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APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES  
“POPE FRANCIS: ORIGINS AND DESTINATION,  
LEADING THE SYNODAL JOURNEY”  
BERGOGLIO LECTURE  
SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY  
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s representative to the United States, I wish to express His Holiness’ spiritual closeness and paternal affection to the faculty and students at Sacred Heart University, as well as all the guests here present, and congratulate you on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this institution. In a special way, I wish to thank Dr. Petillo for the invitation to visit the university and deliver the Bergoglio Lecture, and Bishop Caggiano for his warm welcome to the Diocese of Bridgeport and his support of the continuing formation of students here.

The Bergoglio Lecture was instituted to explore the ongoing development of the Catholic intellectual tradition as shaped by Pope Francis. We are now in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of his Pontificate and much has been written about him and the way in which his Petrine Ministry is charting a course for the Church in the present age. His words and actions have been considered through the lenses of various ideological mindsets, resulting at times in contrasting understandings. There is no doubt that most people consider him a reformer, a Pope that wants to bring the Church into conversation with the challenges of the times. For some of them, such a trajectory has no solution of continuity with previous pontificates; for others it is at variance with them. Some say he is too progressive; others say he is not progressive enough. It is undeniable that his way of speaking is direct and incisive, inviting people to engage, aimed at stimulating a response. Hence a question keeps ringing through the halls of the Church, emerging from the pages of books and newspaper articles: who is Pope Francis?

These reflections are meant to contribute to the search for an answer. This is why I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you about the Pope. We should never stop trying to answer this question. As a matter of fact, the stimulus for our search is at the very heart of the relationship between the Successor of Peter and the People of God. The Church must question herself: what is the Holy Spirit telling us through the person and ministry of this Pope? This discovery is a journey, it is never quite an accomplished fact, it is always in progress, because the Church is a dynamic reality. The Pope spoke of this at the very beginning of his pontificate in the first Mass he celebrated with the Cardinal electors:

Our life is a journey, and when we stop moving, things go wrong. Always journeying, in the presence of the Lord, in the light of the Lord, seeking to live with the blamelessness that God asked of Abraham in his promise (Homily at the *Missa Pro Ecclesia* with the Cardinal Electors, 14 March 2013).

There are many ways to answer the question about the identity of Pope Francis, which are reflected in the multifaceted reactions to him and his writings. I shall look at one of the facets of such a kaleidoscopic reality, one that sits at the very heart of the Petrine ministry: leadership. The Pope has the task of pointing the way, of following the footsteps of the Lord, his is the charism of a way-finder. He is the

Vicar of Christ, who began his earthly ministry asking people to follow him. People followed Christ because his words and actions were appealing, truthful, engaging. What are the attributes of Francis' leadership? Where is he leading us? What makes his leadership appealing? These are some of the questions I shall try to answer.

### **The Hermeneutic of Discovery**

Before we look more closely at Pope Francis' leadership, however, I think it is important to clean our glasses. We should always be careful that our vision is not vitiated. If you wear sunglasses things look darker. Today there is a risk that certain ideologies might cloud our vision. An ideology is a box, a man-made device into which we somehow try to fit reality in order to make sense of it. We do this all the time. We have an idea of how we should be, of how our parents should be, of how the parish priest should be and, more to the point, of how the Pope should be. However, in my experience, reality almost never fits into our boxes. In fact, if we become overly focused on trying to categorize every experience according to certain preconceived ideas, we lose the sense of wonder and the experience of novelty and discovery which opens us to the encounter with the other, with the divine.

Consider the coming of Christ. His incarnation is a fact, a reality that defies all expectations. At the time of Jesus' birth there were many "ideas" on how the Messiah should be, what he should do, and so on. These preconceptions were shaped by political, social and religious mindsets. Yet none of them was commensurate with the event of the incarnation. The shepherds, the first witnesses of this event, were told to go to Bethlehem to see a sign, not to analyze it. The angels invited them to discover a new reality, to encounter a person. They were privileged because their humble social status prepared them for such an encounter. They did not come with preconceived ideas. They came in wonder and found a baby in a manger, a sign that filled them with joy because it spoke of the same humility that was part and parcel of their lives. It conveyed the message that God was close to them, and sent them back praising Him.

When the first disciples approached Jesus and asked him, "Master, where are you staying?" He answered, "Come and see!" (John 1:38-39). They were invited to begin a journey that would bring them to the gradual discovery of who Christ is. In this journey they were invited to leave behind their "boxes", so to speak, to abandon their preconceptions in order to let the experience of following Christ transform their lives.

John the Baptist faced a similar dilemma. At some point he seemed to have had a doubt as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. He sent his disciples to ask him "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?" (Mt 11:3). Perhaps this question betrayed the fact that even the Baptist had a few preconceptions, and he was trying to see if he could fit Jesus into the little box labeled "Messiah". In response to his quest Jesus answered, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed...and blessed the one who takes no offense at me." (Mt 11:5-6) Again, the invitation is to see and hear, to discover and recognize the novelty of Christ that invites us to deny ourselves and renounce our schemas to welcome the Kingdom of Christ.

Finally, the empty tomb bespeaks an unprecedented reality, a fact that changed the course of history forever. The women first, and then Peter and John went to the tomb to see the signs of the resurrection of Christ. The resurrected Lord himself, appearing to them and to the rest of the disciples, helped them to grasp the marvel of his victory over death.

This dynamic from the life of Jesus that I have tried to outline is what I shall call the hermeneutic of discovery. The Christian is never a spectator, one who sits at a distance and tries to dissect reality with the aseptic tools of the scientific method. There is no better way to discover who Christ is than to enter into a relationship with him. The same holds true for every aspect of the Christian faith. Pope Francis is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. His ministry calls for engagement; but many, I fear, prefer to keep a distance and to analyze him from the heights of their own ideological strongholds. Thus, they miss the point. The correct hermeneutic, one that affords an unadulterated vision of reality, is that of the man who lets himself be drawn into a personal relationship, who is willing to abandon his prejudices, who keeps a sense of wonder. This person reaps the fruit of his search; he has a much keener grasp of reality than the man conditioned by preconceived ideologies.

The advantage of such a hermeneutic is that it acknowledges the importance of intuition, alongside reasoning, for the process of discernment. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) maintained that intuition is often a more powerful and apposite means to probe reality than reasoning. And I quote:

We see that the intellect, so skillful in dealing with the inert, is awkward the moment it touches the living. Whether it wants to treat the life of the body or the life of the mind, it proceeds with the rigor, the stiffness and the brutality of an instrument not designed for such use. [...] Intuition, on the contrary, is molded on the very form of life. While intelligence treats everything mechanically, intuition proceeds, so to speak, organically (Henry Bergson, *Creative Evolution*).

Intuition, however, can only function in a specific context, which is the close proximity with the reality that we want to explore. Intuition requires a movement and an engagement that bridges the gap between the observer and the observed. In fact, its posture is the opposite of that of the scientific method, which calls for a certain distancing between the scientist and the object of study. By bridging the gap, intuition alters substantially the terms of the equation. The observer becomes the explorer, the missionary; the observed is encountered, not dissected. Knowledge results from a personal experience that changes the lives of all those involved.

Hence, we can appreciate the essential ecclesial value of the *sensum fidei*. The faithful, being immersed in the reality of the world in which they live, acquire an intuitive knowledge of it. This knowledge is essential for discerning how to respond to the challenges that the announcement of the Gospel faces today. The everyday experience of the faithful at work, school or in their other societal environments consists of a multiplicity of encounters that lay the ground for the hermeneutic of discovery. The wealth of knowledge that is thus generated, informed by the light of Revelation, constitutes the foundation of the *sensus fidelium*. We must promote, channel, and utilize this wealth if we are to effectively engage today's society and become salt and leaven for this generation.

Pope Francis' leadership is shaped by the desire to make the hermeneutic of discovery a *modus vivendi*, a way of being for the Church. I will consider now three aspects of the Pontiff's leadership that bear witness to his programmatic intent to direct Catholics towards a greater engagement with the world. These three aspects could be envisioned as consecutive phases, three distinct moments of one single movement. They are the strokes of a painter who outlines a path for rapprochement in a society that is ever more forcefully pulled apart by centrifugal forces. I will look at missionary spirit, synodality and reform.

## Missionary Spirit

Pope Francis, since the beginning of his pontificate, has urged the Church to go out, to become missionary. In his understanding, however, being missionary is not just a technical term designating a specific office in the Church. Rather, “going out” is the essential dynamic of our faith. It depicts the way in which to live the Christian vocation, a constant movement away from the self and towards the other. We are familiar with such movement from Scripture, where we encounter it frequently. Immediately after receiving the announcement of the Angel, Mary sets out to go visit her cousin Elizabeth. Her assent to the angel, motivated by faith, compels her to initiate a journey, to offer her services to Elizabeth. The missionary impulse that animates the Church is meant to bridge the gap that divides us from those who do not know Christ, from those in need, to bring the Christian community to become intimate with human weakness. The Pope envisions a Church that desires to come near the concrete reality of humankind in all its aspects, especially those of greater lowliness and poverty, both spiritual and material.

The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. [...] An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24).

The ministry of Christ began in the very same way. He abased himself to become one with every man and woman he met, he sought proximity to every situation of pain and suffering so that he could touch the lives of the poorest of the poor and change them. The Kingdom of God spreads by contact, by physical presence, not by the propaganda of ideologies. Jesus sends the apostles to evangelize two by two and the Kingdom of God arrives with them in every town and village where they proclaim the Good News. Since the very beginning, feet have been the most effective vehicle for evangelization. “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news” (Is 52:7). Hence every Christian must put his body, his whole life, at the service of this ministry. The field of action is immense, the Pope reminds us.

Where does Jesus send us? There are no borders, no limits: he sends us to everyone. The Gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who seem closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming. It is for everyone. Do not be afraid to go and to bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away, most indifferent. The Lord seeks all, he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love (Homily at the Mass on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day, 28 July 2023).

As Church we cannot fulfill our mission today without a conscious decision to set aside the comfort of our homes, parishes, rectories, institutes, universities, and even ideological positions to enter the lives of those around us. The New Evangelization is not a program, it cannot be devised by a committee. It must be the fruit of a hermeneutic of discovery. Many ask how can we evangelize the modern world. Paradoxically, the answer can only be found by evangelizing, with that openness to other that Pope Francis is asking us to have. There, in the struggle of the everyday encounter with sin, with poverty, with the challenges of indifferentism and atheism, we will find the path. Proximity will spark our intuition; we will be able to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit, day by day. The charism of the evangelizer is that of a path-finder, of one who navigates by sight.

Consider the life of Saint Teresa of Calcutta. She did not begin to live out her calling by sitting down and putting together a programmatic charter for her institute. She went out and cared for the first poor she found. She did not pause to make an analysis of the problem of poverty as a whole so as to find the best strategic approach. In her own words, this was her *modus operandi*:

I never look at the masses as my responsibility; I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time – just one, one, one. So, you begin. I began – I picked up one person. Maybe if I didn't pick up that one person, I wouldn't have picked up forty-two thousand. The same thing goes for you, the same thing in your family, the same thing in your church, your community. Just begin – one, one, one (Saint Teresa of Calcutta).

Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest to you (Saint Teresa of Calcutta).

By saying this, I do not mean to belittle or neglect the importance of studying, researching, and planning. On the contrary, evangelizing today requires intelligence and creativity, as well as organization. However, the starting point is always the “going out” that brings us to encounter the other. From there begins a journey that must integrate all the charisms given to the Church. Pope Francis is encouraging all of us to experience evangelization in action, and he leads the way by his example, by attending to and caring for the individual, for the one who suffers, for the marginalized. He is inviting the Church to stop planning and begin.

## **Synodality**

The second moment along the path on which the Pope is leading the Church, is a logical consequence of the first. The proximity with the other, made possible by the “going out”, is only one element of the encounter and by itself is not sufficient to establish a personal relationship. It is also necessary to have an openness to listening. The hermeneutic of discovery prepares the path for a dialogue that introduces each interlocutor to the life of the other. Consider Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). Jesus' journeying brings him to a tabu region, to a people that was ostracized and shunned by the Jews. His missionary zeal bridges the gap and breaks the isolation, making possible the encounter with the woman. He then begins a dialogue with her, he listens and, gradually, she opens up and reveals the tragedy of her life. The result is the blossoming of a personal relationship with Jesus that changes her life forever.

This event from the life of Jesus exemplifies something that is at the very heart of what the Pope envisions when he invites the Church to undertake the path of synodality. As such, synodality is not a task, a program, not even a mere tool. Synodality is an ecclesial mode of being. It is an existential response to the original Christian vocation. The Pope spoke clearly about this in his address for the opening of the Synod that is currently underway.

I would say that celebrating a Synod is always a good and important thing, but it proves truly beneficial if it becomes a living expression of “being Church”, of a way of acting marked by true participation. [...] The Synod could be reduced to an extraordinary event, but only externally; that would be like admiring the magnificent facade of a church without ever actually stepping inside. [...] If we want to speak of a synodal Church, we cannot remain satisfied with appearances alone; we need content, means and structures that can facilitate

dialogue and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity (Address for the Opening of the Synod, 9 October 2021).

The Pope warns the Church against the attitude of being a spectator and encourages all the faithful to experience the synodal path. Once again, we see here the importance of the hermeneutic of discovery. The true meaning of synodality is revealed to the person that enters its dynamic. By doing this, the faithful discovers synodality not as a social device to create a parliamentary system, nor as an undercover attempt to introduce a libertarian populism that seeks to undermine the Magisterium and the role of the Episcopate, as some have argued. Rather, it is the antidote to clericalism, to a hierarchical Church where the absolutization of the vertical dimension distorts the geometry of the whole system. The synodal path leads the Church to recover the horizontal dimension, conferring on her a proper polyhedral shape. This can only be realized in a concrete engagement with reality. The diffident approach of some to the synodal path, and the ensuing mistrust, is the result of a purely intellectual approach, as the Pope points out.

The risk is intellectualism. Reality turns into abstraction and we, with our reflections, end up going in the opposite direction. This would turn the Synod into a kind of study group, offering learned but abstract approaches to the problems of the Church and the evils in our world. The usual people saying the usual things, without great depth or spiritual insight, and ending up along familiar and unfruitful ideological and partisan divides, far removed from the reality of the holy People of God and the concrete life of communities around the world (Address for the Opening of the Synod, 9 October 2021).

The goal of the synodal path is first and foremost to help the Church evangelize and bring forth the announcement of the Kingdom. It is an exercise of communion, because communion is an eschatological sign that makes present the victory of Christ over death, over every division. This is essential. The structures that the synod seeks to establish are instrumental to breaking the isolation that today plagues society at large as well as the Church. Often even in our parishes people live the faith anonymously. It is not uncommon for a person to find herself at Mass surrounded by strangers, even though she has been seating shoulder to shoulder with these “strangers” for months or years.

Today we need to create anew in the Church a space of proximity so that we can listen to each other, learn to see the sufferings of the other, which are often invisible. We need to create a closeness also with those outside the Church, so that they can experience first-hand the Kingdom of God that is coming to them by way of a concrete person who reaches out and begins a dialogue. The concrete structures of the synod, the small circles, the listening sessions, are meant to provide such space and engender the dialogue. Synodality, as a way of “being Church”, has ramifications in all sorts of directions. It is the driving force underpinning ecumenical and interreligious efforts; it is the springboard for the evangelization of the faraway; it is the key to entering into a dialogue with the world of politics, culture, academia, and society at all levels.

### **Reform**

The third moment in the journey proposed by the Pope is that of concrete reforms. Since her beginnings the Church has had structures to help accomplish her missions. These have been in continuing evolution. The deposit of faith is unchanging. The depth of its richness continues to be probed and unfolded in countless way, constituting the basis for the sound development of Doctrine. But the process of reform intersects the life of the Church principally at a different level. It operates on the structures of government, ecclesial realities, liturgical expressions, legal systems, and so on. In this realm, evolution, plasticity and dynamism must be the hallmarks. We should resist any tendency towards crystallization. A

solution that crystallizes, no matter how beautiful and pleasant to behold, remains lifeless. Human life, on the contrary, is always teeming, chaotic, in flux. The missionary impulse of the Church is the driving force behind the need for change. The purpose of a tool determines its design. Hence, a missionary Church requires structures suitable for the task, capable of interacting with an ever-changing world. This is the Pope's vision.

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 (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 27).

The path of reform must be guided by the same hermeneutic of discovery that has led us thus far. It requires a willingness to abandon old "boxes", those structures that no longer help the Church in the fulfillment of her mission. It can only be the result of a real conversion, as the Pope reminds us. St. John of the Cross used to say that "to get to what you don't know, you have to go through where you don't know." This means that, as Church, we must leave the confines of what we are familiar with and enter the realm of newness that the Holy Spirit brings. The path of familiarity continues to meander through the usual places, it does not bridge distances, it does not reach beyond the borders of a nostalgic vision of the Church that aims only at self-preservation. This attitude can even result in reactionary tendencies, which are poisonous for the faithful and deprive them of a truly apostolic zeal, replacing it with the stale surrogate of outdated liturgical practices. The Pope goes on to explain that the path of true reform requires a *sentire cum ecclesia*.

Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to 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, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 33).

The Christian community as a whole, guided by her shepherds, is the *locus* where the path of true reform can be discerned. Not in the isolation of a defensive posture but in the vulnerability of an engagement with the world.

## Conclusions

My hope is that I have managed in the space of these brief reflections to offer a glimpse of what I believe is the service rendered by Pope Francis to the Church. I did not presume to provide a comprehensive treatise. Rather, I wanted to paint a sketch with a few strokes, with a rather large brush. I am aware that here and there I might have drawn a rather simplified picture, that there are topics for which, with the leisure of more time, I could have used a finer theological styllet. However, my goal was to elicit a response, to pursue the cause of Pope Francis, to encourage you to engage. The Church needs

courageous evangelizers. Christians are above all people in love, and lovers, you know, do not sit down to elaborate schemes or to calculate the costs. They give themselves with liberality, they plunge headlong in whatever endeavor will bring joy to the beloved. This is the prism through which the Church understands her mission. Pope Francis wants to lead us toward an intimate relationship of love, lived out in the service of the other, for the other is Christ.