

LENT COURSE 2022

THE VISION OF POPE FRANCIS

Introduction

I think I have remarked before that the teaching ministry of the Holy Father, which is a bit of a roller coaster, has in my view rendered out of date existing books and programmes in pastoral ministry, renewal and evangelisation. It is difficult to keep up: only last week, marking St Joseph's day on Saturday, a new letter to priests appeared, reflecting closely Pope Francis' teaching, which I suspect many of us haven't had time to read yet. Lent is about constant renewal and conversion of heart, and this is what it is about.

The purpose of this talk is to look at the synodal process and pathway in the context of the teachings and ministry of Pope Francis, Jorge Maria Bergoglio. This is important because this really is a case of 'the medium is the message.' The ways in which he has asked us to join in the preparation for the Synod of Bishops in 2023 are central to what the synod is about, and key to how we want to renew and reform the Church. Moreover, people in the Church who don't like the process, who are filled with fearfulness and suspicion, are people who haven't really paid attention to what the pope has been saying; but they don't like him anyway. As I said last week, this process - and we're only at the beginning - is a challenge to ways of working in the Church which are authoritarian, clericalist (and Deacon Séan has written another good piece about this in the latest newsletter), unaccountable, contemptuous of laypeople (particularly women), and self-seeking. These vices will only cease to mar the image of Christ in the Church if we change the way we work, the way we are.

Dialogue in *Fratelli Tutti*

A year ago we spent some time in Lent looking at the Holy Father's letter from October 2020, *Fratelli Tutti*. Chapter 6 of the letter begins with these words:

'Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word "dialogue". If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue. There is no need for me to stress the benefits of dialogue. I have only to think of what our world would be like without the patient dialogue of the many generous persons who keep families and communities together. Unlike disagreement and conflict, persistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live much better than we imagine.' (198)

The letter was written about social friendship in the world, not to address governance in the Church; nor is it about Ukraine. But in relation to the Church, and to the international situation at the moment, these words say so much. This paragraph isn't a dry piece of academic writing: there is real passion in the pope's words. He says that dialogue which does exist in the world, and there isn't enough of it, 'helps the world to live much better than we imagine.' This must mean the same for the Church: dialogue, which is what the synodal process is about, can help the Church 'live much better than we imagine.' It is rather obvious really: through dialogue we can get to know each other better; this might mean that, even if continue to disagree with someone, we may know them better, we may be able to understand them. Incidentally, a challenge post-pandemic (and at least here I am not sure we are 'post' yet, with two members of our clergy team with Covid at the moment) is that

with so little normal parish social contact having happened in the last two years, we need in many ways to get to know each other again.

As I have said every week, this process, sooner or later, will be the only way to end this terrible war: one side is not going to 'win'. In relation to the war a new initiative for Ukrainian students has been launched by St Mary's University (https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/news/2022/03/ukraine-scholarships?fbclid=IwAR3jlSYYjyOKOtc_Zjkn8Se6Qh6ob1a60iGPzzG4p7aS1jmsS-RtNdPNOU8)

In so many situations it is so much easier not to do this - and I am probably worse than most. I like to take decisions quickly, and if I am in a position of leadership to get on with implementing the decision as quickly as possible. Dialogue and listening, if we do them seriously, take time; for many of us time is at a premium; we don't feel we have much of it. So *Fratelli Tutti* is for the whole Church, as well as for a world in which friendship is in short supply. Apart from the letter to priests I mentioned, only in the last few days the pope has drastically reformed the running of the curia, the 'civil service' which runs the Holy See: apart from reorganising departments (and what he's done is significant, but for another time), he's opened up the jobs to any baptised Catholic, including women. That means something: it's not simply to improve the pool from which you draw people, or to make priests in the curia go and do things other than office jobs. It is about changing the Church, from top to bottom.

The earlier ministry of Jorge Bergoglio

Francis is now in the tenth year of his pontificate (a word, incidentally, which doesn't simply mean 'ministry of a pope / bishop', but 'bridge building'). What he says about synodality, and dialogue, didn't suddenly start in 2020, or indeed in 2013 when he was elected pope. I would recommend, as I have done before, that if you have a chance you read the books about Francis by Austen Ivereigh and Christopher Lamb. Their research on the Holy Father is very thorough, and their analysis of him and of the problems he faces in the Church is faultless. I can't cover this evening all of what they tell us, but I will try and pinpoint some important facts. Context is always important; the background of the pope tells us about him, as is true of all of us.

Jorge Bergoglio was born in Argentina to parents who were both of Italian background. His paternal grandmother Rosa was a great influence on him; in the 1920s in Asti near Milan, she had been active in the organisation known as Catholic Action in the years after the Fascists under Mussolini came to power. Ivereigh writes:

'Rosa became one of the outstanding leaders of the women's branch. She appears various times in the town's only newspaper....twice a week she gave marriage preparation classes to women in the San Martino church, and wrote popular pamphlets. Her oratory and courage made her a target, who did not like women imitating men. They heckled and cajoled her, one time shutting down the fall where she was due to speak. Unable to gain entry, she instead made her speech in the street, standing on a table.' (*Wounded Shepherd* pp. 12-13; other references are all from this excellent book)

This is a remarkable picture: agitation, discussion, a woman being assertive, a woman being bullied by other people. Lots of people, including women, worked like Rosa Vassallo Bergoglio for people

in the 1920s; but it was not how the leadership of the Catholic Church worked. It's not how the leadership of the Catholic Church works now.

Secondly, when the young Jorge Bergoglio decided to become a priest in the late 1950s he was influenced by and attracted to religious orders. One of his early mentors was a Salesian priest (the same order as some of the sisters in our own parish), and he entered the Jesuits. Being a diocesan priest I don't know much about religious orders and congregations, but I do know that in most cases at all levels discussion and dialogue are important as ways of reaching a consensus, of making decisions. For him as a Jesuit there's another factor: Jesuit spirituality is inspired by their founder, St Ignatius Loyola, and his way of encouraging people to reflect on the Scriptures as a way of helping with decision-making: the classic way would be on an intensive retreat. Ignatius invites people to imagine that they are present at a scene in the Bible. He invites us to ask questions about the scene, to ask ourselves *how we feel*, to be imaginative. In the process of 'Spiritual Exercises' you're encouraged to ask questions, to engage in dialogue to bring about clarity. It's a demanding model; it's not quick or easy. It tells us something about the pope and how we want us to be. Hopefully in our parish as we progress along the synodal path we will be able to learn from our Religious congregations here.

Two examples: Aparecida and *Amoris Laetitia*

There are countless examples from the life of Bergoglio; but I want to refer to two - one from his time as a senior cardinal in South America, and the other from earlier in his ministry as pope.

As some of you may know one of the most exciting things to have happened in the life of the Church since the late 1960s is the Latin American movement known as *Liberation Theology*. Rooted in the Bible, this theological movement did a great deal to empower the poorest people in the continent, to seek liberation from structures of sin in society, from systematic oppression. A characteristic of the movement is a series of big assemblies of Latin American bishops (the CELAM assemblies), beginning at Medellin in Columbia in 1968. The documents from these assemblies, reflecting the life of the poor, are major Catholic teaching material. For over fifteen years from the early 1990s no assembly met, but in 2007 bishops gathered again in the city of Aparecida in Brazil, with the blessing and support of Pope Benedict XVI. Cardinal Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was a leading figure in the Latin American church; he played a very big part in the final teaching document from the assembly. Ivereigh puts it like this:

'Aparacida saw Christianity's loss of cultural and political power as an opportunity to recover the gratuity of God's grace. Rather than defining itself as antiglobalisation, it sought a globalisation of solidarity'. (154)

We're told that Bergoglio got the bishops and others to agree on the final documents through constant discussions, insisting that people should carry on talking until they found common ground (the Latin American Church is as polarised as others). What is also important is the the assembly in 2007 didn't just issue a document: it laid down plans for dioceses to implement pastoral plans to renew their life. This offers a vision for all of us

At Aparacida the bishops had noted how the Christian Church came together in a...context of urban pluralism, which it made use of to grow. It wasn't, at the time, a powerful civic institution seeking influence in the circles of power; Christ's followers were often hounded

and persecuted....the Christians’ “gaze of faith” allowed them to see God alive in his people, especially on the margins, and they went on to meet him there.’ (155-156)

So when in the responses you made in the synodal pathway you wrote or spoke about the Church’s responsibility to the marginalised, to be inclusive, you were in accord with the vision in Brazil back then. Not only that; some of you wrote about opening up the Church, at new ways of enabling this great building become part of the Church’s mission. So again:

‘One important idea is *santuarizar la parroquias*, as one of Bergoglio’s sticky neologisms puts it: to have parishes take lessons from the shrines. The city’s actuaries are open all hours, take people as they come, and are down-to-earth.’ (156)

As I understand it these urban shrines, like sanctuaries such as Lourdes or Walsingham, are centres of special popular devotion. The churches and shrine buildings are open all the time, with teams available to help people in lots of different ways. This model of dialogue and discussion renews the Church’s mission: how we make this church more available to people in so much need in our society, is one of our challenges where the pope has so much to teach us as we try to digest the feedback you gave us. Before the pandemic, nearly three years ago, we worked hard to have more doors open in the building and after all the restrictions of the last two years we need to restart that approach.

The second example is more recent from Francis’ ministry as pope, from the Synod on the family in Rome in October 2015. This synod came together to look at problems facing families in terms of Catholic teaching. One of the key issues(though not the only one), always a point of division and disagreement, was how the Church should support divorced people; there was a lot of polarisation and division. The eventual letter from the pope in response to the synod, known as *Amoris Laetitia*, was an attempt to move the Church’s response in a more pastorally sensitive direction, and has attracted controversy. But what’s important now is what the pope said at the beginning of the synod:

‘Francis stressed that what mattered was not negotiating an agreement like a parliament but walking together “to read reality with the eyes of faith and with the heart of God”. The synod, he reminded them was “a protected space in which the Church experiences the action of the Holy Spirit”, one that called for “apostolic courage, gospel humility and trusting prayer.”’ (269)

This is not all sweetness and light. Ivereigh describes how Francis took on conservatives; he’s not afraid of being critical. Being open to the Holy Spirit, being open to one another, can disarm a partisan atmosphere; but it means having the courage to criticise openly, not conspire behind people’s backs. Having said that the Holy Father has continued to be undermined by right wing Catholics, particularly those in the United States backed up with large amounts of money. One anecdote quoted by Ivereigh concerns our own Cardinal Nichols:

‘When Cardinal Nichols asked the English language group he chaired to speak about their own families, it “totally transformed” the discussion. “Suddenly we realised that every bit of the saga of family living was in the room”’ (271)

The bishops in the group all came from families; the cardinal got them to take about them rather than doctrinal statements.

Again, the method, the medium, is the message.

Next week we try to root all we have been saying in how, strengthened by the process of dialogue and renewal, the Church will try and enter into the Lord's sufferings, death and resurrection in Holy Week. I hope the little we have looked at this evening helps us see how Pope Francis' vision is a constant source of strength and inspiration: thank God in your prayers that he has been given to us as pope, and pray for him.

Synodality now