

“The Vision of Pope Francis for the Twenty-First Century: An Open World”
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Introduction

Good evening! I am very pleased to be with you here at Sacred Heart University in the Diocese of Bridgeport. In a special way I wish to thank Dr. Petillo for inviting me to give this lecture and for conferring upon me an honorary degree. I also wish to thank Bishop Caggiano, the Faculty, Staff for their important work in the continuing formation of students at Sacred Heart. Finally, I am heartened to have with us so many students, clergy, religious, and laity.

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s personal representative in this country, I wish to assure you of his spiritual closeness and affection for each of you. This evening I have been asked to speak to you about the Vision of Pope Francis for the Church.

To do so, I would like to begin with the words of Pope Benedict XVI in the declaration of his resignation, given on February 11, 2013: “However in today’s world, subject to rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary” (Pope Benedict XVI, Declaratio, 11 February 2013)

It is true that his stamina was diminishing; however, what I want to point out is that in his humility and wisdom, Pope Benedict XVI, was able to recognize the needs of the Church in a changing era. Recently, Pope Francis said, “Today we are not living in an age of change so much as a change of age.” (Address at the Meeting with participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church,” Firenze, 10 November 2015).

It was this decision that opened the way for the election of Pope Francis. Thus, on March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires was elected Pope, taking the name Francis. The election of Pope Francis can be seen not only as a movement of the Spirit, but also as Austen Ivereigh calls it, “the Latin American moment”, which consists in an awakening, for society and the Church, to their vocation and destiny.” (Austin Ivereigh, “El Papa Francisco y el ‘resurgimiento católico latinoamericano’, Pontifical University Javeriana, 18-21 septiembre 2016, Congresso Internacional de Teologia)

The Vision of Pope Francis

What is the Vision of Pope Francis? In short, his vision is one of openness. He has a vision of an open world in which everyone can encounter God and others, even strangers. His is a vision of a world and Church, without sacrificing essentials or identity, that is open to new ideas. His vision aims to include rather than exclude and involves dialogue and missionary discipleship so that those at the peripheries may experience mercy and peace.

Without vision the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18) To have vision is to be attentive to the “signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4); to see what truly is, engaging reality; and, to look forward in hope to an encounter with the Lord of History. The vision of Pope Francis goes beyond abstract ideas to see the concrete reality of life – of persons, cultures and the conditions of our world. In his exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes:

There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric ...Realities are greater than ideas. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 231)

The vision of the Pope requires seeing people and their situations for what they truly are. In considering the vision of Pope Francis, one must remember his Jesuitical training. Father

Antonio Spadaro, SJ, editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, has described the pope as a Jesuit – a man with an “incomplete thought.” In academics, when writing an essay, if a thought is incomplete, a professor might count this against a student. However, by “incomplete” thought, I mean an “open thought”, one that is continuous development. This is how the mind of Jesuit works: to reflect upon reality to discern the will of God.

For this reason, Pope Francis is unpredictable. He is a man of continuous discernment, not a man of black and white. Recently, during a private meeting with Jesuits in Poland, he revealed the influence of Father Hugo Rahner, SJ, who suggested that:

the Jesuit must have a nose for the supernatural, that is, he should be endowed with a sense of the divine and the diabolical relative to the occurrences of human life and history. The Jesuit must, therefore, be able to discern what is from God and what is from the devil. For this, in the Exercises of Saint Ignatius asks that he be introduced both to the intentions of the Lord of Life and to those of the enemy of human nature and his lies. What he has written is truly bold; it is bold, but discernment is precisely this ...We need to truly understand this: in life, not all is black on white or white on black. No! The shades of grey prevail in life. We must teach them to discern in this grey area.” (“Un incontro privato a Cracovia con Papa Francesco,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 10 settembre 2016, 3989/17, p. 349)

Pope Francis is a man of discernment. That he speaks of shades of grey is not to imply that there is no black or white; nor is it to say that because he can see areas of grey that his vision is blurry. He is like a great explorer on a ship, who must be attentive to the winds, the seas, and the stars, but who looks toward the horizon as he embarks on a magnificent adventure. He does not necessarily know what things will look like or where exactly he will arrive in the end, but Pope Francis understands that he goes toward the horizon to meet Christ, the center of his life, attentive to reality which guides his discernment as he directs the barque of Saint Peter.

It is the lived reality and spirituality of people in their circumstances, rather than ideology, which is the subject of discernment for the Pope. The Holy Father has a general sense of where he would like to lead, but he will not allow himself or the Church to be locked in to a rigid, inflexible plan. As a Jesuit, he searches for the “seeds of the Word” to discover the presence of God. He is attentive to the nearness of God in history and places.

His theology, view of the Church, and world are engaged with the concrete reality of the lives of the flock. His pastoral vision flows from dialogue with reality and with history, attentive to the signs of the times and in light of Faith and human experience. This is why many of his messages try to persuade the local people to preserve their heritage, especially the heritage of popular faith, and their memory, appropriating the best of their local culture and elevating the culture with the Good News.

The method of Pope Francis in developing his vision demands contemplation, being in constant dialogue with God, the Church, and the world and being willing to be transformed or changed by the experience of an encounter.

In speaking of the problems facing the Church, including the loss of young people from the Church, the Holy Father says:

I would say that the gravely serious thing that all this is expressing is a lack of a personal encounter with God, of an authentic religious experience. This is what I believe creates in the end the “religion *a la carte*.” I believe that one has to recover the religious act as a movement towards an encounter with Jesus Christ. (S. Rubin-F. Ambrogetti, *El Jesuita*, Bs. As., 2010, 80-81.)

It is this encounter with Christ that is central to the Holy Father’s vision, which is anything but static. He is engaged in relationships and dialogues. His vision is not like seeing a sculpture or painting from a distance, but it is one that involves interaction. His worldview is fluid in the presence of God and neighbor. In this sense, one can never say that the vision is completely

finished. The Pope quite happily keeps the rest of the world guessing. He has an expansive vision of an open world.

The World

Before considering the specifics of this “open world”, we may first ask a more general question: how does Pope Francis envision the world? A globe is often used to depict the world. It has a spherical shape. All the points on the globe are equidistant from the center of the sphere. On the surface, it seems that all exercise equal roles in the formation of the world. Simply looking at the sphere, one might think that everything is uniform, homogenous, not unlike the landscape of big cities where houses, stores, restaurants all look the same, where chain stores and name brands are spread throughout the city.

I would suggest that Pope Francis does not see the world exactly this way; that is, rather than a sphere, he uses the image of a polyhedron, “which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 236)

A polyhedron is a solid figure with many plane faces, usually more than six. The different faces are connected one to another at the edges. Each surface preserves its uniqueness and identity, which shows its differences with respect to the others, and yet, the whole polyhedron remains a single unit. This is the way Pope Francis views the world – as a common home – with many nations and peoples who are interconnected. Some are living near the center; while others are living at the peripheries.

Pastorally, Pope Francis has emphasized the importance of solidarity, encounter, dialogue and inclusion, with the goal of integration of persons into a community. At the same time, the Holy Father recognizes the obstacles: ideologies that polarize; the exclusion of whole sectors of the population; and attempts to impose a uniformity, which he occasionally calls an ideological colonization.

It is not that the Holy Father is against globalization. As he noted in Philadelphia, he sees two forms of it. One form, symbolized by the sphere, is of a technocratic paradigm and destroys the richness and uniqueness of individuals and peoples (the model of the sphere). The other, illustrated by a polyhedron, unites everyone, while preserving one’s proper identity, helping the people to grow, and preserving each person’s dignity and rights. (Cf. Address at Independence Mall, Philadelphia, 26 September 2015)

The world, understood as a polyhedron, has many points of contact and convergence. In dialoguing with reality, the Church goes to the peripheries to experience life and to encounter others there. This going to the peripheries changes our perspective through engagement with the experience of the persons who live there. It is at the peripheries that the Gospel urgently must be preached. The Pope calls us out of our comfort zone:

Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 20)

Christian Identity in an Open World

The Church goes forth to encounter others in this interconnected, open world. Two words that are essential to Christian engagement in this “open world” are identity and dialogue. To speak of an open world necessitates addressing our identity as Christians. The Holy Father spoke of this when addressing the Bishops of Asia in Korea:

We cannot engage in real dialogue unless we are conscious of our own identity. ... If we are to speak freely, openly and fruitfully with others, we must be clear about who we are, what God has done for us, and what it is that he asks of us. And if our communication is not to be a monologue, there has to be openness of heart and mind to accepting individuals and cultures. (Address of Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishops of Asia, 17 August 2014)

The Church must be open to the world while preserving her own identity. How might we best understand this identity? The Holy Father describes Christian identity as “the baptismal embrace which the Father gave us when we were little ones” which “makes us desire, as prodigal children ... yet another embrace, that of the merciful Father who awaits us in glory.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 144)

An embrace between a parent and child is dynamic. Our model for Christian identity is the sacrificial giving of Christ on the cross (cf. *EG*, 269), which is a culmination of his public ministry - of bringing the Mercy of the Father to those at the margins. Living our faith in Christ, who is a Person, not an idea, is our greatest identity. Pope Benedict XVI expressed it this way:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas est*, 25 December 2005, 1)

Our Christian identity is the fruit of an encounter which gives direction to our lives. Nevertheless, the Christian, Pope Francis warns, must guard against complacency, isolation and self-absorption:

Faith by nature is not self-absorbed; it ‘goes out’. It seeks understanding; it gives rise to testimony; it generates mission. (Address of Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishops of Asia, 17 August 2014)

Christian identity, born from the embrace of the Father and the encounter with the person of Christ, manifests itself in three things: worship of God alone; love and service of one another; and, witness to our hope, which lies in the One who saves us. Another aspect of Christian identity involves belonging to the community of faith, which helps us broaden our horizons. Having a sense of belonging helps us overcome the fear of being changed by another.

Finally, going forth as Christians, with our particular identity, to engage others in the real world can help create a new cultural synthesis. Writing in the context of the problem of migration, the Holy Father exhorts:

I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis. How beautiful are those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 210)

Firmly rooted in Christ, we can engage others in dialogue, which also demands having empathy, the ability to hear even those things which are unspoken. We are challenged to listen not only to the words which others speak, but to the unspoken communication of their experiences, their hopes and aspirations, their struggles and their deepest concerns. (cf. Address of Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishops of Asia, 17 August 2014)

Dialogue in the Open World

The Church goes forth to engage others in the world. Dialogue is an instrument of mercy inasmuch as it facilitates mutual understanding, forgiveness, and the construction of peace. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (nn. 238-258) the Holy Father envisions the whole Church engaged in different forms of dialogue: the dialogue between faith and reason; ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue; as well as social dialogue and dialogue about religious freedom.

Dialogue is sometimes criticized as not yielding tangible results. People gather, talk, and listen, but in the end, things remain more or less the same. A word must be said about the method and demands of dialogue. In addressing the Pontifical Institute for Arab Studies, the Holy Father noted that dialogue requires “patience and humility along with extensive study, because approximation and improvisation can be counterproductive, or can even cause discomfort or embarrassment. A lasting continuous commitment is needed in order to not be caught unprepared in various situations and in different contexts.” (Address to Participants in the Meeting sponsored by the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, 24 January 2015)

In addition to patience, humility, and study, it is important to keep in mind the goal of dialogue: to help shape and form a more just society – “to devise a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive, and inclusive society.”

Dialogue demands not compromising one’s essential convictions but also having a fundamental openness to others in order to better understand them. The Holy Father writes: “True openness involves being steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, while at the same time being ‘open to understanding those of the other party’ and ‘knowing that dialogue can enrich each side.’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 251; cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 7 December 1990, 56)

This mutual enrichment which results from authentic dialogue is not merely the communication of the truth or abstract ideas. Again, for the Holy Father, realities are more important than ideas (cf. *EG*, 231). In his vision of dialogue, the most important thing exchanged is the exchange and welcoming of persons:

Dialogue is much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 142)

The fruitfulness of the dialogue will be seen in the true change that occurs within those engaged in dialogue. This calls for rejecting those things which obscure reality, including “angelic forms of purity, dictatorships or relativism, empty rhetoric ... ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 231)

The world of Pope Francis is an open world, with many points of contact and convergence. It is a world with many actors, each with his or her specific religious and cultural identity, each with a unique personal history. These actors are engaged on the world stage, ideally to promote peace. The world of Pope Francis is a web of relationships and encounters which seek to overcome divergences and conflicts, which are part of the real world in which he and we all live.

The Church in the Open World

This understanding of an open world shapes the pastoral activity of the Pope with respect to migration; the promotion of peace and solidarity; and to the permanent mission of the Church and the need for pastoral conversion.

Migration

A grave and pressing pastoral problem facing the world is the problem of migration due to war, poverty, religious persecution and the like. In addressing the Diplomatic Corps in 2015, the Holy Father noted that migrants “at times are not searching for a better future, but simply a future, since to remain in their own country would mean certain death.” (Address of the Holy Father to the Diplomatic Corps, 12 January 2015)

It is imperative that there be a spirit of openness to the other – to seek not only what is in our best interest but to be concerned about their interests – creating an “open community in which there is space for all, poor and rich, those near and afar.” (Address of the Holy Father to the Diplomatic Corps, 12 January 2014)

To keep others out, especially by building walls, thereby remaining closed in on oneself, seems not only to be an affront to human dignity but also suggests that dialogue is impossible, that differences cannot be overcome. It is this attitude that the Pope rejects. No one should be surprised by his words: “Where there is a wall, there is a closed heart. We need bridges, not walls!” (Angelus Address, 9 November 2015)

His words related to migrants are a manifestation of a pastoral thrust of his Pontificate, namely that politics and authority are a service; they are not for serving oneself or for excluding whole groups of people. Politics ought not be concerned with ideological ideas but with persons. For this reason, it is important for the state to be open to the role of faith in public life, not only for the benefit resulting from the dialogue between faith and reason but also because it gives rise to

a politics that serves the common people and is respectful of their values and beliefs, which enrich the culture.

Solidarity

This creation of an open community requires solidarity without which man cannot live:

Solidarity in its deepest and most challenging sense, thus becomes a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions, and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 228)

Solidarity, born from an encounter, can push humanity to search for true justice without forgetting the least of our brothers and sisters. Solidarity demands recognizing the common, inherent human dignity of each person, refusing to accept the throwaway culture. It thereby becomes a condition for peace. The idea of welcoming another, especially someone fleeing persecution or “certain death”, in the open world of Pope Francis, is not the privilege of Christians but is the common work of humanity, helping us recognize that we are part of the same human family.

This idea of solidarity, so prominent in the Pontificate of John Paul II, is significant in the pastoral ministry of Pope Francis. Despite a tortuous history, in recent years, Latin American countries have grown in fraternity, seen on a political scale but even demonstrated by the collegial working of their bishops, giving rise to a true unity in diversity, which the Church can be universally. Pope Francis is cautious to distinguish fraternity and solidarity from the uniformity imposed upon peoples and nations under the guise of unity, a uniformity which does not respect the values and priorities of the people. Part of the Church’s mission involves bringing unity and peace to the world and defending peoples against an ideological colonization. Pope Francis is leading this defense.

The Missionary Church and Pastoral Conversion

Mindful of his worldview, we can now consider the Holy Father’s Apostolic Missions. He wants to promote peace, which does not exist in the abstract. The Holy Father has traveled to places of great conflict – where there are open wounds – to bring the healing balm of Mercy. He journeyed to Lampedusa in Italy, where there is a tremendous refugee problem. He went to Korea but refused to distinguish between North and South Korea, recognizing the common heritage of the people. Traveling to the Central African Republic, a place of great violence and tremendous poverty, he brought joy by opening the first Holy Door there. In Cuba, he wished to be a bridge between the East and West in meeting Patriarch Kirill, but also in negotiating peace between the North and South - the United States and Cuba. His Mass at the border, at Ciudad Juarez, was a way of highlighting the real conditions in which families and peoples must live.

In addition to these pastoral trips, the Holy Father has set the example for Catholics in going to the peripheries – to those places where there are not many Catholics: Albania, Bosnia, Sweden, Armenia, and Georgia – to be a witness of peace to the world. Even where Catholics are less numerous, he believes it is necessary to encounter, as an ambassador of Christ, the other. In his Message for the World Day of Communications, Pope Francis, in asking journalists to “reject prejudice toward others and foster a culture of encounter, helping all of us to view the world around us with realism and trust” offered the following:

In his beloved Son, this divine promise – “I am with you” – embraces all our weakness, even to dying our death. In Christ, even darkness and death become a point of encounter with Light and Life. Hope is born, a hope accessible to everyone, at the very crossroads where life meets the bitterness of failure. That hope does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts (cf. Romans 5:5) and makes new life blossom, like a shoot that springs up from a fallen seed. (Message for the World Day of Communications, 24 January 2017)

Just as many years ago, doctors used to make house calls, the Holy Father is traveling, bringing the medicine of mercy to all those in need, setting the example for the rest of the human family. The Pope’s conception of an “open world” is realistic; it is not a world without conflict. It is

a world of hope – one that can be a setting for a better tomorrow. It is this hope that the Church can bring to the world.

The Pope leads the Church in this mission. The Church cannot be self-referential, waiting for the rest of the world to come to her; rather, she must go out to engage the world in a missionary spirit. The Holy Father uses “the image of a field hospital to describe this “church that goes forth”; it exists with all the equipment where people go to receive treatment for both small and large infirmities. It is a mobile structure that offers first aid and immediate care, so that its soldiers do not die. It’s a place for urgent care...” (Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, New York: Random House, 52-53)

The image of a “Church that goes forth” into the open world is an important one. The Church can be conceived as a lighthouse, a sign of hope in the midst of the fog, winds, and storms of the present day. The lighthouse provides security. Many look for the lighthouse or find refuge there.

The Holy Father also sees those who struggle to make it to the lighthouse or who simply cannot make it there, because they are too hurt or wounded. In this regard another image of the Church, also using light, can be helpful. Here the members of the Church are carrying torches in the darkness to find those who are lost and to bring them light in the darkness. This light is the person of Jesus Christ and the mercy he offers.

In the light emanating from Christ, the Church finds those in darkness and accompanies them on their journey in light of her faith, which is the central focus of the Holy Father’s exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, dealing with family life. The Church must go forth to meet people unafraid of encountering those families facing difficulty.

The Church goes forth, carrying out works of mercy, in light of her faith. Flowing from Aparecida document and into his Pontificate, Pope Francis tirelessly reminds the Church of the need to be in a permanent state of mission and of a need for pastoral conversion.

Regarding mission, the mission is about handing on a legacy, which is essentially about witness. To transmit the legacy of faith, one must hand it on *personally* – touching the heart of the one to who will inherit the legacy.

Regarding pastoral conversion, the Pope recommends Mercy. Pastoral care is nothing other than the exercise of the Church’s motherhood:

We need a Church capable of discovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of “wounded” persons in need of understanding, forgiveness and love. (Address to the Brazilian Bishops, Archbishop’s House, Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013)

Conclusion

What is the Vision of Pope Francis? In short, his vision is one that is constantly developing in the spirit of authentic discernment, mindful of his own training as a Jesuit. He seeks to discern what brings consolation and peace from that which brings desolation and anxiety.

His discerning view of the world imagines it as a polyhedron with many points of contact and convergence. It is an open world in which everyone can encounter God and others. The parties to the encounters are enriched through their mutual exchange of dialogue and culture. The Church and her members, without changing essentials or sacrificing identity, can be open to new ideas and peoples. Pope Francis has a vision of the world that is hopeful – one in which all are invited to the merciful embrace of the Father in family of God in our common home. The vision involves missionary discipleship so that those at the peripheries may experience the peace offered in the person of Jesus Christ, who has revealed the Merciful Father.

I have been speaking to you of the vision of Pope Francis. Each person came here this evening with his or her own view of the world. I conclude with a question: How does Pope Francis’ vision of the world challenge you?