

Saint Ignatius, Saint Francis, and Pope Francis: Lenten Reflection for St. John Seminary Faculty

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MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO wrote a biography of Don Quixote, the protagonist of Cervantes's masterpiece, which is probably the most influential novel ever written, (before *The Da Vinci Code* of Dan Brown, of course). Unamuno begins his biography of Don Quixote with an ingenious comparison of Don Quixote and St. Ignatius of Loyola, drawing from Cervantes's description of the Man of La Mancha and Rivadeneira's biography of the founder of the Jesuits. Unamuno describes how Ignatius set out for Montserrat to deposit his arms at the feet of the Virgin. On the road to Montserrat, he encountered a Moor who denied the virginity of the Blessed Mother. Ignatius tried to convince him, without success, and the Moor rode away very conceited and arrogant.

The young Ignatius had second thoughts and wondered if he should have punished the man. He wanted to let God decide, so he dropped the reins of his steed to see if the animal would pursue the recalcitrant Moor or continue on the road to the sanctuary of Montserrat. The beast trotted off to Montserrat and the Jesuit Order was founded. By the way, Unamuno credited that donkey with the founding of the Society of Jesus.

The early biographers recount how St. Ignatius was wounded in the battle of Pamplona and how he spent much of his convalescence reading. Because there were no books of chivalry like Quixote and Ignatius loved to read, they gave the patient Ludwig of Saxony's *Life of Christ* and a *florilegium* of the lives of the Saints. After devouring the books, Ignatius's comment was: "I want to be a saint like St. Francis."

Well, we have a Pope who has embraced the vocation of being a follower of “Ignatius who wants to be a saint like St. Francis.”

Our Pope is thoroughly Jesuit, thoroughly Ignatian, right down to the fascination with St. Francis. In his interview for *Civiltà Cattolica*, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., asked Pope Francis why he became a Jesuit. The Pope said that three things about the Jesuits that attracted him were: the missionary spirit, community, and discipline. He especially admired the way Jesuits manage their time.

It is quite obvious that Pope Francis exhibits these characteristics in spades. He is truly living his Jesuit vocation with an intense missionary zeal, a love for community, for mission, and for the disciplined life that does not waste anything, especially not time. I love the image of Pope Francis running around the Vatican turning off the lights. It reminds me of my dad.

Shortly before his ordination, the thirty-two-year-old Bergoglio wrote a short *credo*. He has kept that piece of paper as a reminder of his core convictions. It is a clear indication of the habit of self-reflection so deeply ingrained by his Jesuit formation.

He speaks of his own history and says that, on a spring day of September (in the Southern Hemisphere!), “The loving face of God crossed my path and invited me to follow Him.” The Holy Father is always harkening back to the day of his own spiritual awakening and conversion on the Feast of St. Matthew that found him breaking away from his friends to go to church to receive the Sacrament of Confession. It was there that he first felt called. Later, he shared that his favorite painting in Rome is Caravaggio’s *Calling of Matthew*, where Jesus is pointing at the tax collector. Bergoglio said that, when he looks at that painting, he feels that Jesus is pointing at him. It is not surprising that Fr. Bergoglio, when appointed bishop, chose the phrase *miserando atque eligendo* (“having mercy and calling me”) from the homily of the Venerable Bede on the Feast of St. Matthew, the publican converted and called to be an apostle.

The experience as a seventeen-year-old was, in his words, “the astonishment of an encounter . . . of encountering someone who was waiting for you. . . . God is the one who seeks us first.” The Holy Father views morality in the context of an encounter with Christ that is “triggered by mercy,” “the privileged locus of the encounter is the caress of the mercy of Jesus Christ on our sins, and thus a new morality—a correspondence to mercy is born.” He views this morality as a “revolution”; it is “not a titanic effort of the will,” but simply a

response to a surprising, unforeseeable, and “unjust mercy.” Morality is not a “never falling down,” but “an always getting up again.”

Pope Francis embraces the introspection that is so central to Jesuit spirituality. The practice of the *examen*, mental prayer and reflection, a review of how one is living one’s vocation, was Ignatius’s plan to keep the Jesuits recollected in God—focused, despite their activist lifestyles.

As novice master, Fr. Bergoglio insisted on fidelity to the practice of *examen*, realizing that Ignatius’s strict program of formation was to prepare men for years of self-discipline once all the props of the formation program were taken away.

In keeping with his own Jesuit formation, Pope Francis is a man of discernment, and at times, that discernment frees him from the confinement of doing something in a certain way because it was always thus.

There are many indications that Pope Francis is very comfortable in his own skin and does not feel constrained by practices of pontificates of the past. But to me, one of the most striking examples of this clarity of vision and confidence was the decision to celebrate his first Holy Thursday Mass as pope at the Casal del Marmo Detention Center, washing the feet of a group of prisoners.

On Holy Thursday, Jesus washed the feet of the Twelve. They were shocked and unhinged by the experience. St. Peter rebelled at the thought and capitulated only when Jesus insisted. For most of us, it has become a rather stylized liturgical gesture that is but a weak reflection of what the original foot washing entailed. The newly elected Pope Francis replicated the surprise and the shock of the Apostles even as he dismayed those who preferred the stylized liturgy in a Basilica.

This was not an innovation for Pope Francis, for as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he had been doing this each Holy Week. While many were surprised that the Holy Father did not opt to celebrate the Holy Thursday Mass as other popes had done, in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Holy Father was jostling our imagination because we have grown so complacent that we can no longer see beyond the familiar custom to glimpse the challenging truth. With a simple gesture, the Pope was challenging core assumptions about power, authority, and leadership. As he told the prisoners, this is a symbol; it is a sign. “Washing your feet means I am at your service,” he said.

In his address to the Brazilian bishops at the 2013 celebration of

World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis said: “Unless we train ministers capable of warming people’s hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness, what joy can we have for our present and future journey?”

Fr. Jorge Bergoglio’s former novices recount how he always insisted that the seminarians should go on the weekends to the poorest neighborhoods to give catechism classes to the children. He used to tell them that if someone could make the catechism simple enough for children to understand, that was a wise person. When the seminarians returned from the poor neighborhoods, he would always check to see if they had dusty shoes. If a seminarian did not have dusty shoes, that man had some explaining to do.

This same desire to teach the young Jesuits to stay engaged with the people, to be close to the little people, is what Jesus did when he was training the apostles. Jesus took them to the temple to observe the widow putting her last penny into the collection. The Lord did not refund her money, applaud her, or give her a compliment. She was unaware that she was being observed as Jesus used her as part of his lesson plan to his seminarian apostles. He helped them to see the poor widow through his eyes. Jesus wanted his priests to see the faith and the devotion of the *anawim*, the poor who are rich in faith. We have much to learn from the poor.

Pope Francis, in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), reminds us that God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself “became poor.” The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. In his inaugural address at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus used the prophecy of Isaiah to describe his own messianic mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” Jesus assured those burdened by sorrow and crushed by poverty that God has a special place for them in his heart: “Blessed are the poor, yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Pope Francis is most eloquent in his advocacy on behalf of the poor and our obligation to help them by programs of promotion and assistance, as well as by working to resolve the structural causes of poverty. However, one of Pope Francis’ most impassioned pleas on behalf of the poor concerns their pastoral care. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father writes: “I want to say with regret that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The

great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them His friendship, His blessing, His Word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care.”

Reading that passage from *Evangelii Gaudium* reminds me of something that happened to me years ago when I was working at the Centro Católico. There had been a terrible earthquake in Guatemala and thousands of people perished. A former priest who was working at a secular relief organization came to seek my help in contacting some remote indigenous people in Guatemala. His agency wanted to fund a project for the poorest people.

I arranged for a friend to take this individual to a remote mountain village, where he made known his agency’s offer to this people. He told them to choose any one project—a school, a clinic, a well. The elders of the tribe asked for time to discuss the proposal with the members of the tribe. After their deliberations the chief returned and said to the former priest: “Sir, what we need more than anything else is new doors for our Church.”

Needless to say, my friend was shocked and embarrassed. I am not sure how he negotiated that with his agency. I think he paid for the doors himself and funded some other program.

The interesting thing is that the Indians, despite all their physical needs, felt that their relationship with God was their most pressing need. Pope Francis would have understood that immediately.

The young Jorge Bergoglio joined the Jesuits in part out of a desire to be a missionary and go to Japan. It is hard to read Pope Francis’s challenge to go to the peripheries without recalling the letter of Francis Xavier to St. Ignatius that appears in the breviary for the feast of the great Jesuit missionary. Francis Xavier’s letter contains this passionate plea to his fellow priests:

Many, many people are not becoming Christians for one reason only: There is nobody to make them Christians. Again and again I have thought of going around to the Universities of Europe, especially Paris, and everywhere crying out like a madman, riveting the attention of those with more learning than charity: “What a tragedy: How many souls are being shut out of heaven and falling into hell, thanks to you!” I wish they

would work as hard at this as they do at their books and so settle their account with God for the learning and talents entrusted to them.

I can imagine Pope Francis writing that.

Pope Francis never got to be a missionary to Japan, but he never ceased to admire those Jesuit missionaries and others who formed the faith of the laity so well that those Christian communities in Japan survived without priests for over 250 years. In 1865, two years after Mathew Perry opened Japan to foreigners, Fr. Bernard Petitjean of the Missions Etrangères de Paris opened a Church for foreign nationals but was immediately visited by throngs of underground Catholics who had practiced their faith clandestinely. The French priest found them all baptized, catechized, and legitimately married in the Church, and all of their dead had received a Christian burial.

As Pope Francis observes, “faith was kept intact by the gifts of grace that gladdened the lives of the laity, who only received baptism but then continued to live their apostolic mission.”

Pope Francis, like Pope Benedict, has said that Catholicism is not a “catalogue of prohibitions.” He urges us to be positive, to emphasize the things that unite us, not the negative, the things that divide us. “You must prioritize the connection between people, the path we walk together. After that, addressing the differences becomes easier.”

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father shares with us that every form of catechesis should attend to the “way of beauty,” the *via pulchritudinis*, showing that to follow Christ is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties (§167). He writes further:

As for the moral component of catechesis, which promotes growth in fidelity to the Gospel way of life, it is helpful to stress again and again the attractiveness and the ideal of a life of wisdom, self-fulfillment and enrichment. In the light of that positive message, our rejection of the evils which endanger that life can be better understood. Rather than experts in dire predictions, dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and deviation, we should appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel. (§168)

A fascinating study funded by the Lilly Endowment resulted in the acronym MTD, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” The authors of the study, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, invented this term to describe the common religious beliefs among Americans. It is a religion that is about being nice, feeling good, and having God as some sort of a fire extinguisher—in case of emergency, break the glass and say a prayer. What is missing is the *kerygma*, the love of God that sent Christ into the world to die on the Cross, rise again, and accompany us until the end of time.

Besides MTD, we find a compelling critique of American religion by Ross Douthat. In his provocative book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, he berates the popularity of so many brands of bad religion, from the prosperity gospel to the portrayal of God as a life coach, aberrations of religion that have bred self-righteousness, greed, and self-absorption.

Pope Francis is not a proponent of MTD or the Bad Religion that has become so fashionable in our day. His *Evangelii Gaudium* begins, “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and minds of all who encounter Jesus.” The Pope is a true companion of Jesus, a Jesuit who puts Christ at the center of his life. At the center of the Church’s mission is the announcement of the *kerygma*. The *kerygma* is Trinitarian.

The fire of the Spirit leads us to believe in Jesus Christ, who by his death and Resurrection reveals and communicates to us the Father’s infinite mercy. Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over. Jesus Christ loves you, he gave his life to save you, and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (§164).

The Document of Aparecida, much influenced by then Cardinal Bergoglio, talks about the need to form missionary disciples. The *kerygma* is central in this process: “the *kerygma* is not simply a stage, but the *leitmotiv* of a process that culminates in the maturity of the disciple of Jesus Christ. Without the *kerygma*, the other aspects of the process are condemned to sterility with hearts not truly converted to the Lord. Hence, the Church should have the *kerygma* present in all its actions.”

In the midst of a culture that glorifies individualism and the imperial autonomous self, the Pope and Aparecida speak to us about communion:

There can be no Christian life except in community, in families, parishes, communities of consecrated life, base communities, other small communities and movements. Like the early Christians who met in community, the disciples take part in the life of the Church, and in the encounter with brothers and sisters, living the life of Christ in solidarity, in fraternal life.

The Holy Father speaks so often about the culture of encounter and the art of accompaniment in mentoring people in the faith. His message is very different from the new-age individualism of “I’m very spiritual but not very religious” attitude that thrives in today’s climate.

In a world that is so often polarized and divided, Pope Francis’s message has brought hope into people’s lives and enticed many to look at the Church again. The field hospital imagery is more compelling than that of the museum or the concert hall.

Most Catholics have felt energized by the focus on God’s love and mercy and on the clarion call to embody the ideals of the Church’s social Gospel in our relations with others, especially the most vulnerable and forgotten. The Holy Father has made us more aware of Lazarus, covered with sores, who is on our doorstep suffering alone while we are absorbed in our pursuit of entertainment and creature comforts in a globalization of indifference. *Evangelii Gaudium* reminds us: “Sometimes we lose our enthusiasm for mission because we forget that the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters” (§265)

Pope Francis fittingly celebrated his inaugural Mass on the feast of St. Joseph. He has St. Joseph’s symbol on his coat of arms and, like Pope John, added Joseph to the canon of the Mass. In the homily at that inaugural Mass, Pope Francis urged us to take care of each other, to show a little *tenerezza*, tenderness, and to protect God’s gifts.

One of God’s greatest gifts to the Church is this Jesuit Pope who is like St. Ignatius who wanted to be like St. Francis of Assisi. Pope Francis is helping the whole world to rediscover the “Joy of the Gospel.” And all this *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*. N&V