

Pope Francis and the Caress of Mercy

An article from this week's Tablet by Michael W Higgins

There has been no Pope like him in centuries. His pontificate marks a series of firsts: the first Jesuit, the first Latin American, the first to take the name Francis, the first for many centuries to opt out of palatial digs and to live among others. His election as Pope nearly 12 years ago was a shock, and his papacy has been a rollercoaster of shocks.

Many of those praying for him outside the Gemelli hospital where he is being treated believe he is in many critical ways irreplaceable. But Jorge Mario Bergoglio himself would be the last to think so.

One key portal through which to view his pontificate is his intellectual attachments, his spiritual antecedents, his personal faith models. And they are surprising in their range, their rich catholicity of charism and witness.

Although papal documents are frequently the result of many hands, they bear the personal stamp and signature of the pontiff and reflect, at their best and most personal, his tone and timbre. So we can read them as a point of entry into the mind and spirituality of Pope Francis

(pictured below in East Timor in September last year).



Francis' apostolic letter of 19 June 2023, *Sublimitas et Miseria Hominis* ("The Grandeur and Misery of Man"), issued on the fourth centenary of the birth of Blaise Pascal, is not a major work in the Bergoglio canon but it is significant in what it tells us about its principal creator. Pascal's "evangelical radicalism" appeals to Francis.

The French scientist, mystic and lay apologist taught the Argentinian pontiff that ecclesiastical rules and regulations have their limitations, that works of mercy are primary because the "*sole object of Scripture is charity*", that attention to the suffering of the poor is critical to a life of faith, that understanding the limits of reason does not diminish the dignity of reasoning itself, and that the existential and the personal take priority over the abstract, as in the phrase that often recurs in Francis' teaching - "*reality is superior to ideas*".

In Pascal Francis found a kindred spirit who lived in the "now", recognised humanity's innate grandeur and its unavoidable misery, and placed himself in the service of the Infinite Mercy. Like Pascal, whose God is not the God of the philosophers, Francis understands that an encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not an encounter circumscribed by the strictures of reason. And "*that only one who has encountered mercy, who has been caressed by the tenderness of mercy, is right with the Lord... and the privileged place of that encounter is the caress of the mercy of Jesus Christ.*"

That emphasis on the caress of mercy has been present from the outset, when he chose the name "Francis". Bergoglio is not quite the romantic figure of the legend of Francis, but he is, like his namesake, an ecclesial pioneer of arresting originality. Similarities between the two Francises - Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires and Giovanni de Pietro di Bernardone (*il poverello* – the little poor man) of Assisi - deserve scrutiny.

G.K. Chesterton's book *Saint Francis of Assisi* makes much of the paradoxical qualities to be found in the first Franciscan. Not surprising, given GK's fondness for paradox as a conceit and as a concept. The quirks and genius of paradox rightly applied make sense of the peculiar capacity of the Bergoglian mind to hold in tension the contradictions that define Christian life: the juxtaposition of agony with ecstasy, doubt with certitude, the mundane with the sublime, a life of service with a life of solitary prayer, leadership from below with leadership from above.

Akin to the troubadours of medieval times, Francis the Umbrian mendicant and Francis the Argentinian pope are *jongleurs de Dieu*, God's tumblers or jugglers, special performers for the divinity - poetic, beatific, subversive. Just the way God likes them.

Bergoglio's Franciscan streak, however, is not the dominant definer of his spirituality and his intellectual disposition. That is reserved for the Society of Jesus and the rigorous formation of their Companions in the

Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola. There is a strong evangelistic component in Bergoglio's temperament and spirituality that is linked to the Ignatian notion of the *magis* or "more", compelling the disciple to move beyond the sufficient or stasis. It is a summons to the spiritual heroism - unknown, ennobling, terrifying - that awaits the temerarious pilgrim of the spirit. It is not for the timid.

Bergoglio's Ignatian spirituality is a spirituality in endless formation because the human person, the human project, is forever in formation. In Bergoglio's mind the Jesuit must be a romantic realist, balancing knowledge of the luminous with knowledge of the shadow, possessed of what fellow Jesuit Hugo Rahner called "*supernatural flair*". Such flair involves an anxious heart with unquiet structures. For Francis, Pope and Jesuit, we are in an open sea, and we must not be afraid.

The dynamic of the Spirit cannot be contained by rules, regulations, dogmas even, and the securities and certitudes inherent in ways of doing things that sedate the yearning spirit, our insatiable questing for God, can distance us from the Love that calls us forth into the turbulence, the mess, of living deeply and authentically. Jesuits need, as Francis has said in one of his many meetings with them, "*to go and walk together and don't stay locked in rigid perspectives because in them there is no possibility of reform*".

And usher in an era of unprecedented reform -the defining feature of his pontifical tenure - is precisely what he has done in this extraordinary papacy: a reform of structures, attitudes, embedded models of governance, clerical entitlements and dignities, and long-entrenched institutional priorities. To assist him in effecting this reform in fact, the still point in his whirligig of *aggiornamento* - is his papacy-defining Synod on Synodality. Francis' conception of synodality was indebted to the Eastern Churches and to the Church of England, his own direct involvement as chair of the committee charged with drafting the final document of the fifth conference of CELAM (the bishops' conference of Latin America and the Caribbean) held in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007, and his commitment to the *modus operandi* known as "conversations in the spirit".

A careful parsing of the working document or *Instrumentum laboris* of the October 2023 first of two final sessions of the Synod on Synodality reveals the key components of the synodal approach: listening deeply, and walking together, with real people in mind. In other words, pastoral attentiveness to the concrete rather than a preoccupation with the abstract world of legal and dogmatic niceties and formularies; communion as a lived encounter, meaningful participation rather than passive reception.

From the outset of his papacy Francis has set his eyes on reinvigorating the synod as an ecclesial instrument of relevance and efficacy. He insisted that it be more faithfully representative of the Catholic demographic preponderantly lay, disproportionately female in terms of actual religious practice, no longer Euro-centric, more inclusive of other ecclesial communities in union with Rome - but also outward-looking, enjoining Catholics to attend to the greater challenges facing humankind, most especially the continuing desecration of the planet.

In 2023 he went further still: extending the right to vote to synod delegates drawn from the larger pool of Catholics outside the episcopacy. The laity - men and women - joined the club as equal members. The Jesuit disruptor pope is making a paradigm shift by being faithful to the organic tradition, not by abandoning it. He is an authentic conservative, not an obscurantist or a reactionary, and that conservative grounding allows him to be radical.

Although he has disrupted the established pattern of doing things as the premier occupant of the Vatican, the protocols that are the main-stay of institutional life on the Tiber, and the way that the Church works in the world by readjusting ecclesial priorities privileging the outliers, the poor, and the migrants, he has also managed to hold to the tradition he was sworn to protect as Peter by refusing to alter church teaching by papal fiat or by parliamentary consensus, by refusing to disregard traditional forms of devotion or popular piety, and by refusing to dismiss the work of his predecessors instead, building on their scaffolding.

Bergoglio, the disruptor pope, disrupts our spiritual and intellectual complacency, our foreclosure through fear of fresh ways of seeing the Gospel as the leaven of society, and our ahistorical sense of the Church that blinds us to the reforming gusts of the Spirit.

I wish the Pope a speedy recovery. He has made Rome, once the centre of an ecclesiastical empire, a treasured seat on the periphery, a beacon of human and spiritual harmony in a sea of dark turmoil.

Michael W. Higgins is the author of many books and radio documentaries, including The Jesuit Mystique and The Jesuit Disruptor: a personal portrait of Pope Francis.