



## Lent 2016: The Spiritual Works of Mercy & *Laudato si'*

### To admonish the sinner

Edel McClean

*Laudato si'* is a model of an Ignatian approach to sinfulness, an approach that is at the heart of Francis' papacy, says Edel McClean as she reflects on how the encyclical helps us to think about our next Spiritual Work of Mercy: to admonish the sinner. Ignatius and Pope Francis 'encourage us to look our personal sin in the eye, but we only take this step when we have a deep understanding of God's creative and transformative love for us.'

Speaking to the Bishops of the United States during his [2015 Papal Visit](#), Pope Francis assured his audience that he was not going to lecture them before adding:

Harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart. Although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing.<sup>1</sup>



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kindness and with a desire for our flourishing. Such people are precious to us and when they 'admonish' us we find ourselves not condemned, but called to live more fully.

Contrast that with those who employ 'harsh and divisive language'. The finger-wagging, tongue-lashing kind of admonishment leaves us battered and belittled. It may spark guilt or shame but it offers little hope of change. We end up either

Whatever it was that he was alluding to – and commentators have offered an abundance of possibilities – his statement reflects something of his stance on the thorny issue of 'admonishing the sinner'. Francis has found his way into the hearts of all kinds of people. This is a pope to whom non-believers, non-Christians and non-Catholics respond warmly. It is said that he is media savvy, acutely aware of how his words and actions play out in news reports. But this is to underestimate the man. He comes across warmly because he is warm, comes across as humble because he is grounded in humility, comes across as forgiving because he's in the business of forgiveness. That he knows how to get his message across does not in any way de-value the message itself.

angry at the person attacking us, determined to carry on as usual, or we accept the admonishment but feel so defeated that we despair of our ability to improve. Either way, positive change is unlikely to be the outcome.

This matters in the admonishment of sinners because of a basic human truth: we respond to those who love us. Those who have a major positive impact on our lives are those who regard us with respect, with

This insight can be found at the heart of the Ignatian understanding of God as revealed both in the structure of the Spiritual Exercises and in the Rules for Discernment. The Exercises encourage us to look our personal sin in the eye, but we only take this step when we have a deep understanding of God's creative and transformative love for us. In the Rules for Discernment, Ignatius tells us that, for those of good will, 'the good angel touches the soul gently, lightly and sweetly, like a drop of water going into a sponge'<sup>2</sup> – so that even when challenging sinfulness the good spirit works with us rather than against us. [Pierre Favre](#), Ignatius's early companion and a spiritual hero of Pope Francis, remarks similarly that:

Sometimes we are interiorly anguished; and though this spirit may speak what is true, reproving us for our many failures, nevertheless if it robs us of our tranquillity it is not the good spirit. The spirit of God is peaceful and gentle, even in reproof.<sup>3</sup>

This insight of the early Jesuits was at the heart of their ministry across Europe supporting their engagement with a wide range of people across the social spectrum. It is also an insight that operates at the heart of Francis' papacy. He moves between social and cultural worlds with a seeming grace and ease, a servant of the good spirit, 'peaceful and gentle, even in reproof'. He is not afraid of speaking his mind, of pointing out the sin of individuals, nations, the Church or society, or of challenging us to live more God-orientated lives. He takes the call to 'admonish the sinner' seriously, but with a kindness and lightness of touch that bears the hallmarks of the good spirit.

This spirit is much in evidence in *Laudato si'*. This document does not pull its punches and I challenge any Christian to read it without feeling that their personal sin has been rightly admonished. Francis' gaze takes in politicians, scientists, bankers, transport officials, urban planners, environmental agencies, farmers and 'every person living on this planet'<sup>4</sup> including, importantly, Francis himself. His is not a voice condemning us from on high. Instead he speaks to us as a fellow traveller, encouraging us 'to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously'.<sup>5</sup>

Francis bases the entire document in the context of God's gift of creation, reminding us that 'rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise'.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the celebration of the gift, however, is the lament for how we have abused it – but it is always 'we' and 'us'. Francis does not point the finger of accusation at us but includes himself amongst the ranks of sinners against God in God's creation.

Francis also finds much to love in humanity and the labours of those who seek to care for creation. His response is generous – 'we must be grateful for the praiseworthy efforts being made by scientists and engineers';<sup>7</sup> 'we cannot fail to praise the commitment of international agencies and civil society organisations';<sup>8</sup> 'how can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress, especially in the fields of medicine,

engineering and communications?'<sup>9</sup> This appreciation stretches from broad societal movements to the practical actions of individuals including recycling, using public transport and planting trees: 'all of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings'.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps this is the key to Francis' approach to admonishment. It is impossible to read *Laudato si'* without feeling deeply troubled by our individual and societal sinfulness. But it is also impossible to read *Laudato si'* without feeling a real sense of encouragement. Francis reminds us again and again that God is at work. We see it in the goodwill and energy of those labouring across the globe. We see it even in our own limited efforts to take sustainable living seriously. And Francis urges us to remember that, however discouraging environmental degradation might be, and however discouraging our personal sinfulness might be, God continues to work, to call and to encourage. The document manages the extraordinary feat of holding up a mirror to our selfishness and greed and yet leaving us, not in self-loathing, but with a real taste of the possibility of a more joyful freedom. Francis admonishes us by loving us, and affirming and reaffirming the love of a forming and transforming God:

No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to forget this dignity which is ours. No-one has the right to take it from us.<sup>11</sup>

*Edel McClean works in spirituality.*

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, [Address to the Bishops of the United States of America](#), Cathedral of Saint Matthew, Washington, D.C.,

23 September 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, §335.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Favre, 'Instructions for Those Going on pilgrimage' in *'Memoriale': The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), p. 342.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (2015), §3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, §47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, §12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, §34.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, §38.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, §102.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, §211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, §205.