuit identity into account. Despite the kind manners of the man, a certain anti-Protestant attitude lingers in the pope's mind and heart. Although he does not seem to be pushing a Roman Catholic outlook as dogmatic as his predecessor's, he nonetheless has his own "dogmatic certainties," and they are not what one may expect them to be. Furthermore, his insistence on "mission" needs to be grasped within the whole of his theological framework. The use of the same word by other Christians does not necessarily imply the same meaning. Mission is the outworking of Francis's program and fits his own personal interpretation of the papacy. This theological portrait of the pope will indicate the particular blend of catholicity he is embodying and advocating. Since catholicity is what Roman Catholicism stems from, Francis's version of catholicity is perhaps the most significant mark of his papacy.

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When Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected as Pope Francis on March 13, 2013, the first question that many Vatican experts asked was: what did he write? What books

did he publish? The answer was simple and straightforward: none. Contrary to his predecessor, Benedict XIV, who had been a major theologian in the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church, Bergoglio was not a scholar. So, are we left completely without open windows onto his thought prior to the beginning of his papacy? Not necessarily. There is at least one hint that helps us to appreciate the theological worldview Bergoglio is coming from. It is not the only element that defines his background, but still a significant one, and it will prove an intriguing entry point into the unfolding theological vision of his papacy.

## JESUIT ANTI-PROTESTANTISM?

Friendly. Appreciative. Always wanting to stress commonalities and to lay aside differences. This has been the popular image of Pope Francis in his dealings with non-Catholics thus far. This may have been the rule, but now there is an exception that sheds light on a less-known aspect of his thought. The recent republication of a lecture on the history of the Jesuits that Archbishop Bergoglio gave in Argentina in 1985 indicates the kind of harsh assessment that he gave of the Protestant Reformation in general and of John Calvin in particular. The lecture was republished in Spain in 2013 and then translated into Italian in book form.<sup>1</sup>

In examining the history of the Jesuits, Bergoglio gives special attention to their interactions with the Reformation and their role in the Latin American missions. According to him, the inevitable consequences of the Reformation are the annihilation of man in his anxiety (resulting in existential atheism) and a leap in the dark by a type of superman (as envisaged by Nietzsche). Both outcomes lead to “the death of God” and a kind of paganism that manifests itself as Marxism and Nazism—all this originating from the “Lutheran position”! Bergoglio argues that the Reformation is the root of all the tragedies of the modern West, from secularization to the death of God, from totalitarian regimes to ideological suicides.

There is nothing new under the sun. This disparaging and appalling view of the Reformation had been the common reading of modern European history by scores of Counter Reformation Catholic polemicists until recent decades. Bergoglio did not invent it. He rather reaffirms it as if more thorough historical research and theological and cultural analyses never took place after the Council of Trent. What can we make of his friendly tones toward Protestants if he really thinks that the “Lutheran position” is to be blamed for all the evils of Western civilization?

There is more. Bergoglio makes a distinction between Martin Luther the “heretic” and John Calvin the “heretic” and “schismatic.” The Lutheran heresy is “a good idea gone foolish,” but Calvin is even worse because he also tore apart man,

society, and the church. As for man, Bergoglio's Calvin split reason from the heart, thus producing the "Calvinist squalor." In society, Calvin pitted the bourgeoisie against the other working classes, thus becoming "the father of liberalism." The worst schism happened in the church, however. There Calvin "beheaded the people of God from being united with the Father." He beheaded the people of God from its patron saints. He also beheaded them from the mass, that is, the mediation of the "really present" Christ. In summary, Calvin was an executioner that destroyed man, poisoned society, and ruined the church.

Despite the much applauded yet inconsequential "words of apology" recently extended to Pentecostals and Waldensians, Pope Francis still demonstrates he has mixed feelings about the whole of the Protestant Reformation.

### A DOGMATIC CERTAINTY

The more Pope Francis speaks, the clearer his theology becomes. He has always said that the traditional dogmas and the catechism are in the background of what he affirms and that nothing of substance changes in his remarks on God's infinite mercy and the goodness within every human being. This is true only in part. Different Roman Catholic interpreters have always played with the task of putting different accents on the same sheet music and Francis is deliberately putting his preferred accent—*fortissimo*—on another key dogma.

Talking to Jesuit journalists from across the world (September 19, 2013), Pope Francis said many things, and these comments attracted lots of positive reviews. Here we will focus on this particular one: "I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs, or anything else—God is in this person's life. You can, you must, try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow."<sup>2</sup>

This pope is not someone who likes to use dogmatic language, at least on the surface. Yet, here he is using the strongest language possible. He really wants to mean what he is saying. God is in everyone's life. This unqualified statement raises questions about what the pope thinks of the nature of sin in human life and the reality that we all "fall short" of God because of our sin (e.g., Rom. 3:23). While teaching that those who believe in Christ shall be saved, the Bible is clear in saying that humans universally are sinners and therefore are enemies of God and under His judgment. The pope, instead, wants to affirm the dogma that God is present because there is always some residual "good" in man.

One further comment by Pope Francis reinforces his dogmatic view on man's inherent openness to God's presence. Responding to the editor of *La Repubblica* (September 11, 2013), he wrote the following:

*You ask me if the God of Christians forgives one who doesn't believe and doesn't seek the faith. Premise that—and it's the fundamental thing—the mercy of God has no limits if one turns to him with a sincere and contrite heart; the question for one who doesn't believe in God lies in obeying one's conscience. Sin, also for those who don't have faith, exists when one goes against one's conscience. To listen to and to obey it means, in fact, to decide in face of what is perceived as good or evil.*<sup>3</sup>

Put simply: obeying one's conscience is what God will take account of in granting forgiveness. Notice that the pope here is not speaking of those who have never heard the gospel but of those who don't believe it, knowing what they are doing. Apparently, to go against one's conscience counts more than going against God's revelation. Although the Bible teaches there is no excuse before God's righteous judgment (e.g., Rom. 2:1), Francis here says that the conscience is the final judge to whom God will submit Himself. The human conscience is the determinative factor for God's forgiveness.

These two statements—God is in every person, and obeying one's conscience is what really matters—are thus part of a coherent “dogma” of human goodness and the consequential hope for universal salvation. What is important to observe is not so much the details of each statement but rather the general theological vision that lies at its core. Traditionally, Roman Catholicism has worked within the nature–grace scheme largely dependent on its pontifically ratified Thomistic tradition. According to this theological metanarrative, nature, although partially flawed by sin, is elevated by grace to its supernatural end, and the sacramental system of the Church is the way in which grace effects this elevation.

Moreover, in the twentieth century, this scheme was significantly modified and received an important endorsement at Vatican II. Whereas the old scheme implied that grace needed to be “added” to nature, the new version claims that grace is already part of nature and works, not as something extrinsic, but intrinsic, to it. Grace is inherent to nature and through the sacramental system of the Church it unfolds itself more and more.

One advocate of a “grace within nature” framework was Karl Rahner (1904–1984), himself a Jesuit like Pope Francis. His view of the “anonymous Christian” stated that each human being is already inherently graced and therefore a Christian, even

though he is not aware of it or does not want to be such. While not using the Rahnerian language, Pope Francis works within a similar “dogmatic” framework. God is present in everyone, and one’s conscience is what will ultimately count. Despite all its missional allure and merciful attitude, what Francis is saying is not good news for gospel-centered people.

## WHAT ABOUT MISSION?

Together with the dogmatic certainty about human conscience, mission is another defining word. Pope Francis wrote the apostolic letter titled *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*), the second magisterial document of his pontificate (the previous being the encyclical *Light of Faith* and the most recent one being *Laudato Si’* on ecological concerns).<sup>4</sup> It is the first, however, to come entirely from his own pen (and was originally written in Spanish). In 2010, Benedict XVI launched the idea of the “new evangelization,” and in 2012, he convened a Synod of Bishops to discuss it. Now we have Francis’s interpretation of the new evangelization in an authoritative statement, which is also a compendium to interpret most of what the pope has been saying and doing so far.

Although *Evangelii Gaudium* comes one year after the synod and is quoted twenty-seven times, Francis’s whole approach to the topic is more dependent on the 2007 Latin American document of Aparecida.<sup>5</sup> More than the “new evangelization,” this pope loves to speak about “mission.” The former attempts at reaching the nonpracticing Catholics, the latter is a style of the whole Church going in all directions. The former is particularly relevant for the ever-more-secular West; the latter is a “catholic” agenda for the world. The vision of Pope Francis is an outward one, and “mission” (whatever it may mean) is at the center of it. His Church will not be on the defensive but will be engaged proactively in promoting its vision.

The word “joy” is repeated fifty-nine times and is the common theme of the document. The pope wants to give a joyful flavor to mission. The gospel is also part of the title but has a lesser role in it. The “heart” of the gospel is summarized in this way: “The beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead” (p. 36). In this apparently evangelical definition of the gospel, something is missing: while the objective good news of God is rightly related to the narrative of Jesus Christ, the subjective part of it (i.e., personal faith and repentance from one’s own sin) is omitted.

The tragedy of being lost without Jesus Christ is also downplayed. For this reason, nowhere in the document are unrepentant unbelievers called to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Non-Catholic Christians are already united in baptism (244),

Jews don't need to convert (247), and with believing Muslims, the way is "dialogue" because "together with us they adore the one and merciful God" (252, a quotation of *Lumen Gentium* 16). Other non-Christians are also "justified by the grace of God" and are associated to "the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ" (254). The gospel appears not to be a message of salvation from God's judgment but instead is a vehicle to access a fuller measure of a salvation that is already given to all mankind. According to Francis, therefore, mission is the joyful willingness to extend the fullness of grace to a world that is already under grace. Is this the mission that the Bible calls us to?

## THE CATHOLICITY OF POPE FRANCIS

What has been the "Francis effect" on the Church? The simplest answer is that he is envisaging a different kind of catholicity. Both his insistence on the human conscience and mission stem out of his catholicity. In the Roman Catholic understanding, catholicity has to do simultaneously with unity and totality. The basic premise is that multiplicity should be brought into a unity. The Church is seen as an expression, a guarantor, and a promoter of true unity between God and humanity and within humanity itself. In Vatican II terms, the Church is a "sacrament of unity." As long as the institutional structure that preserves this unity remains intact (i.e., the Roman element), everything can and must find its home somewhere within its realm (i.e., the catholic element).

The Catholic mindset is characterized by an attitude of overall openness without losing touch with its Roman center. It is inherently dynamic and comprehensive, capable of holding together doctrines, ideas, and practices that in other Christian traditions are thought of as being mutually exclusive. By way of its inclusive *et-et* (both-and) epistemology, in a catholic system, two apparently contradicting elements can be reconciled into a synthesis that entails both. In principle, the system is wide enough to welcome everything and everyone. The defining term is not the Word of God written (*sola Scriptura*) but the Roman Church itself. From a Catholic point of view then, affirming something does not necessarily mean denying something else but enlarging one's own perspective of the whole truth. In this respect, what is perceived as being important is the integration of the part into the Catholic whole by way of relating the thing that is newly affirmed to what already exists.

Catholicity allows doctrinal development without a radical breach from the past and also allows different kinds of catholicity to coexist. Each pope has his own catholicity project. John Paul II (the former Archbishop of Krakow, Poland, Karol Józef Wojtyła) pushed for the Church to become a global player, thus expanding geographical catholicity and its profile with the media. Benedict XVI (the former Prefect

of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger) tried to define catholicity in terms of its adherence to universal “reason,” thus trying to reconnect the chasm between faith and reason that the Western Enlightenment had introduced. These catholicity projects are not mutually exclusive, but they all contribute to the overall dynamic catholicity of the Church.

After more than two years of his pontificate, it is becoming apparent what kind of catholicity Francis has in mind. He wants to build on John Paul II’s global catholicity while shifting emphases from Wojtyła’s doctrinal rigidity to more inclusive patterns. He pays lip service to Ratzinger’s rational catholicity, but wants to move the agenda from Western ideological battles to “human” issues that find appeal across the global spectrum. If Ratzinger wanted to mark the difference between the Church and the world, Francis tries to make them overlap. In shaping the new catholicity, he seems closer to the pastoral tone of John XXIII, who was canonized (i.e., declared a saint) in 2014. So there is continuity and development. This is the gist of catholicity.

Francis has little time for nonnegotiable truths, and gives more attention to the variety of people’s consciences. He is more interested in warmth than light, in empathy than judgment. He focuses on attitude rather than identity, and on embracing rather than teaching. He underlines the relational over the doctrinal. For him, proximity is more important than integrity. Belonging together has priority over believing differently.

Of course, all these marks are not pitted against each other, but their relationship is worked out within a new balance whereby the first one determines the overall orientation. Roman catholicity works this way: never abandoning the past, always enlarging the synthesis by repositioning the elements around the Roman center. Francis calls this catholicity “mission,” and this word lies at the heart of his theological vision. The word is familiar and intriguing for Bible-believing Christians, yet one needs to understand what he means by it beyond what it appears to mean on the surface.

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## NOTES

- 1 Jorge Maria Bergoglio – Francesco, *Chi sono i gesuiti* (Bologna: EMI, 2014).
- 2 The full interview can be found here:  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130921\\_intervista-spadaro.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html).
- 3 [http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/09/11/news/sintesi\\_lettera\\_bergoglio-66283390/](http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/09/11/news/sintesi_lettera_bergoglio-66283390/).
- 4 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papafrancesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papafrancesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html). Reference to paragraph numbers are given in the main text.
- 5 In May 2007, the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean met at the shrine of the Virgin of Aparecida in Brazil for their fifth general conference. The final draft of the document was edited by a committee presided over by the future Pope Francis and contains many elements that can be found in his teaching and attitude. The Aparecida document can be found here:  
[www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf](http://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf).