

Pope Francis and living with messiness.

David Timbs

Francis has been criticised by left and right, liberals and conservatives for lacking clarity in policy, for speaking in riddles and for leaving big issues dangling in mid air. Clarity in speech for Francis is largely a matter of suggestion, hinting, teasing, taunting, being parabolic. His ambiguities and lack of clarity even refusal to be definitive is perhaps an attempt to force people to think independently, not to be infantilised by doctrinaire authoritarian clerics of whatever colour the cloth.

It has created a new age of anxiety for many if not for all. While liberals seek the raging banditry of the risk-taking prophet, while the conservatives and Trads seek dogmatic assurances and catechesis, Francis offers an uncomfortable Christ who disturbs all equally.

He has normalised the evangelical genius of a Christlike form of the Chaos Theory: “Pope Francis told a gathering of some 30,000 youth from his homeland that they are to “make a mess (¡Hagan lío!)” “shaking up the comfort, self-satisfaction and clericalism of a Church closed in on itself.” (Link [here](#))

In this festival of messiness and un-finished-ness he allows to surface a key feature of his native Jesuit spirituality, namely the Incarnation.

It seems clear now that Jorge Bergoglio was jolted into new a level of consciousness and moral evaluation when he encountered the uncompromising messiness of the *Word become flesh* in the lives of slum people:

‘ “Returning to the city of his birth as a bishop meant that Bergoglio embraced an even larger family. He went to the *villas miserias* and spent long hours with the poorest of the poor. He became known as the Bishop of the Slums. Over his 18 years as bishop and then archbishop in Buenos Aires, one priest told me, Bergoglio talked personally to at least half the people in his slum. He would turn up, wander the alleyways, chat to the locals, bless their children and their homes, and drink maté tea with them. “He doesn’t see the poor as people he can help but rather as people from whom he can learn,” said Father Guillermo Marcó. “He believes the poor are closer to God than the rest of us.” ‘

- Paul Vallely, “The Crisis that changed Pope Francis,” Newsweek, 23 October, 2014 (Link [here](#))

Jorge Bergoglio had come to realise the deepest truth about authentic Liberation Theology, that it is a authentic servant of the Gospel and not an ideology. It is about the task of assisting non-persons, dehumanised individuals back to the dignity of the sons and daughters of God. It’s no wonder he rediscovered the prophetic message of Gustavo Gutierrez Dominican priest and father of Liberation Theology, a message which insists that the credibility of the Church’s mission stands or falls on the way the disadvantaged poor are treated:

“How are we to talk about God who is revealed as love in a situation characterised by poverty and oppression? How are we to proclaim the God of life to men and women who die prematurely and unjustly? How are we to acknowledge that God makes us a free gift of love and justice when we have before us the suffering of the innocent? What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are the daughters and sons of God?”

Bishop Bergoglio came to a conversion moment strikingly similar to that of Teresa of Calcutta. When asked what she experienced when she confronted with the poorest of the poor for the very first time replied: ‘I saw Christ in a most disturbing disguise.’

What Francis has done in the recent Synod was to remind Catholics and others that poverty is not uniform. In his morning homilies at Santa Martha, he made constant reference to the outrage of Jesus at the sight of people crushed under the weight of intensified moral and social norms and expectations beyond their capacity to bear. He reminded the Church leaders that practically every Catholic family on earth knows the embarrassment, moral ambiguity and the intractable messiness of broken marriages, divorces, re-marriage, cohabitation and homosexuality.

Catholic doctrine is its authentic best when it demonstrates that it is not an end in itself, that it serves Christ and not a rigid ideology. Maybe the next twelve months offer us all an invitation into the mystery of God’s mercy. Paul VI, only weeks after publishing *Humanae Vitae*, met with a large group of moral theologians. He commended them for the integrity and depth of their scholarship but then spoke to them in these words: “When you have done with your professional study, become pastors and you will see how the Law of Christ bends and shapes itself to assume the human condition.”

I think that Francis might be giving exactly the same advice to the pastors of the People of God.

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