

The Francis Effect: Joy and Fresh Hope?

Talk to Spirituality in the Pub Meeting, Sandringham, 23 April 2014

When 115 cardinals entered the Sistine Chapel in early March 2013 to elect a new Bishop of Rome, were they looking for a man who had the qualities set out by St Paul in his 1st Letter to Timothy?

‘... irreproachable, married only once, temperate, self-controlled, decent, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not aggressive but gentle, not contentious, not a lover of money; able to manage his own household well, keeping his children under control with perfect dignity; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of the church of God? ... He must also have a good reputation among outsiders ...’ (1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-19).

Or the qualities he listed in his Letter to Titus?

‘... blameless, not arrogant, not irritable, not a drunkard, not aggressive, not greedy for sordid gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, temperate, just, holy and self-controlled, holding fast to the true message as taught so that he will be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to refute opponents’ (Titus, 1:5-9).

Or were they looking for a man with the qualities outlined by Jorge Bergoglio, one of their own?

‘... a pastor, close to the people, a father and brother, with great gentleness, patient, and merciful...not having the psychology of a prince, ... able to support the movements of God among his people.’

Aside from the ‘once married’, it would appear that they were looking for all those qualities, none of them heroic. More than anything else, I think they were looking for a pastoral leader, someone with that special chrism or gift from the Spirit who could bridge the widening gap between those Catholics who wanted to take the Church forward according to the vision of Vatican II, and those who were fearful of reforms that a full-blown vision might usher in; someone who could draw the Church closer to Christ, and give new impetus to its evangelizing mission. To date, all the indications are that in choosing Jorge Bergoglio for his charism of pastoral leadership, they chose well.

Tonight, I would like to talk about the pastoral leadership charism of Pope Francis, Bishop of Rome: how we have recognized it, where it is leading him, how he is using it to lead the Church of our times, and how I would assess his achievements to date

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How we recognized Francis’s charism for pastoral leadership

In the first weeks after Jorge Bergoglio was elected Bishop of Rome, many of my family and friends asked what I thought of the new pope. Like so many they recognized that there was something very different about this man. My initial response was guarded, as I knew little of him or his background. He was not at the top of the tipsters’ lists, and few knew he was a front-runner in the previous conclave. But over the next few months a clearer picture began to emerge. Looking back, I would characterize that period as our ‘recognition stage’.

From the outset we recognized that this man was, and would be, unlike his predecessor; not necessarily a better pope, but different.

Initially the recognition came through symbols, simple actions which struck a chord, sent a silent message, touched our hearts. Symbols have an exquisite ability get to that place in our souls where we perceive acutely, are swayed convincingly, and make judgments easily. Symbols work intuitively and sub-liminally, they bypass the normal methods of communication and get to us 'under the threshold'. Sometimes we can't believe their impact, but once impacted, we cannot forget them and they remain a powerful force.

Who could forget:

- his first appearance on St Peter's balcony *sans* the customary red ermine trimmed papal cape; and his (perhaps apocryphal) words to the Monsignore offering it: 'No thanks. You wear it. The carnival is over!'
- his simple act of asking the crowd in the square below to first bless him, before he blessed them;
- his easy decision to return to his hotel in a bus with the cardinals, and to do what every ordinary guest does – pay the bill;
- his rejection of the distinctive and emblematic hand-crafted red Prada shoes;
- his pectoral cross made of iron; not of gold (like most bishops), nor bejewelled (like some);
- his decision not to reside in the Apostolic Palace, but in a small apartment at the Santa Marta guesthouse, where he would eat his meals in the common dining-room;
- his washing of the feet of young women and Muslims in a Roman prison on his first Maundy Thursday; and
- (the most powerful symbol of all) his choice of the name 'Francis'.

Francis is a name packed with history and significance. No pope before had ever dared to take it, for it is a name full of fearful challenge.

We know that when he chose the name 'Francis' he had the 12th century (1181-1226 CE) *poverello* of Assisi specifically in mind - the rich young man who, in what seemed act of 'total folly', discarded both his clothes and his patrimony to fully identify with the poor and to follow Jesus. I think he also had another Francis in mind, Francis Xavier, the great 16th century (1506-1552 CE) Jesuit missionary to Asia, and the companion of Ignatius of Loyola who founded the Society of Jesus of which this pope is a member. Calling himself Francis he knew that much would be expected of him, for with that name he would have to follow closely in the footsteps of the two giants: identifying himself with the poor and dedicating himself totally to evangelization.

In choosing the name Francis, he was deliberately, publicly, and symbolically saying to the whole world that he, as pope, had no desire to be associated with power and wealth; but rather, wanted to identify with the poor, who would be his priority. Also, like Francis of Assisi, he would be committed to the environment and to peace, and like his Jesuit namesake, committed to mission.

Intentionally or unintentionally, these symbolic acts must have sent a clear message (perhaps even a sharp rebuke) to many of his fellow bishops who still clung to pomp and power. If they did not realize that the carnival was over, they were blind. A new era of service and identifying with the poor had begun.

It did not take long for Catholics and the world to recognize that here was a very different leader, and they liked what they saw. The first Francis effect was immediate: fresh hope and joy.

For a Church bogged down in so many problems, battered by the pervasive stench of clerical sexual abuse scandal and its cover up, suffering a precipitous and on-going decline in the faithful's reception of the sacraments, and with an out-of-touch hierarchy which had lost the trust of the people, at last it had a charismatic pastoral leader who could give believers, and others, fresh hope.

As well as symbols Francis also used words; words which gelled with the symbols, complemented and reinforced them, were honest and credible. Here are some that impressed me:

- 'Let all of us be protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and the environment' (spoken to everyone);
- 'How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor' (spoken to the faithful);
- (Speaking to priests) 'As pastors you must be shepherds of your flocks and willing to embrace the smell of the sheep';
- 'Let us preach the Gospel with our example and then with words! It is in our life that others must first be able to read the Gospel' (spoken to the faithful);
- (Responding to a journalist's question about his attitude to gay persons) "Who am I to judge?"
- 'We have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality which kills; where everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, and where the powerful feed upon the powerless' (on the global economy, in *EG*, 53); and
- 'I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security' (*EG*, 49).

To our great surprise and in a short space of time, this new pope, with just a few simple symbolic acts and honest down-to-earth words, was able to have us recognize that in him we had a genuine pastoral leader, whose charism would be directed at serving the Church and the world, but above all the poor, with whom he chose to identify. We quickly recognized that in Francis we had a pastoral leader who would speak out for peace and protection of the environment, who would speak out against injustice and inequality, who would be prepared to fully embrace the vision of Vatican II, restart the reform and renewal which had been hobbled for 50 years, turn the Church outwards, and revitalize its mission.

This recognition certainly gave us much joy and fresh hope.

Where is Francis's charism for pastoral leadership leading him?

All true leaders have a vision, a goal or a mission they want to achieve. Integral to the vision is a plan or roadmap, setting out the steps and processes for how the vision might be achieved, the stages of the journey, what will be needed on the way, what challenges will have to be faced, and how they can be overcome.

On 24 November 2013, Francis published a document addressed to the bishops, clergy, religious, and the lay faithful throughout the world. It deals with the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world. He titled it *Evangelii Gaudium* – 'The Joy of the Gospel' and we should all read it. It is Francis's vision and roadmap.

Papal documents often have ghost writers, with not every word written by the pope himself. However, with this document I have the sense that much, if not most of it, is from the pen of Francis himself. He says he wrote it in response to a request from the bishops at the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization, asking him to express his own [personal] concerns on evangelization. But he only explores some questions, for:

[I do] 'not believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. I am conscious of the need to promote "decentralization"' (EG. 16). (my emphasis)

How fresh and hopeful is this? Here was the principle of subsidiarity in action, challenging the 'centralists' in the Roman Curia who were clinging to total control, and challenging those diocesan bishops who were constantly look to the Pope for answers to all their local problems, preferring a road ahead be signposted by directives from Rome rather than by the cries and *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) of their own people.

A précis of *Evangelii Gaudium* is not necessary here. Suffice to say that its main themes are church reform, missionary outreach, pastoral ministry, the Church as the entire People of God, the poor, peace, and dialogue.

Clearly, in this stage of his pontificate ('making bridges'), it is into these areas that his charism is leading him.

Francis's vision and plan are not new. They are essentially the same as set out in the documents of Vatican II, but sharpened and updated with the insights of the various regional synods and conferences which have followed the Council, especially those held by the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops. They are made more attractive by the fresh and honest language and personal discernments of Francis himself, energized with the leitmotif of 'Joy'.

Like Martin Luther King Jnr., Francis has a 'dream':

'I have a dream of a "missionary option" - 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 channelled for the evangelization of today's world, rather than for her self-preservation. [I have a dream of] the renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversions which 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 to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with him' (EG. 27).

And like King, he has an antiphon which he repeats over and over, emphasising what he wants us to embrace:

'Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of our missionary enthusiasm'

'Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization'

'Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope'

'Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community'

'Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel'

'Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love'.

If we were all to join him in his dream, what might be the Francis effect?

How is Francis using his charism to lead the Church of our times?

Francis says that ‘the Gospel joy which enlivens the community of disciples is a missionary joy’, and that in evangelizing, the community has to embrace human life, and to take on the smell of the sheep so that the sheep will be willing to listen (EG, 24).

But he has grave misgivings about the current state of the Church’s pastoral and missionary ‘conversion’. Repeating the discernment of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, he states: ‘[We] cannot leave things as they presently are. “Mere administration” can no longer be enough. Throughout the world we have to be permanently in the state of mission’ (EG, n.25).

‘Conversion’, is not just for individuals, but for the entire church, which has to look within itself, comparing the ideal which Christ envisaged and loved and the actual image which the Catholic Church presents to the world today. Vatican II attempted this in a heroic effort some 50 years ago, but what it began stalled, leaving the conversion and self-renewal it called for still in its infancy, with some ecclesial structures even hampering the Church’s efforts at evangelization. Francis has relaunched the call for structural renewal and given us hope.

Tonight, I would like to look at two of the structures specifically identified by Francis as in need of renewal: the parish, and the diocese.

The Parish

For Francis

‘the parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach’ (EG, 28).

That description of what our parishes are capable of becoming must surely give us fresh hope. But like Francis, we also have to admit that ‘the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented’ (EG, 28). (my emphasis)

In 2011 I wrote a report on parish ministry in Australia. In it I concluded that, on the basis of the information then available, there was a real and huge crisis in this country, verging on disaster. Unfortunately, since then, I have to say that the situation, far from improving, has in fact deteriorated. Here is why:

- Regular Mass attendance continues to fall. From a high of 74 percent of all Catholics regularly attending in 1954, the percentage in 2011 was little more than 12 percent. In this archdiocese of Melbourne, only 14 percent now regularly attend;

- Despite there being an extra 1.3 million Catholics in Australia since 1986 the number of parishes nationwide providing pastoral care and mission outreach has fallen from 1425 to 1269, a decrease of 156 parishes or 11 percent;
- Of the current 1269 parishes, only two thirds (821) have a full-time resident priest not shared with another or other parishes; the other third have to share a priest with another or other parishes, or have no priest assigned at all;
- For the past decade the number of diocesan priests in parishes has continued to fall, despite the active recruitment of priests from churches outside Australia. Australian parishes are currently supported by over 500 priests sourced from or born outside Australia, and without them, most dioceses would be in a perilous state;
- In the mid-1950s there were some 1600 seminarians in Australian seminaries; today there are about 200, with half sourced from or born overseas;
- Few Australian bishops have really warmed to permanent deacons, though their financial cost ranges from zero to negligible; and
- The ministry of the 170 religious sisters currently in parishes is threatened by old age, and the ministry of the over 200 predominantly female lay pastoral associates and workers in parishes is now being threatened by budgetary constraints.

Last week I spoke to a priest in the regional diocese of Toowoomba, whose former bishop, Bill Morris, was sacked by Pope Benedict for thinking out loud on some radical options for ministry. That diocese currently has just 20 priests for 37 parishes. Not a single priest is aged under 40, and only 6 priests are aged under 65. What options does the current bishop have? How can he be expected to provide pastoral care to his people without sufficient ministers? Pope Francis rightly proclaims the importance of the parish for evangelization; but if parishes have insufficient ministers to be what is expected of them, it takes great hope to see the renewed vitality which he envisions.

In this context, I think it well worthwhile to listen to what Francis has to say about the participation and ministry of women in the Church.

First, he rightly says there are not enough laywomen in ministry, a situation sometimes caused by a lack of formation opportunities, but in many dioceses caused by an 'excessive clericalism' ['a distortion of religion'] which has not allowed them to speak, to act, or to participate in decision-making. Further, where they are involved, it is too often in 'tasks within the church', not in applying the Gospel to the transformation of society (*EG*, 102-104).

Yet, while he argues that 'broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church' are necessary, he endorses the teaching of his immediate predecessors that 'the priesthood is reserved to males' and that this matter 'is not open to discussion'. In a vague sort of way he does seem to leave the door open to the 'future development of some non-priestly role for women in the Church's ministry', presenting 'a great challenge for pastors [presumably bishops and parish priests] and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life' (*EG*, 103-104).

Hearing this, you may now be wondering whether Francis is bringing fresh hope.

Organisations such as Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) have already expressed concern about the above statement, and I'm sure that many of you may feel the same. However, I have to say that the responses I have seen so far appear quite reserved, and suggest that most Catholics, even the most progressive, do not want to undermine the credibility of this pope who promises so much, and in whom

almost all are prepared to invest a huge amount of trust. Such has been the recognition, and the effect of his charism of pastoral leadership.

The Diocese

Individual dioceses are known canonically as ‘particular’ churches. They are the one Catholic Church incarnate in a particular place [e.g. Melbourne], equipped with all the means of salvation bestowed by Christ, but with local features. Hence, in official language you will not find the expression ‘Australian’ Catholic Church, or ‘Irish’ Catholic Church; rather, it is ‘the Catholic Church in Australia’, or ‘the Catholic Church in Ireland’. Each diocese is under the leadership of its bishop, and to each of these Pope Francis has made the strongest call yet for local structural reform if they are to experience joy in communicating Christ within their boundaries.

Vatican II ‘encouraged’ bishops to undertake many local reforms, as does the Code of Canon Law. But with each encouragement came is a catch-all ‘opt out’ clause, namely, bishops need only introduce the reforms ‘if they deem them opportune’. Many bishops, and certainly most Australian bishops have used and continue to use this opt-out clause with great frequency. Pope Francis hasn’t changed Canon Law, but he has stepped up the pressure on bishops for significant reform in their dioceses. Addressing each diocesan bishop he has said:

“The bishop must always foster missionary communion in his diocesan Church ... sometimes going before his people, at other times simply being in their midst, and at other times again walking after them, and – above all – allowing the flock to strike out on new paths. In his mission of fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion, he will have to encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in the Code of Canon Law, and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear’ (EG, 31). (my emphasis)

Wow! Now there is joy and fresh hope.

And in case the Code of Canon Law is not your bedtime reading, you can be excused from not getting excited by the footnote reference to ‘Canons 460-468; 492-502; 511-514; 536-537’. A pity! For those canons refer to what potentially could be the most radical reforms which many of our moribund dioceses require. They specifically refer to bishops setting up in their diocese these means of participation: the diocesan synod, the diocesan pastoral council, the diocesan finance council and parish pastoral councils. After Vatican II almost all the bishops of Australia’s 28 territorial dioceses established a finance council, but less than half set up a diocesan pastoral council (Melbourne still does not have one), most encouraged parish pastoral councils (but did not insist on them) and only five Australian bishops have convened a diocesan synod in the last 50 years (the last in Melbourne was in 1916 during WWI). Further, less than a third of the 28 dioceses have a pastoral plan, and the most recent Australian plenary or national synod was in 1937, 77 years ago.

But why this Episcopal reluctance to convene synods and establish pastoral councils? I would suggest four main reasons, most associated with clericalism:

- A real fear of creativity, of striking out on new paths, of rising to the pastoral challenges.
- An innate fear of sharing power and decision-making, and of co-responsibility.
- A deep fear of dialogue with the lay faithful, especially with women.
- A learned fear of the principle of subsidiarity, of taking full responsibility for the local church.

Francis himself, as Bishop of Rome, recognizes that he too must be 'converted' and be open to suggestions on how his ministry might be improved. 'The papacy itself', he says, 'and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion, for excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach' (EG, 32). (my emphasis)

If this conversion and reform really was to happen, what would be its effect? How might it change the Church and the way it is seen?

Francis is not naive or deluded. He expects resistance and anticipates a negative response from some quarters. 'If pastoral ministry in a missionary key is to succeed', he writes, 'it must abandon the complacent attitude that says "We have always done it this way"'. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters' (EG, 33). (my emphasis)

Of course we should not be concerned about structures alone, and certainly not structures for structures sake, for they are only worthwhile if they serve to make the Church a better Church, a more Christ-like Church, so that it can achieve 'its solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit. Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served' (GS, 3-4).

How would I assess Francis's effect to date?

Overall, I would say that so far Pope Francis has already given us, Catholics and others, a generous dose of joy and fresh hope. I say that these reasons:

- He has repositioned the vision of Vatican II to centre stage
- He has reoriented the Church to the poor
- He is pointing the Church outwards, towards mission
- He has linked the renewed call to conversion and renewal with dialogue, collegiality, co-responsibility, and subsidiarity.

I also see grounds for further hope.

I applaud his establishment of the Group of 8, to examine the Roman Curia and central organs of the institutional Church. In congratulate him on how he chose the 8, ensuring all the continents were represented (though I would not personally endorse the individuals chosen).

I very much applaud his decision to call a 2-stage Synod of Bishops (Extraordinary in 2104 and Ordinary in 2015) to deliberate on and provide him with advice on how to deal with the challenges facing contemporary families.

I am overjoyed that he chose to survey the *sensus fidelium* worldwide and at local 'grass roots' level on the issues to be discussed at the 2014 synod.

I applaud the appointment of Marie Collins, the Irish women survivor of clerical sexual abuse, to a special commission preparing advice on how to deal with this ongoing scandal and shame.

But I also have some misgivings:

Though asserting a firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, and that there is need to create 'still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church', as yet Pope Francis has done nothing to unlock for women any of the senior positions which canonically remain the exclusive domain of male clerics. Nor has he opened to women the doors to those places where the highest level decisions are made.

While I am hopeful that the Synod of Bishops, when it is considering marriage and the family, will establish a really genuine dialogue with the *sensus fidelium*, especially with married persons and families of every type, and listen carefully to what they have to say about how they understand, interpret and apply the Gospel in their daily lives, I am concerned that if that dialogue is not put in place, there will be little hope for a successful synod outcome.

I share Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's view that 'for Christ's sake, the pope and bishops must take the necessary steps to end sexual abuse in the Catholic Church for good'. But I am still not convinced that they will. When Pope Francis stated publicly that 'the church has done so much; perhaps most of all', that it was 'maybe the only public institution to have moved with transparency and responsibility', and that 'no one else has done more, but it is the only one to be attacked', I was amazed and saddened.

If you followed the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, and if you are following the public hearings of the current Royal Commission into institutional abuse, you will know that those words do not ring true. The compassion and justice, the transparency and accountability, the proper processes of governance which are expected of the Church are just not there. To say that they are, is untrue. There is no joy here, and only a skerrick of hope.

Unless Pope Francis deals with this scandal urgently and properly, puts a full stop to the cover-ups, places the welfare of victims and survivors first, and institutes transparent processes of justice and compassion, the Church, here in Australia or elsewhere, will never regain the credibility it has lost, never be able to fulfil its mission, and never experience real joy.

In summary, yes, Pope Francis has given us hope that our Church can be a better Church, a more Christ-like Church, and that the vision of Vatican II can come alive again. But it is qualified hope, still waiting to see whether Francis will fulfill the promise that gave us so much joy and hope in the first weeks of his papal ministry.

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