

Pope Francis' missionary approach

The attractive witness of courageous dialogue

Roberto Catalano

The Good News must be shared with that portion of humanity – almost two thirds of the world's inhabitants – still awaiting a deep encounter with Jesus. But, how to do this in a way which is respectful of individual freedom and in a multireligious and multicultural world? A kind of roadmap for communicating the Gospel emerged through the words and actions of Pope Francis during his 2019 journeys. Author Roberto Catalano spent much of his life in Asia and is currently co-responsible for the Focolare Movement's Center for Interreligious Dialogue.

Pope Francis clearly portrays a new way of recounting the Gospel story. This was evident right from the very first evening of March 13, 2013, in his greeting of 'buona sera' (*good evening*) from the balcony overlooking St. Peter's square. People are deeply struck by the pontiff's capacity for speaking the language of the people. In fact, a fundamental and ongoing characteristic of his mission as a Jesuit, a bishop, and now the successor of Peter, is one of faithfulness in remaining close to the *pueblo fiel*, the ordinary faithful. While Bergoglio's language is simple, it is far from 'simplistic'. Rather, it contains a remarkably rich and diverse pastoral vocabulary. In this regard, it seems to me that 2019 marked a key moment in Francis' 'mission.' The year began with trips to Abu Dhabi and Morocco and later in the year a historic voyage to Thailand and Japan. Together, they offered a clear roadmap that also displayed the Argentine Pope's full range of communication skills. Key moments gave witness to the fact that this Pope, through his actions, mission and dialogue merging together in vibrant and articulate ways, can offer fundamental pointers to the present and future Church.

The Church grows by attractive witness

Let us start from the facts. In 2019, Pope Francis traveled to countries with miniscule Christian, and especially Catholic, populations. Yet, Francis never showed the least unease in addressing these "small flocks". Rather, he seemed at home precisely in that environment to which the Church is called to be present. Taking up one of his frequently mentioned

themes present in *Evangelii gaudium*, the pontiff explained that 'our mission as baptized persons, priests and consecrated men and women, is not really determined by the number or size of spaces that we occupy, but rather by our capacity to generate change and to awaken wonder and compassion.'¹ These effects come about through 'witness,' which means 'by the way we live as disciples of Jesus, in the midst of those with whom we share our daily lives, joys and sorrows, suffering and hopes'.²

In this sense, Bergoglio himself is a 'witness'. This is evident from the interest generated by his words, his initiatives, and by the trips themselves. Each of these elements serves to bear witness to Christ's discipleship and often provokes reaction even within the Church itself. For humanity today, such evangelical life becomes a powerful 'narration' of the Good News.

A few years ago, I was invited to visit a famous Taoist temple in Hong Kong. This experience made a lasting impression on me. At the end of the morning together, our hosts invited me and two Chinese friends to an excellent vegetarian meal. To my great surprise, the topic of conversation at lunch was Pope Francis, even though we, as Catholics, had not raised the topic. Instead, the president of the board in charge of the Taoist temple posed the first question. He was interested in knowing about the Pope himself, his life, his actions and, when asking about *Laudato sí*, it was from the perspective of a fellow human being, a Chinese and a Taoist.

Thus, it is this compelling witness that attracts others, and it is a second key point of the Bergoglian 'narrative.' It is the awareness, or rather the conviction, that 'the Church grows not through proselytism, but through attraction.'³ As we know, this effective formula was coined by Benedict XVI in reference to the early Christian communities, and Pope Francis often quotes this when speaking in majority Muslim countries or in major centers of Buddhism, such as in Thailand and Japan. Obviously, attractive witness does not need words. It is much more effective when it is something lived but that does not rule out speaking when it is suitable and perhaps requested. St Francis, too, had this intuition and wanted it inserted into his First Rule in 1221. He gave clear recommendations to the brothers living at that time in a Muslim setting: '. . . when they see that it pleases the Lord, they should announce the word of God, so that they may believe in Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' Thus, it is a concept dear to Pope Francis, one he did not fail to quote again at Rabat during his meeting with priests and religious in the mission land of Morocco.

Transmitting faith in one's 'dialect'

Basic elements of this narrative, communicated at opportune moments also through spoken word, is the way the Gospel is to be transmitted. In Thailand and Japan, the Pope bumped up against the prevailing mentality of non-Christians, who see Christian faith as 'foreign' and 'imported.' This attitude regarding Christianity is present across the huge Asian continent, except for the Philippines. Pope Francis shows great creativity in recommending that faith be confessed in one's dialect, 'in the same way that a mother speaks to her child.'⁴

The suggestion of the Pope reminded me of my own personal experience in a Himalayan parish where Jesuit priests served a Chinese-Mongolian tribe in the region. The local parish priest asked me to speak at the packed Sunday Mass, with a local catechist translating my English words into Nepalese. At the end, the priest apologized because the catechist had translated my words rather loosely. Truthfully, I had noticed this and had no problem with it, because even more noticeable to me was the attentive listening of the people. I could see that what had been said penetrated their hearts and minds. It did not matter whether the translation was exact.

So, the confession of faith can and should be in one's 'dialect', as Bergoglio himself bears witness. Being myself from Turin, Italy (in the northern Piedmont region), for example, I noted that the Pope, during the early years of his pontificate, tended to express himself in a manner typical of this same region. He likely picked this up from his Italian, Piedmont-born grandmother, Rosa, whom the Pope often speaks of as the true channel of his faith and early evangelical formation.

Enculturating the Gospel

On this basis, we can move to a third element that emerged during the 2019 trips: The Pope's emphasis on finding ever-more creative ways of communicating Christian truths to persons of diverse cultures. In a time of cultural conformity where world religions at times run the risk of being dumbed down and forced to peddle themselves in a seeming 'religious marketplace', Pope Francis forcefully and clearly speaks of the need to 'enculturate.' His Jesuit roots help him find the courage "to look for new symbols and images, for that particular music which can help awaken in the Thai people the amazement that the Lord wants to give us.' So: 'Let us not be afraid to continue enculturating the Gospel." Bergoglio communicates the need 'to seek new ways of transmitting the word, ways that are capable of mobilizing and awakening a desire to know the Lord. Who is that man? Who are these people who follow a man who was crucified?'⁵

The 'sacrament' of dialogue

The factors mentioned here - attractive witness, a courageous, understandable narrative, and an urgency for enculturation— connect well with Pope Francis' words in Morocco, when he spoke of the 'living sacrament of...dialogue'.⁶ Perhaps for the first time, dialogue is being called a 'sacrament,' a process 'God wants to initiate with every man and woman, wherever they are.'⁷ It also signifies a commitment to be an 'example of Jesus himself, who is meek and humble of heart, with fervent and disinterested love, without calculations and limitations, and with respect for the freedom of others.'⁸

Dialogue is fundamental for Pope Francis. In Abu Dhabi, he carried out a gesture that was both an event and a witness. With the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, he signed the *Document on Human Fraternity*. It gave courageous witness to something new, but especially to an

awareness that today, the Church's journey is 'together.' It is a 'together' that invites the Church to be with men and women of all cultures and beliefs, in every corner of the globe. This being 'together' with others speaks a great Truth: that of God's paternity, and because of that, universal fraternity.

A few weeks after this historic signing in the Emirates, I met with Msgr. Pizzaballa, Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Knowing he had been present at the Abu Dhabi event I asked his thoughts on what transpired there. Among other things, he said: 'In addition to the Document, there remains the action itself. People need to see images, to see icons. Certainly, what remains in the memory of so many was the sight of Pope Francis and Imam Al-Tayyeb together.' And, as Pope Francis said, quoting the Document itself during his apostolic visit to Morocco, dialogue "becomes prayer. We can carry it out daily in the name "of the human fraternity that embraces all human beings, unites them and renders them equal."⁹

¹ Francis, Address: Meeting with priests, religious, consecrated persons, and the Ecumenical Council of Churches, Rabat, 31 March 2019.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Id.*, *Evangelii gaudium*, n.14

⁴ *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 139.

⁵ *Address: Meeting with priests, religious, seminarians and catechists, Bangkok, 22 November 2019.*

⁶ Address: Meeting with priests, religious..., Rabat, 31 March 2019

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*