

POPE FRANCIS

Reform and Resistance

Austen Ivereigh

The expense is reckoned,
 The enterprise is begun.
 It is of God.
 It cannot be withstood.
 So the faith was planted
 So it must be restored.¹

THIS FAMOUSLY CONCLUDES St Edmund Campion's 'Challenge to the Privy Council', better known as 'Campion's Brag'. The scholar and Catholic convert penned his dazzling piece of Oxford rhetoric in 1580, shortly after returning to these shores as a Jesuit priest. His aim? To let the world know that far from being a traitor, he had come to England in peace, to preach the gospel and the traditional faith of England.

Campion brags not of his own powers, but of God's sovereignty. It is the brag of the high priest Gamaliel in the Gospel: that what is of God cannot be withstood, however hard it is opposed, even though along the road there will be defeats and reversals. It is that God is at work in the world, in charge of God's Church; but also that there is a battle, the one St Ignatius famously depicts in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In that battle, as Jorge Mario Bergoglio puts it in one of his early reflections on the Two Standards meditation, 'discernment is an instrument of struggle, and the struggle is to follow the Lord more closely'.²

My contention is that Campion's brag opens a window on to a papacy that has put discernment at its heart, and that Pope Francis's option accounts for the vehemence of the opposition to him. True reform is to take seriously that Christ is in charge of His Church; it is to make space for God to build God's people. It is a struggle because the goods of religion are vulnerable to being usurped and controlled, and harnessed

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¹ Quoted in Evelyn Waugh, *Edmund Campion* (London: Longmans Green, 1935), appendix 1, 222.

² Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 'Dos banderas', in *Meditaciones para religiosos* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 2014 [1982]), 160–166, here 163.

to purposes that are not of the gospel. Behind resistance to true reform is therefore an attempt to cling to the 'acquired fortune' of St Ignatius' 'Three Classes' (Exx 149–157).

Religion can be corrupted by this attempt to extract benefit from it: it can become a means of declaring ourselves innocent and others guilty, as Thomas Merton once put it.³ Pope Francis often quotes Henri de Lubac's claim that the greatest danger that can befall the Church is spiritual worldliness: the harnessing of the gospel for purposes that are not those of God: the enrichment or prestige of the few.⁴ Spiritual worldliness turns the Church from Christ even while it continues to speak of Him; it prevents the Church from evangelizing by reducing Christianity to an ideology or set of precepts safeguarded by an elite.

To live by discernment is to enter a place of combat, because spiritual worldliness resists exposure: it is to enter a world of angels of light, many of which are the bad spirit in disguise. Ignatius' Second Week rules are especially important in the reform of the Church because everyone claims to have the gospel and the good of the Church at heart. Yet as the clerical sex-abuse crisis has urgently shown, spiritual authority is sometimes used not to serve but exploit. In discernment, we must bargain for opposition and resistance: as Campion's brag says, *the expense is reckoned*. The expense is misunderstanding, rejection and persecution. To reckon that expense is to press ahead, regardless of what is thrown at you; to promise all unto the end, as Campion promises: 'while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn'.⁵

The Francis pontificate is the fruit of two principal discernments in his past: his navigation of an era of tribulation within the Society of Jesus in the late 1980s, and the Pentecost experience of the Latin American church meeting at Aparecida in 2007. Both were intense experiences of the movement of spirits within the ecclesial body: the first principally of desolation, the second mainly of consolation. But the pontificate is also the fruit of an ongoing apostolic discernment in common whose central locus is synodality, and in particular the reinvigorated synods of bishops that take place every two to three years in Rome. By considering in greater depth Francis's reliance on discernment, it will become clearer that the intensity of the resistance to Francis's pontificate shows forth precisely in those areas where discernment is at its heart.

³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 1989 [1966]), 116.

⁴ See for example Pope Francis, 'Christ Died and Rose for Us: The Only Medicine against the Worldly Spirit', homily, Rome, 16 May 2020.

⁵ Quoted in Waugh, *Edmund Campion*, 222.

Francis's Discerning Leadership

At the beginning of *Wounded Shepherd* I confessed that in my 2014 biography, *The Great Reformer*, I had unknowingly fed the idea of a superman Pope, the ecclesial counterpart of the myth of the heroic leader. Over the three years of writing *Wounded Shepherd* I came to understand that Francis is indeed a model leader, but of what might be called *post-heroic discerning leadership*.⁶ The new understanding is reflected in the title. *Wounded Shepherd*, which comes from Francis telling clergy during the sex-abuse crisis in 2018 that they should not hide from the Church's wounds: they should not be lamenting those wounds but, by following them, they should be led to where Christ is—which is discernment. The title contains a further echo of an address by Francis in Santiago de Chile at the start of 2018, which stands as a summary of his reform: 'A wounded Church does not make herself the centre of things, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the centre the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ'.⁷

Antonio Spadaro once told me once that he had asked Francis directly if he thought of himself as a 'great reformer'. The Pope had answered no. 'I think what I am doing is putting Christ at the centre, and the reforms follow', Spadaro reported him as saying.⁸ It is not Francis who is the agent of conversion and change, but the centrality of Christ. But that does not reduce Francis's role. Like a spiritual director leading a person through an Ignatian retreat, helping the retreatant to centre him- or herself on Christ and God's will by understanding the movement of spirits, Francis is the spiritual director of the universal Church, guiding it to Christ by discernment.

As a discerning leader, Francis is not imposing a theological agenda or a



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⁶ Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014) and *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church* (New York: Henry Holt, 2019).

⁷ Pope Francis, meeting with priests, consecrated men and women, and seminarians, Santiago de Chile, 16 January 2018.

⁸ Antonio Spadaro, *Il nuovo mondo di Francesco. Come il Vaticano sta cambiando il mondo* (Venice: Marsilio, 2018), 12.

precooked plan; he accompanies, facilitates and enables a Spirit-led process, intervening when needed to confront obstacles or temptations that stand in the way of conversion. That means sometimes issuing challenges or sharp rebukes—to spiritual worldliness, clericalism, rigidity and so on—which then provoke revealing reactions. Francis learnt from his spiritual mentor, Miguel Ángel Fiorito, that the movement of the spirits is a good thing, a sign that spiritual struggle is under way, for unless the good spirit were involved, the bad spirit would not bother.⁹ That is why Francis is untroubled by the signs of resistance. Asked about it he smiles, and likes to quote a phrase attributed to Cervantes's Don Quixote, that 'when the dogs are barking ... it is a sign we're moving ahead'.¹⁰ Brought into the open and unmasked for what it is, opposition can be used to fulfil God's purposes. 'Opposition opens up a path, a way that can be followed', Francis told Spadaro. 'Speaking in general terms, I must say that I like opposition.'¹¹

The paradox of the Francis papacy is that, while being deeply rooted in tradition and utterly faithful to the Church's teaching, he is generating seismic change even while decentralising the papacy and bolstering synodality and collegiality. The historian of church councils John O'Malley noted of the First Vatican Council that the difference between the ultramontanes and their opponents was that, for the first, the papacy was the centre from which everything flowed whereas, for the latter, it was the centre where everything came together.¹² Francis's exercise of the papacy is clearly the second, because it is neither centralist nor authoritarian. Yet, because of discernment, it has taken on something of the dynamism of the first. His reform opens the Church to new paths and new ways of seeing that rescue and renew tradition, never contradict it. As Francis likes to say, quoting Gustav Mahler: 'tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire'.¹³

Francis's discerning leadership is concerned less with changing structures than with reforming people, and then putting structures in place to support conversion. It is not a technocratic, functionalist kind of reform, but patient, operating within human limitations and concerned

⁹ 'Father Miguel Ángel Fiorito: Pope Francis' Spiritual Director', *La Civiltà Cattolica* (22 December 2019).

¹⁰ Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd*, 41.

¹¹ Pope Francis, conversation with Antonio Spadaro, in *En tus ojos está mi palabra. Homilias y discursos de Buenos Aires (1999–2013)*, edited by Antonio Spadaro (Madrid: Claretianas, 2018), 28.

¹² John O'Malley, *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II* (Cambridge, Ma: Belknap, 2019), 72

¹³ Pope Francis, concluding speech of the 2019 Amazon synod, 26 October 2019.

for building unity and communion. It is organic change, designed to last rather than to achieve immediate results. Above all, in the Vatican it is aimed at replacing a courtly, middleman culture with a culture of listening and service, and the progress in this regard has been remarkable, in spite of very few changes in personnel.¹⁴

A big part of the explanation for the Pope's dynamism is in his willingness to dwell in the tension of polarities, where discernment thrives. His leader's task is to sustain, in temporarily unresolved tension, the polarities of spirit and institution, tradition and newness, law and pastoral practice, truth and mercy, global and local, and so on. Keeping polarities in tension allows the Spirit to indicate, in the here and now, the path ahead—often a third possibility, unforeseen, that does not destroy the polar tension but renders it generative or creative. In *Evangelii gaudium* Francis describes this as a kind of peacemaking: 'it is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and make it a link in the chain of a new process' (n.227). This is not primarily an intellectual act but a spiritual one: by allowing for the resolution of what he calls 'contraposition' on a higher plane, through 'overflow', it is a response to conflict that takes seriously the incarnation and the Church as a *coincidentia oppositorum*.¹⁵

This discernment does not take place outside or apart from the broader Church, but through structures of deliberation and consultation that Pope Francis has created or reinvigorated. The so-called 'Council of Nine' cardinal advisors, the C9, as well as the college of cardinals and the reformed synods of bishops, have all become important mechanisms of discernment, framed by the sensibility of the people of God and their pastoral needs. Francis makes changes in pastoral practice and law only when a peaceful consensus has emerged and there is evidence of conversion—signs of the Spirit. Without them, Francis prefers not to act; but when he sees them he will proceed decisively, reckoning the expense of opposition.

The Family Synod of 2015, for example, ended with barely a two-thirds majority on the contentious question of communion for the divorced, but he moved ahead with *Amoris laetitia* (knowing the resistance it would

¹⁴ See Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd*, chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁵ Francis discusses this thinking in detail in part 2 of Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. In *Conversation with Austen Ivereigh* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020). 'Overflow' (*desborde*) is Francis's term for the action of the Holy Spirit in moments of paralysis or conflict, 'one that invites us to look beyond and generates a "transcending" dynamic every time life seems to get bogged down in interpretations that contradict each other in mutual exclusion'. See Diego Fares, 'The Heart of *Querida Amazonia*: "Overflowing en route"', *La Civiltà Cattolica* (15 May 2020), 25.

provoke) because the signs of conversion and convergence were unmistakable at the end of the synod, when there was an unexpected breakthrough following weeks of apparently deepening polarization. 'Many of us have felt the working of the Holy Spirit who is the real protagonist and guide of the Synod', Francis told the bishops in his final speech.¹⁶

The resistance to the Francis pontificate is not to be found in this or that criticism or objection, but in a rejection of this way of proceeding. It is a rejection of discernment, which is misread as a dilution or obfuscation. The desire is for authoritarian leadership, but only to provide divine sanction for ideological world-views. If the Pope speaks boldly of ethical imperatives rejected by that ideology but demanded by the gospel—care for the earth and migrants, for example, or opposition to the death penalty—he is told he has no authority to speak of such matters.

There is a clear parallel with the nineteenth-century reaction to the aftermath of French Revolution, which looked to the papacy as a source of iron stability in the midst of political and social chaos, outside the vicissitudes of history. When Leo XIII, after 1891, broke the Church free from that reactionary movement and turned it to re-engage with modernity (arguing that democracy was in principle acceptable, and that workers should receive a just wage) he was the target of dismissive anger and scorn very similar to that endured now by Francis over his 2015 encyclical on 'care for our common home', *Laudato si'*.

This kind of resistance is not the normal stuff of intra-ecclesial debate: Catholics disagreeing with or criticising the Pope over ethical issues, ecclesiologies and theologies. The mobilisation and fury directed at Francis are different in kind, and of a different order. They are an attack, principally, on his authority to lead the Church through discernment, which is why the resistance has been most intense at those moments when the Pope has relied on discernment.

A Lifetime Discerning

The Pope likes to say that he was not expecting his change of diocese in March 2013. But he came to the role, above all, with a profound grasp of the reasons behind the Church's failure to evangelize Western modernity. That discernment was powerfully expressed at the meeting of the Latin American bishops at Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007, which is in many ways

¹⁶ Pope Francis, concluding speech of the 2015 Family Synod, 24 October 2015. On the eleventh-hour resolution of the communion question, see *Wounded Shepherd*, chapter 9.

the basis for this pontificate. But Aparecida, in turn, must be understood in the light of the significance of the late 1980s in Bergoglio's life.

The Córdoba Exile

Much has been written of Francis's so-called 'Córdoba exile', his period of desolation in 1990–1992. In reality, those two years were the culmination of a six-year period of profound tribulation in the Society of Jesus in Argentina, when Bergoglio was in his fifties. Blamed and rejected by the Argentinian provincial governance appointed by the new Superior General in Rome, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Bergoglio spent a number of years without a clear role in the Province, researching and writing up a thesis on Romano Guardini's theory of polar opposition.¹⁷

The main fruit of those years were some of his most sublime reflections on the temptations facing apostolic bodies in tribulation. Using the wisdom of Ignatius' Second Week rules in the *Spiritual Exercises*, he developed criteria to avoid being dragged down by institutional desolation. This means being aware of the evasions and temptations characteristic of times of stress, when God seems absent. These include: to debate ideas rather than discern the situation; to long for past glories or live in fantasy futures; to become fixated on enemies, developing a sense of persecution and an exaggerated feeling of victimhood, dividing the world into goodies (us) and baddies (them); and to live in a state of permanent anxiety and suspicion, seeing everything through a distorted lens. All are temptations to close ourselves off from Christ and the grace of conversion that He offers in such times; they are to stare fearfully at the waves and ignore Christ calling us out of the boat; to shrink back in horror into our comfort zones, like Jonah rushing back to the security of Tarshish.

Bergoglio wrote to the Chilean bishops in May 2018,

It is at times like this, when we are weak, frightened and armour-plated in our comfortable winter palaces, that God's love comes out to meet us, in order to purify our intentions, that we might love as free, mature and critical people.¹⁸

The word I have rendered as 'armour-plated', *abroquelados* (literally 'buckled-up') is the same one that he uses in his 1980s writings to describe

¹⁷ On this difficult but fruitful period, see Ivereigh, *Great Reformer*, chapter 5. Bergoglio's thesis is described and discussed by Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*, translated by Barry Hudock (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2017), chapter 3.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, 'Letter Sent by the Holy Father to the Bishops of Chile Following the Report of Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna', 8 April 2018 (my translation).

this state of 'beleaguered' self-withholding. The temptation in tribulation is to refuse to discern—to ask, *What is the Holy Spirit asking of us? How must we change?*—but rather to lament our loss, to pine for old times and to condemn, and also to take refuge in ethicism and moralism rather than focusing on the person of Christ and His saving love and mercy. Applied to the Church, it is a mindset that is cold and remote, grim and joyless. It is a Christianity without the life-giving, joyful person of Christ, one reduced to what, in *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis calls *eticismo sin bondad*, a merciless moralism. Without the encounter with the person of Christ at the centre of our proclamation, he says, we end up offering charity without truth and truth without charity.¹⁹

Aparecida

You can see this discernment at Aparecida in 2007. The final document, whose drafting was coordinated by Bergoglio, rejects attitudes that see only 'confusion, danger and threats' in modernity, or which seek to respond with 'worn-out ideologies or irresponsible aggressions': that is, a Church in desolation blaming the culture for its failure to evangelize.²⁰ In a letter written to catechists in Buenos Aires a few months after Aparecida, Bergoglio observed that perhaps the greatest threat to the Church lay not outside but within, from the 'eternal and subtle temptation of beleaguered self-enclosure in order to feel more protected and secure'. (He again used the word *abroquelamiento*.)²¹ This is a potent description of the Church in the secularising era of globalisation. Faced with the tribulation of the loss of support from law and culture, the Church has too often become haughty, distant, moralistic and reactionary.

Aparecida was a remarkable, Pentecost-like event. Just as in the upper room in Jerusalem, when the shattered and fearful disciples were visited by the Holy Spirit and emboldened for mission, the meeting of the Latin American bishops at the Brazilian shrine unleashed the missionary potential of the Church in Latin America, giving it new energy and direction at a time of fear and uncertainty.

The speech Bergoglio gave to the cardinals in March 2013 is well known: he talked about a self-referential Church needing to go out to the peripheries, to be a loving mother who lived from the sweet joy of

¹⁹ *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 231. See also Pope Francis, meeting with priests, consecrated men and women, and seminarians, Santiago de Chile, 16 January 2018.

²⁰ Fifth Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *Concluding Document*, n. 11, available at <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>.

²¹ Bergoglio, 'Carta a los catequistas', in *En tus ojos está mi palabra*, 692.

evangelization. Less well known is that six years earlier he said almost exactly the same in a homily at the Aparecida meeting, which made a very deep impression on those present. He used the same image of the Church as being like the crippled woman in the Gospel ‘who does no more than look at herself, with the people of God off somewhere else’.²² The homily captivated his hearers, convincing many that Bergoglio was anointed to lead. In other words, to the same discernment, in 2007 and again in 2013, the bishops in Aparecida and the cardinals at the pre-conclave gathering in Rome five years later had precisely the same reaction.²³

For anyone who knows St Ignatius’ discernment rules, this anointing and confirmation are highly significant. Thus, the election of Aparecida’s leading light, and the author of its concluding document in March 2013 seemed to confirm to many what those at the shrine had seen and felt. Francis has spoken often of the experience of peace and freedom on the night of his election as the reason for an unexpected joy and consolation which have never left him, despite his pontificate amply demonstrating what Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote of the Office of Peter, that ‘it will be the magnetic pole that attracts the darkest powers of world history’.²⁴

The great achievement of Aparecida was not its analysis of the liquidity of contemporary globalised modernity but its recognition of the consequences for the Church’s evangelization: the dissolution of the bonds of belonging meant that the Church could no longer rely on Catholic structures buttressed by law and cultural affirmation, but must become like the early Church: poor, missionary, humble, grace-dependent, witnessing to Christ not as an idea but as an experience of encounter. Aparecida spoke much of the need for this *encuentro fundante*. Rather than lamenting and condemning, the bishops asked how the Church needed to change in order to respond to its new circumstances and to offer, at every turn, that founding encounter.

Wounded Shepherd is essentially the story of the implementation of this discernment in the pontificate. It is an account of the Latin American Pentecost spreading north to Rome, bringing about a new orientation, a change of source Church for a change of era. If in past eras the source for the universal Church was the Middle East, and later Western Europe—Spain and Italy at the time of Trent, Germany and France at

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²² Jorge Mario Bergoglio, homily, shrine of Aparecida, 16 May 2007, in *En tus ojos está mi palabra*, 673–674.

²³ Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd*, 158–161.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, translated by Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 19.



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Benedict XVI opens the meeting of Latin American bishops at Aparecida, 13 May 2007

Vatican II—now it is Latin America, expressed in the vision of Aparecida, reformulated for the universal Church in the magisterium of Francis.

At the same time Francis has engendered a new phase of the reception of Vatican II, implementing and expanding the council as Latin America has done, rather than trying to reinterpret or restrict it, as Europeans and North Americans have too often tried to do. The conservative political and cultural narrative of the 1960s as the origin of contemporary decline—with its corresponding Catholic conservative view of Vatican II as the cause of shrinking congregations—makes no sense in Latin America or in the global South generally. Rather, as I found in my interviews with them, Latin American church leaders are shocked and disappointed that the European Church, which lit the flame of the council, should have let the fire go out. They see the empty churches of Western Europe not as the product of the council but a retreat from it, and suggest that the Francis pontificate is enabling Europe to rekindle that fire.

Because it does not have a pessimistic narrative linking modernity to decline, Francis's pontificate is free of the neo-Constantinian, integralist yearnings of reactionary Catholicism in Europe and North America. The attraction of populist nationalism for beleaguered Christians in Europe is, according to Francis, an example of 'false consolation'—a way of avoiding evangelizing modernity by retreating into fantasies of restoration. Christianity will revive as soon as it focuses not on its loss of power but the needs of its people. *Evangelii gaudium* is an attempt to shake the Church free of false consolations, of its excuses not to evangelize. *Laudato si'* demands action now, in the world-as-it-is, to deal with the concrete emergency that is the social and economic devastation brought about by

technocracy and build an alternative modernity. *Amoris laetitia* is a bid to rescue Catholicism from the false consolation of nominalism and legalism.

Thus Francis, in *Amoris laetitia*, regrets that ‘we have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life’, and says the Church has to learn to communicate marriage as ‘a dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment’, rather than as ‘a lifelong burden’ (n.37). Rather than simply denouncing divorce and same-sex marriage, the Church has to walk with people, facilitating the grace that will enable them to commit themselves and stay together.²⁵

Aparecida represented a shift in self-understanding. In theological terms, it is arguably a definitive move away from a deductive, neo-classicist epistemology to an inductive, pastoral approach characteristic of Latin American Catholicism. All Francis’s teaching documents use the so-called ‘See, Judge, Act’ method—reformulated by Francis as ‘Contemplate, Discern, Propose’—to make clear that we look with the eyes of the disciple and the Good Shepherd, rather than imposing abstract and universal ideas typical of ideologies. Of course, this is the approach of Vatican II. But in the epistemologies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI there persisted what Gerard Whelan calls ‘a perceptualism with roots in classicism’, which pays little attention to the process of discovery and moral growth in human lives and which assumes that the truth clearly explained is easy to see and that the choice is whether or not to comply with it.²⁶

The critical realist or inductive pastoral approach of Pope Francis, on the other hand, starts by attending to pastoral realities and the operation of grace in people’s lives. It is conscious of culture, and of limits and frailties, especially of the poor; and it understands the Church’s task as helping people respond better to grace within the concrete circumstances of their lives. It assumes that the Church needs, like Jesus, to be more interested in sinners’ desire for conversion than their sin, and that it is Pharisaical to lay down the law but not help people live it by opening them to God’s grace. It implies a decentralised ecclesiology which takes the people of God seriously as an evangelizing subject, and a Samaritan, pastoral, missionary outlook which takes seriously gradualism in moral development.

²⁵ On the shift performed in *Amoris laetitia* and its impact on church praxis, see *Alegria e Misericórdia. A teologia do Papa Francisco para las familias*, edited by Miguel Almeida (Braga: Frente e Verso, 2020).

²⁶ Gerard Whelan, *A Discerning Church: Pope Francis, Lonergan, and a Theological Method for the Future* (New York: Paulist, 2019), 75.

Amoris laetitia says that ‘we have been called to form consciences, not replace them’ (n.37). The moral theologian James Keenan calls this a ‘sensational phrase’, meaning that from now on pastors and theologians must accompany and form consciences: it is not enough to regurgitate doctrines; pastors must help people understand what God is asking them to do in the concrete here-and-now of the world-as-it-is rather than the world-as-it-should-be of neo-Scholastic categories.²⁷ As Francis once pointed out in a homily in Medellín, Colombia, Jesus took his disciples out to the lepers and the lame so that they would deal in human realities rather than take refuge in legal categories.²⁸

Aparecida understood that, in an era of globalisation, the Church had to be, above all, close and concrete, if it is to witness to the incarnation.²⁹ The weakening of institutions, the dissolution of the bonds of belonging and the degradation of nature all crippled the poor especially, but produced a deep anguish in wider humanity: *affective*, in the sense of suffering the loss of ties of love and trust that sustain a healthy existence; *existential*, in that the impermanence of contemporary life made it hard to plan and commit; and *spiritual*, in that the geography and architecture of modernity were increasingly empty of signs of the transcendent, deprived of sanctuaries where people might know themselves as beloved of God.

What technocracy has dissolved by the logic of power, the Church is called to rebuild, not through alliances with new Constantines, but from below, in actions and movements that restore bonds of trust and belonging in the fresh light of the gospel. Speaking in Paraguay in July 2015, Francis said the Lord was speaking very clearly today to the Church: ‘in the mentality of the Gospel, you do not convince people with arguments, strategies or tactics. You convince them by simply learning how to welcome them’.³⁰ The Church is called to be ‘a mother who reaches out, a welcoming home, a constant school of missionary communion’, as Aparecida puts it.³¹

This is really the heart of the pontificate. It sounds simple, but is the fruit of a profound discernment. To evangelize is to offer the founding encounter with the mercy of Christ; to be saved is to experience that encounter. God’s love is not a reward for conversion and ethical

²⁷ James F. Keenan, ‘Reading “Amoris laetitia” in the New Light of Easter’, *Cruce* (21 April 2017), at <https://cruce.com/vatican/2017/04/reading-amoris-laetitia-new-light-easter/>, accessed 8 September 2020.

²⁸ Pope Francis, ‘The Christian Life as Discipleship’, homily, Medellín, 9 September 2017.

²⁹ For ‘close and concrete’, see Pope Francis, homily for World Youth Day, Panama, 27 January 2019.

³⁰ Pope Francis, homily, Ñu Guazú, Asunción, Paraguay, 12 July 2015.

³¹ Fifth Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *Concluding Document*, n. 370.

transformation but what triggers them; in a liquid world of sink-or-swim competitiveness, where we are never good enough, it is God's shocking mercy, not a moral code, that captivates us, and allows us to be fruitful even when we are not productive. Only a Church that is close and concrete can perform that mercy.

Resistance and Reckoning

Having sketched some areas that illustrate how the pontificate is a fruit of discernment, it remains to argue that resistance to the pontificate shows forth precisely in those areas where discernment is at its heart.

To be clear, resistance is not criticism. But sometimes criticism contains resistance. Francis himself distinguishes between criticism from people of good will and bad-spirit resistance. You can discern them partly by the way they manifest themselves. Thus, good-will criticism is transparent and open to dialogue—a speech or an article, say. Bad-spirit resistance, on the other hand, is an attack on the Pope's authority: either covertly, by those who throw stones but then hide their hand, or the full-frontal assault of those who brazenly denounce and accuse while claiming the mantle of tradition or orthodoxy. Good-will criticism is healthy and welcome, and needs a response; but the appropriate response to the second is silence: you do not negotiate with the bad spirit.³²

One of the ways in which the enemy of human nature seduces Catholics is to persuade them that the Church is being denatured, and that the Church needs in some way to be saved from itself—or from whichever group is seen to be corrupting it. Such attitudes always conceal a doubt that God is really in charge of God's Church. The other thing to consider is effects. A bad-spirit attack divides, and what is divided is the body. But it is also true to say that it involves a separation from the body—a distrustful self-withholding, an aloofness, a repulsion, all characteristics of the bad spirit. On a flight from Africa in 2019, Francis spoke about the bad-spirit resistance as schismatic, and said: 'The schismatics always have one thing in common: they separate themselves from the people, from the faith of the people of God'.³³

In his Jesuit writings, Bergoglio called this the 'isolated conscience'. In an interview in 2007 he spoke of Jonah fleeing from the mission that the Lord had given him to evangelize Nineveh because God's mercy did

³² Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd*, 84–85.

³³ Pope Francis, press conference on his flight from Madagascar, 11 September 2019.

not fit in with his plans. 'How the isolated conscience heartens the heart! Jonah knew nothing of God's ability to lead his people with the heart of the Father.'³⁴ In the 1970s Bergoglio spoke of 'the conscience isolated from the march of the people of God', manifest in the ideological rigidity of enlightened intellectuals, of left or right, who fail to see,

... the real movement going on among God's faithful people Thus they fail to join in the march of history where God is saving us, God is making us a body, an institution, God's power enters history so as to make of human beings a single body.³⁵

This is key to understanding Francis's own understanding of the origins of bad-spirit resistance: an aristocratic mindset that sees itself as separate from and superior to the body of the people of God, and which blocks the divine action building that body. This is the isolated conscience.

In one early Jesuit essay Francis describes how Jesus avoided the elite religious groups of his time and went straight to the people. The Pharisees, Saducees and zealots of the time suffered from an isolated conscience. They denied God agency by thinking on behalf of the people and for the people, but never *with* the people. They were arrogant, in the true sense of the word, in wanting to arrogate God's power and glory to build themselves up, rather than letting God build up the people. They hated Jesus because he was essentially denying them that power; so they were consumed by *invidia*, envy, which literally means a not-seeing—they saw not salvation but a threat to their interests. Because they were caught in the logic of power and control, they could not respect or recognise the divine being born in the culture of ordinary people, in a Kingdom where the poor and sinners are protagonists.

For Bergoglio then and Francis now, this is precisely the terrain of the spiritual combat within the Church: God is working through the Church to build the people of God, while Satan works to subvert that mission. The mission is manifest, like the incarnation, in closeness and concreteness, the *syncatabasis*; the mission is subverted by clericalism (which is not just a vice of clerics)—rigidity, remoteness, the isolated conscience.

As a Jesuit, Bergoglio wrote that at the origin of the isolated conscience there is always a desire to cling to something: a wealth, a privilege, a

³⁴ Stefania Felasca, 'Quello che avrei detto al consistoro: Intervista con il cardinale Jorge Mario Bergoglio', *30Giorni* (November 2007), at http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_15978_11.htm, accessed 9 September 2020.

³⁵ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 'Formación permanente y reconciliación', in *Meditaciones para religiosos*, 89.

benefit.³⁶ To use a famous Bergoglio distinction, rather than mediators, expending themselves for the sake of others (*ministerium*), clericalists are intermediaries, enriching themselves at the expense of others (*potestas*). The perversion ends in the clerical sex-abuse crisis, which is the revelation of pastors who were pledged to serving the vulnerable exploiting them for gratification. That is why Francis refers to the root of the crisis as power, and the shocking revelations by victims as the Spirit exposing the action of the Lord of the World.³⁷

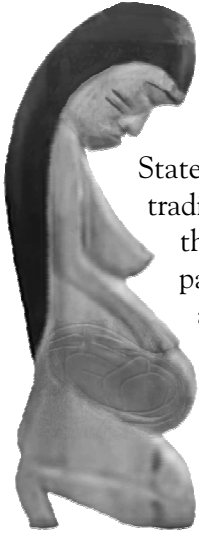
Against this background, we can see why the synod of bishops has become so important to the vision and mission of this pontificate. Francis's dynamic, reformed synods are a mechanism of ecclesial discernment in common. They are also a means of pastoral conversion, a chance to replace the narrow, myopic spectacles of the doctors of the law with the wide-angled lens of the heart of the Good Shepherd.

You can see the effect of discernment in the synods of this pontificate. What is exposed is what keeps the Church from pastoral proximity. The object is for pastors to be better present to those situations (closeness) through a dialogue within the people of God; its fruit is inculturation, allowing God to enter into the life of a people, forming it, by bringing to fruition the Seeds of the Word already present there, through discernment in common: not questioning or debating doctrine, but allowing the Spirit to reveal what the Church needs to change to help people live that doctrine. Hence almost all the most ferocious attacks under Francis have taken place at or around the synods, and are aimed precisely at undermining this process of inculturation. The argument is always that there is nothing to discern; law and doctrine are clear, unchanged, and only in need of clear defence and explanation. Any talk of discernment is a cover for the dilution of the law. The only possible role for the people of God is to obey the law.

In *Wounded Shepherd*, I dedicate a chapter (nine) to the Family Synods of 2014 and 2015 where all this is described. The synod on the Amazon in October 2019 was an even more vivid example of how resistance to Francis is a rejection of the people of God as discerning subjects—denying them agency. The preparation involved in the synod was amazing: a two-year process of meetings and dialogue, more than 60,000 people giving their views, meetings across the region of pastors and people, indigenous

³⁶ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 'Tres binarios', in *Meditaciones para religiosos*, 175.

³⁷ *Wounded Shepherd*, chapter 5.



communities and missionaries. The organizers were consoled: the Spirit was speaking to the whole of humanity through the plight of the native peoples and the destruction of the nature around them.

Yet for parts of the ideological Catholic media in the United States the whole exercise was seen as a conspiracy to subvert the tradition of celibacy. Inculturation was dismissed as syncretism. When the indigenous people were given the chance to speak, they were painted as unorthodox. When they prayed in the Vatican with artefacts of their culture—a canoe, and some simple carvings of a pregnant Amazonian woman—they were told they were pagans. EWTN even described the carvings as idols, raising a firestorm on social media and inspiring an Austrian integralist to steal the figurines from a church and throw them into the Tiber.³⁸

Meanwhile, the synod proceeded calmly, serenely, and reached consensus on many topics despite lingering disagreements over the *viri probati* issue. Francis was careful never to engage with the attacks, quietly restoring the carvings (rescued by the police) to the church and asking the Church to focus on the diagnosis the synod made: in other words, the human and natural realities. Francis meanwhile made clear where he stood: processing in among the native delegation, the pastor with his people, across St Peter's Square to the synod hall.

Even when discernment itself is attacked and questioned, the Pope never stops discerning and helping others to discern. His capacity to resist the mimetic contagion of accusation and counter-accusation is remarkable. He is convinced that reform and resistance are part of the same dynamic—the spiritual combat provoked by discernment itself. If he is a great reformer, it is because of Campion's brag: his total confidence that God is in charge and what is of God cannot be withstood. The expense is reckoned; the shepherd carries the wounds of the attacks, but is never diverted. So the faith is planted; so must it be restored.

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³⁸ See Mitch Pacwa, *Scripture and Tradition*, episode 44, available at <https://listen.ewtn.com/STP/STP18083.mp3>, accessed 8 September 2020.