

TO DISCERN AND REFORM

The ‘Francis Option’ for Evangelizing a World in Flux

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MATURED BY decades of experience in pastoral mission in Argentina and invigorated by the Latin American Church’s signs-of-the-times discernment at the great meeting of Aparecida in 2007, Pope Francis’s vision of how to evangelize a world dominated by globalised technocracy is now—through *Evangelii Gaudium*, his November 2013 apostolic exhortation, and through the priorities of the current pontificate more generally—the definitive source for the universal Church. This vision offers a captivating recovery of the radically pastoral direction set by the Second Vatican Council, read through a specifically Argentinean understanding of that Council after Medellín.¹ It includes, naturally, the option for the poor and an emphasis on Jesus’ proclamation of God’s Kingdom, but with a distinctive and strongly anti-clericalist faith in the piety and culture of the ordinary, faithful people.

The Francis Option

Because it represents the irruption into the universal Roman Catholic Church of the ‘continental mission’ of Latin America (which contains almost half the world’s Catholic population), barring a radical change of direction at the next conclave, it is reasonable to suppose that this will remain the evangelizing template for this generation: *Evangelii Gaudium*, as Francis has himself said, is the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of our time.² We will call it, for shorthand purposes, the ‘Francis Option’, not because the Pope is some kind of luminary imposing an idiosyncratic vision—indeed, Francis has been very careful not to confuse the universal magisterium with a particular theological school—but because he is the one most identified with articulating it and encouraging it.

¹ The Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America (1968) at Medellín.

² Pope Francis, with Antonio Spadaro, *Open to God: Open to the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 108.

But for all that it marks a bold new direction in the Church's evangelization of the contemporary world, one that flows directly out of the Second Vatican Council, it would be naïve to claim that the 'Francis Option' is the only one available. At least two neo-conservative rivals have proved attractive to young and not-so-young Catholics who feel beleaguered by modernity.

One, which we might call, after the Russian president, the 'Putin Option'—although Matteo Salvini in Italy and Donald Trump in the United States would also be contenders to give it a name—seeks to press the Christian Church in general, and Rome in particular, into the service of an authoritarian nationalist project of remoralisation, using the coercive power of the state to reassert the collective over the individual, and to protect 'western Christian civilisation' by, among other things, closing its borders to Muslim migrants. Cardinal Raymond Burke and his followers have expressed admiration for the ideas of Steve Bannon, founder of the right-wing Breitbart News website. Bannon is involved in crafting a training programme for future Catholic leaders organized by the Rome-based Dignitatis Humanae Institute presided over by Burke.³



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Pope Francis and Cardinal Burke at the Vatican in 2014

³ See Mark Hosenball, 'Steve Bannon Drafting Curriculum for Right-Wing Catholic Institute in Italy', *Reuters* (14 September 2018), at <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-politics-bannon-catholics/steve-bannon-drafting-curriculum-for-right-wing-catholic-institute-in-italy-idUKKCN1LU17C>.

Far more seductive than the blatantly ideological and political ‘Putin Option’ is the neo-Donatist, neo-Jansenist vision of Rod Dreher, a widely read American conservative writer and blogger who converted from Catholicism to Russian Orthodoxy in frustration at the clerical sex-abuse crisis. The ‘Benedict’ in the title of his much-discussed 2017 book, *The Benedict Option*, refers not to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (although Dreher professes admiration for his oft-cited, if apocryphal, forecast of a future ‘smaller, purer Church’) but St Benedict of Nursia, founder of Western monasticism, whose *Rule*, according to Dreher, ‘played a powerful role in preserving Christian culture throughout the so-called Dark Ages’.⁴ Dreher has been criticized for his view of Benedictine monks as medieval preservers and conservators rather than rural evangelizers, and of the *Rule* as a reaction to the collapse of the Roman empire rather than an adaptation of the cenobitic tradition to new historical circumstances.⁵ But what interests us here is his view of contemporary modernity, which is remarkably similar to Pope Francis’s.

Both Dreher and Francis agree—in line with Benedict XVI, and with the forecast in Romano Guardini’s 1950 *The End of the Modern World*—that Christendom is over and irrecoverable, and that it is futile and counter-productive to invest energy and resources in unwinnable political battles that only reinforce the idea of Christianity as a set of ethical precepts that the Church seeks to impose via the state. Francis sees the technology-driven forces of globalised postmodernity dissolving the bonds of belonging, sweeping away institutions and turning us into consuming individuals obsessed with gratification and increasingly divorced from our cultural and religious roots. In such a society, as he put it in Santiago de Chile in January 2018, ‘points of reference that people use to build themselves individually and socially are disappearing’, such that ‘the new meeting place today is the “cloud”, characterized by instability since everything evaporates and thus loses consistency’.⁶

Yet where Dreher advocates a strategy of resistance and retreat into what he calls ‘stable communities of faith’, little islands ‘of sanctity and

⁴ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 4.

⁵ See Andreas Gonçalves Lind, ‘Qual è il compito dei cristiani nella società di oggi? “Opzione Benedetto” ed eresia donatista’, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 4022 (20 January 2018), 105–115.

⁶ See my report on Pope Francis’s address to the Pontifical Catholic University in Santiago de Chile, ‘In Chile, Apocalyptic Pope Gives Catholic Universities a Mission’, *Cruce* (18 January 2018). Rod Dreher quoted my report the next day to defend himself against Lind’s article in *La Civiltà Cattolica* accusing him of pessimism: Rod Dreher, ‘The *Civiltà Cattolica* Smear’, *The American Conservative* (24 January 2018).

stability amid the high tide of liquid modernity', Francis, drawing on the vision of Vatican II mediated through the Latin American pastoral experience of the people of God, calls for something far more radical: the rebirth of a new Christian culture from below through a communal experience of an encounter with the God of mercy.⁷ Where Dreher withdraws in order to gain strength from separation, Francis seeks to be revived by a renewed encounter with Christ in his people. For Francis, the liquidity out there is a reason not to raise the drawbridge but to build bridges, launch life-rafts and rebuild from those who have lost most.

Both the 'Benedict Option' and the 'Francis Option' are contemporary responses to a time of change and tribulation, not just in the world but also in the Church: liquidity and relativism in the first, institutional failure and corruption (the sex-abuse cover-up and so on) in the second. But the spirits behind each reaction are very different. Dreher's response involves a strict separation from and hostility towards the first, and a tightening of discipline in the case of the second. Unsurprisingly, he has been supportive of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò's crusade of purification, backing the former nuncio's call for Pope Francis to resign over alleged failures to act against what Viganò claims is a 'homosexual current' among the bishops.⁸

Francis, on the other hand, sees in the tribulation and ferment of the Church an opportunity for patient conversion through a renewed humble and joyful dependence on God's mercy. It involves not a radical purgation of sinners but a firm condemnation of spiritual worldliness and other forms of corruption. His familiarity with the Spiritual Exercises and long life-experience of apostolic bodies facing such tribulations have taught him that scandals often bring in their wake polarisation and mutual recrimination, blame and scapegoating, crusades of purification and the desire to divide people into good and bad. At such times we are tempted to lament and condemn, rather than discern and reform. The temptation in times of tribulation—as a result of the rapid exculturation of Christianity or scandal—is to focus on the threats rather than on Christ, like St Peter leaving the boat and being

⁷ Dreher, *Benedict Option*, 50, 54. The phrase 'liquid modernity' was coined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to describe the breakdown of structure and stability in the present phase of the modern age: 'the falling apart, the friability, the brittleness, the transience, the until-further-noticeness of human bonds and networks' (*Liquid Modernity* [London: Polity, 2000], 14).

⁸ See 'Testimony by His Excellency Carlo Maria Viganò, Titular Archbishop of Ulpiana, Apostolic Nuncio', at <https://www.lifesitenews.com/all/date/2018/08/25#article-former-us-nuncio-pope-francis-knew-of-mccarricks-misdeeds-repealed-sanction>, accessed 13 September 2018.

terrified by the waves. We accuse others rather than ourselves; and instead of seeing the spiritual forces at work we focus on ethics and ideas rather than the truth that is a person. In this way we end up offering truth at the expense of charity, or charity at the expense of truth.

These insights appear in a series of writings of Bergoglio's from the late 1980s, when he experienced such tribulations at first hand.⁹ He has been drawing on these insights, even referencing the 1980s texts, this year, in responding to the tribulation provoked by the abuse crisis in Chile and in the United States. But in a larger sense, he has been drawing on them for years, in calling the Church to a 'pastoral and missionary conversion' in order to evangelize our contemporary age of liquidity.¹⁰

Argentina and Aparecida

Francis's evangelizing vision was forged, above all, in three places. The first was the Colegio Máximo at San Miguel, in Buenos Aires province, where Jorge Mario Bergoglio spent most of his Jesuit life: first in the 1960s as a student and scholastic; then in the 1970s and early 1980s as novice master, provincial and finally rector of the college. It was in this final phase of his Colegio Máximo experience, between 1980 and 1985, that he was the first pastor of the parish he founded in the area contiguous to the college, known as Patriarca San José. In the fifty-odd years since the college's foundation in the 1930s, in what was then empty *pampa*, hundreds of thousands of migrants from the interior of the country and neighbouring nations had settled in the area, which had evolved over time into a working-class conurbation. Each weekend, Bergoglio would send out the dozens of Jesuit students at the college to organize and evangelize this young, mostly poor, community, visiting house by house, blessing homes, saying prayers with those inside, inviting children to catechesis, discovering where there was suffering and need, and connecting these with others who had time and resources to give. The experience was crucial both for the people of San Miguel and the Jesuits who served them.¹¹

⁹ Above all three texts: *Sobre la acusación de sí mismo* (Madrid: Claretiana, 1984); Prólogo, in Lorenzo Ricci and Juan Roothan, *Las Cartas de la tribulación* (Buenos Aires: Diego de Torres, 1987); and 'Silencio y palabra', in *Reflexiones en esperanza* (Buenos Aires: Universidad del Salvador, 1992). See also Diego Fares, 'Contro lo spirito del "Accanimento"', *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 4029 (5 May 2018), volume 2, 216–230.

¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 25.

¹¹ I describe the effect on both in Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (London: Allen and Unwin, 2015), chapter 5.

Today, Patriarca San José is run by Rafael Velasco. The parish embraces around 40,000 people in seven *barrios*, five of which have churches with Sunday Mass and other liturgies, social projects and catechesis. In Bergoglio's day 'Rafa' was among the Jesuit students fanning out across the *barrios*; these days, now that the Colegio is no longer training vast numbers of Jesuits, the parish missions are carried out each year by the young people who are part of the parish's Ignatian youth movement. But both the method and the experience are similar: they go from house to house, knocking on doors, sitting and praying with people, learning about their lives and their challenges. Afterwards, they reflect on the experience, their hearts full of names and faces, and stories of what they had heard and witnessed among some very poor people, most of whom did not come to church but could tell how God had been at work in their lives. One of the young people, filled with emotion, told me: 'misionando, fuimos misionados': 'in going out on mission, we were missioned to'. They had learnt the insight expressed by Cardinal Bergoglio in 2011: 'God is present in, encourages, and is an active protagonist in the life of His people'.¹²

The second place crucial to Francis's missionary and evangelizing vision was the city of Buenos Aires, where in the 1990s, as auxiliary bishop, he was the regional vicar of Flores, a lower middle-class area of the city with a number of sanctuaries and shrines, where he applied many of the lessons from San Miguel. From 1998 until what he calls his 'change of diocese' in 2013, he was archbishop of the diocese that includes the central urban area of Buenos Aires, within the boundaries of the original city, with close to 3 million people. But in reality his canvas was far bigger: his was one of eleven dioceses of the so-called Buenos Aires region, essentially an urban sprawl of around 13 million, of whom perhaps 85 per cent are Catholics. Under Bergoglio's guidance, the dioceses worked closely together in a common urban pastoral mission that sought to implement the vision of Aparecida.

The shrine in Brazil where the Latin American episcopal council (CELAM) met for its historic continental gathering in May 2007 is the third locus of our story. It was the first time in 25 years that the Latin American Church had met en bloc to define its collective continental mission. Bergoglio was not just a key contributor to the discernment

¹² Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Prólogo, Dios en la ciudad* (Buenos Aires: San Pablo, 2011), 5.



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An urban archbishop: Cardinal Bergoglio riding the Buenos Aires metro in 2008

process before and during the meeting but, as its redactor-in-chief, was the architect, together with his team of Argentine theologians, of the concluding document, to the point where it is impossible in practice to separate Bergoglio and the experience of Buenos Aires from the Aparecida document, especially its section 10.6 (nn. 509–518) on the *pastoral urbana*.¹³

The early paragraphs of that section acknowledge the profound shifts that have taken place in society, displacing Christianity as the primary creator of culture; but, rather than lamenting that shift, they go on to note that the Church was born precisely in such a context of urban pluralism, of which it made use to grow. What is preventing the Church from growing now, Aparecida observes, is an attitude of fear and defensiveness that locks us into a sense of powerlessness and impotence. The Church needs to adopt instead ‘the gaze of faith’, to see that ‘God lives in the city’ (n.514), and to embrace a change in mindsets and habits that is now needed to go out to meet and contemplate God in the lives of the people, through the proclamation of the Word, celebration of the Liturgy, fraternal service to the poor and so on.

The section ends with a series of concrete proposals for what it calls a new urban ministry, as well as for the mindsets and attitudes that such

¹³ See Fifth Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *Concluding Document*, available at <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>.

a ministry demands (nn.517–518). These include a spirituality of mercy and gratuity, a focus on the peripheries of exclusion and marginality, and a new missionary approach that makes use of home visits, social media and a ‘constant closeness’ to people in their daily, concrete realities. As well as a number of practical and logistical considerations—such as the need for interdiocesan cooperation to enable the city to be seen as a single community—Aparecida’s ‘urban pastoral’ placed particular emphasis on the need to offer the ‘full beauty that is God’ (n.518) in the Church’s proclamation.

Referring to Paul VI’s great 1975 document on evangelization, Francis has often described Aparecida as the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Latin America. From 2007 to 2013, Bergoglio and the other bishops of the Buenos Aires region sought to implement its insights, holding each year a joint congress of the eleven dioceses to develop new methods and visions to meet the challenge of evangelizing in a context of plurality and liquidity. This annual congress, known as PUBA, Pastoral Urbana de Buenos Aires, brought together 400 so-called pastoral agents—bishops, priests, religious and lay people—to share their grace-filled experiences of evangelizing the city.

This experience flowed into Bergoglio’s brief speech to the cardinals prior to the conclave, in which he imagined Jesus not on the outside knocking to be let in, but on the inside, asking to be let out; and in which he portrayed the Church as paralyzed by introversion, reflecting its own light rather than Christ’s, becoming sick and self-referential, bent over like the woman in Luke 13:10. He then presented a picture of an evangelizing Church which puts Christ at its centre, and which goes out of itself to the peripheries, to places of need and suffering. The next Pope, Bergoglio told the cardinals, should help the Church to be a fruitful mother who lives from the joy of evangelizing.¹⁴

This journey from crippled paralytic turned in on herself to fruitful mother, joyfully evangelizing, is summed up in the Aparecida phrase ‘pastoral and missionary conversion’. It is what lies at the heart of *Evangelii Gaudium*. To the question posed, and poorly answered, by the 2012 synod on the New Evangelization—how do we evangelize contemporary modernity?—Francis responded not just with the vision of Aparecida but

¹⁴ Bergoglio’s speech was initially published in the magazine of the diocese of Havana, *Palabras Nuevas*. An English translation can be found at <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350484bdc4.html?eng=y>, accessed 14 September 2018.

also with the experience of Buenos Aires, reformulated in the universal categories of the global Church. Francis took Aparecida, the new *Evangelii Nuntiandi* for Latin America, and in *Evangelii Gaudium* created a new *Evangelii Nuntiandi* for the universal Church of our times.

Mission in Response to a Change of Era

At the time, Aparecida was by far the most sophisticated signs-of-the-times discernment happening in the Church anywhere in the world. In many studies and meetings prior to the May 2007 general conference, CELAM showed how the forces of technocracy and globalisation were sweeping away the weak sense of belonging of cultural Christianity, while bringing a new pluralism—together with new forms of social and economic exclusion alongside ever greater concentrations of wealth.¹⁵ Drawing on studies and meetings led by the man who is now cardinal archbishop of Mexico City, Carlos Aguiar Retes, Aparecida would frame this shift in terms of a change of era—*un cambio de época*—in which the new turbulence was bringing opportunities and advantages for the well educated and mobile, but whose overall effect was to produce great anguish, because it was dissolving the bonds of belonging.

CELAM witnessed rising inequality, the decline of states, mass migrations, ecological disaster, neo-Darwinist worship of power, technocracy and other features of our age. It concluded that the option for the poor demanded that the Latin American Church stand with those crucified by the new global economy, embracing not only those who were materially poor but also victims of exclusion and solitude in its many new forms—the migrants, the elderly, prisoners and victims of people-trafficking, for example. The document saw in the new context of cultural and religious pluralism a moment not to try to recover legal and state privileges for the Church, but to work to build unity out of a reconciled diversity in dialogue and shared witness.

But, above all, Aparecida discerned the implications of this change of era for evangelization. Its conclusion was that the transmission belts were broken, and the Church now had to ‘go out’ in order to evangelize. The dissolution of the bonds of belonging—displacement, uprooting, desocialisation and so on—was sweeping away the traditional mechanisms

¹⁵ Carlos Aguiar Retes, *Globalización y nueva evangelización en América Latina y el Caribe. Reflexiones del CELAM 1999–2003* (Bogotá: CELAM, 2003).

of faith transmission, at the same time as the cultural support for Christianity was disappearing (n.37). Thus, as Aparecida puts it,

... a Catholic faith reduced to mere baggage, to a collection of rules and prohibitions, to fragmented devotional practices, to selective and partial adherence to the truths of the faith, to occasional participation in some sacraments, to the repetition of doctrinal principles, to bland or nervous moralizing, that does not convert the life of the baptized would not withstand the trials of time. (n.12)

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Unlike the reaction of so many church leaders and commentators in Europe and North America, Aparecida's response to the new liquidity was not to lament and condemn, but to discern and reform. Rather than asking, *how can we best resist or reject this?* the questions were, *What is the Holy Spirit calling us to do? What changes must we make?* The way these questions were answered was also significant. Aparecida saw in the change of era an invitation to return to the 'attitude that planted the faith in the beginnings of the Church', as Cardinal Bergoglio put it to catechists a year afterwards.¹⁶ The Catholic faith of the future, the document stressed, would depend on a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and experience of God's transforming mercy, just as in the first era of Christianity. The challenge to the Church was how to enable this *encuentro fundante de nuestra fe*,¹⁷ this foundational faith experience, namely 'a personal and community encounter with Jesus Christ that raises up disciples and missionaries' (n.11).

The third point was what now had to change. The key idea at Aparecida was that mission should be not so much an activity or a programme as a way of being that was both 'permanent' and 'paradigmatic'. Nor was mission just *ad extra*, but *ad intra* at the same time: in going out on mission, the Church too is converted and evangelized: *misionando, es misionada*. Concretely, Cardinal Bergoglio told his priests that to enable the foundational experience of encounter with Jesus Christ would require

¹⁶ 'Carta del cardenal Jorge Mario Bergoglio a los catequistas' (21 August 2008), at http://aica.org/aica/documentos_files/Obispos_Argentinos/Bergoglio/2008/2008_08_21.html, accessed 26 September 2018.

¹⁷ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 'La misión de los discípulos al servicio de la vida plena', in *En tus ojos está mi palabra. Homilias y discursos de Buenos Aires, 1999-2013*, edited by Antonio Spadaro (Madrid: Claretianas, 2018), 853-854.

spiritual, pastoral and also institutional reforms to make the Church visibly present as ‘a mother who reaches out, a welcoming home, a constant school of missionary communion’.¹⁸

The collapse of the traditional distinction between Christian countries and mission territories is a key insight of *Evangelii Gaudium*. As Christoph Théobald observes in his *Urgences pastorales*, the document of Vatican II that best applies to the Church today in the West is the one that was written then with Africa and Asia in mind, *Ad Gentes*, which notes how ‘circumstances are sometimes such that, for the time being, there is no possibility of expounding the Gospel directly and forthwith ...’ (n.6).¹⁹ If the Church is not missionary in such a context, it cannot evangelize; and if it does not evangelize, it ceases to be. This is the point of Francis’s famous words from *Evangelii Gaudium*:

I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation (n.27).

It is easy to miss the sting at the end there. To evangelize is to raise up missionary disciples, not seduce adherents. To seek to fill up empty pews and restore market share from rival Churches is not evangelization but proselytization; it is to put the institution in the centre, rather than Christ, and at the same time to leave it untouched, unconverted. This is spiritual worldliness, a form of sacrilege, that only perpetuates the Church’s paralysis. Nor is evangelization about increasing our power and capacity, as if it were a matter of our own efforts. In Asunción, Paraguay, in July 2015, Francis noted:

How many times do we see evangelization as involving any number of strategies, tactics, maneuvers, techniques, as if we could convert people on the basis of our own arguments. Today the Lord says to us quite clearly: in the mentality of the Gospel, you do not convince

¹⁸ See Bergoglio’s addresses as cardinal in *En tus ojos está mi palabra*, especially ‘Volver a las raíces de la fe: la misión como propuesta y desafío’ (2008), ‘El mensaje de Aparecida a los presbíteros’ (2008) and ‘La misión de los discípulos al servicio de la vida plena’ (2009); *Concluding Document*, n.370.

¹⁹ Christoph Théobald, *Urgences pastorales du moment présent: pour une pédagogie de la réforme* (Paris: Bayard, 2017), 429–462.

people with arguments, strategies or tactics. You convince them by learning how to welcome them.²⁰

Or again, to Catholic Action in 2017:

Let reality dictate times and places, and let the Holy Spirit guide you. He is the inner teacher who illumines our work once we are free of preconceptions and conditionings. We learn how to evangelize by evangelizing, just as we learn how to pray by praying, provided we have a good disposition.²¹

If Pelagianism is one temptation that keeps us from evangelizing, turning us into worldly proselytizers, the other temptation, perhaps the greater, is a form of Gnosticism—presenting Catholicism as a kind of ethical system, a moral code. This has been the besetting temptation for the Catholic Church, especially in Europe and North America, faced with the post-1968 tide of secularism and relativism. The temptation, again, is to fail to discern and reform, and instead to respond with an ethical or truth defence, resulting in what Massimo Borghesi, in the final chapter of *The Mind of Pope Francis*, calls ‘the moralistic drift that characterizes Catholicism in era of globalization’.²² (The original Italian, *deviazione etica*, is easier to connect to Francis’s critique in *Evangelii Gaudium* of *eticismo sin bondad*, or ‘heartless moralism’).²³

Borghesi points out that Benedict XVI shared this discernment of where contemporary Catholicism had gone wrong, which is why, right at the start of his first (2005) encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, he boldly asserts that ‘being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’ (n.1). This insight is quoted in the Aparecida document and again in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Francis says that he never tires of repeating these words, ‘which take us to the very heart of the Gospel’ (n.7).²⁴ It also reappears in *Placuit Deo*, the Congregation of

²⁰ Pope Francis, homily, holy Mass at Campo Grande, 2 July 2015, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150712_paraguay-omelia-nu-guazu.html.

²¹ Pope Francis, ‘To Participants in the International Forum of Catholic Action’, Synod Hall, 27 April 2017, available at http://m2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170427_congresso-azione-cattolica.html.

²² Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey*, translated by Barry Hudock (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2018), 289.

²³ *Eticismo sin bondad* is badly rendered in the official English translation of *Evangelii Gaudium* as ‘ethical systems bereft of kindness’. But Francis is not referring to ‘systems’ so much as the reduction of the Christian offer to an ethical idea.

²⁴ *Concluding Document*, n. 12; *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 8.

the Doctrine of the Faith document against Pelagianism and Gnosticism, suggesting a concern that runs through both pontificates.²⁵

The absolute truth, Francis has said, is the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. The truth is a relationship; when we evangelize, we communicate that relationship—Jesus’ ‘Abba’ relationship with the Father.²⁶ To reduce the Christian offer to some kind of knowledge, ethical or spiritual—a particular temptation for educated Catholics—is the ‘gnostic illusion’ of which Francis warns in the second chapter of *Gaudete et Exsultate*. In offering what is true and good, the key is to integrate the third transcendental: beauty. Only the beauty of God can attract; and the beauty of God is God’s gratuity and mercy. The *encuentro fundante*, as Aparecida puts it, is that experience; as Francis told the Brazilian bishops in July 2013, recalling Aparecida, ‘Mission is born precisely from this divine allure, by this amazement born of encounter’. Thus, the Church loses people when it imports a rationality that is alien to them, forgetting the ‘grammar of simplicity’.²⁷ The beauty of God is the experience of God’s grace and mercy, incarnate in the person of Christ, available to all, and more easily available to the poor.

Thus a major obstacle to evangelization is that, too often, the Church reverses the order of its proclamation, forgetting that we become good because we are loved, rather than being loved for being good. In a 2004 talk on the anniversary of John Paul II’s *Veritatis Splendor*, Bergoglio highlights a part of that great encyclical that its advocates often ignore, namely that Jesus does not simply give us a moral code or a series of rules and rituals by which to live. Rather, the love to which Christ calls us is impossible by our own efforts, but only ‘by virtue of a gift received’, as John Paul II puts it: that is, God’s grace. Quoting the Polish Pope quoting St Augustine, Bergoglio notes how it is not the keeping of the commandments that earns God’s love but the other way round: God’s mercy and love enable us to be moral and holy, merciful and loving also.²⁸ (He made this point more simply in a retreat he gave in 2012.²⁹

²⁵ *Placuit Deo*, n.8, available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180222_placuit-deo_en.html.

²⁶ Pope Francis, ‘Lettera a chi non crede. Papa Francesco risponde al giornalista Eugenio Scalfari’, *La Repubblica* (2 September 2013).

²⁷ Pope Francis, address to the bishops of Brazil on World Youth Day, 28 July 2013, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130727_gmg-episcopato-brasile.html.

²⁸ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, ‘Es posible ser santos’, in *En tus ojos es mi palabra*, 406–413.



The Gospel does not tell us if the adulterous woman whom Jesus forgave in John 8 returned to her sinful, promiscuous life, but you could be sure that she did not, ‘because whoever encounters such great mercy cannot depart from the law—that’s what follows’.)

Hence Francis is critical in *Evangelii Gaudium* of ‘doctrines that are more philosophical than evangelical’ (n.165), and of those who speak more of law than grace, more of the Church than Christ, or who imply that Christianity is a form of stoicism or self-denial. Before all else, he tells us, the gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. And he warns, starkly, that ‘if this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk’ (n.39).

In his 2004 homily, Bergoglio asked whether it was because Christianity was so often reduced to a lofty precept in Western nations that contemporary humanity had succumbed to relativism. For if morality is a kind of judicial code, imposed from the outside, rather than a free response of the heart to the experience of God’s mercy, it becomes an ideology which is then vulnerable to manipulation in service of political or other interests, as has happened too often in the US culture wars. In that context, relativism becomes an assertion of freedom, an affirmation of autonomy against an ideological imposition. Secularism, in short, is the child of our ethicism—and ironically opens the way to a recovery of

²⁹ A DVD of this retreat is available from Caritas Argentina; see <https://www.caritasbas.org.ar/web/archivos/489>, accessed 1 October 2018.

the gratuity of the Christian offer. Therefore the dechristianization of culture and law—so often blamed by the bishops and cardinals at the 2012 synod about the new evangelization as the reason for the Church shrinking—cannot be an excuse for the Church’s failure to evangelize; as Francis points out in *Evangelii Gaudium*, God has found a way of binding Godself to every people in every age (n.113).

This is why, unlike the Benedict Option, the Francis Option does not waste time condemning or lamenting secularisation, even while acknowledging its dire cultural and social consequences, especially for the poorest. For secularism is also an invitation to discern and reform, to recall that Christianity spread first not by attachment to power but through the compelling experience of God’s mercy—and can spread again, not by seeking to recover the lost hegemonies in the law and culture of Christendom, but by going out to encounter God at work in God’s holy people. ‘In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization’, Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* (n.119). ‘The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*’—and called to be missionary disciples. The Church’s failure is not the result of secularism, but rather of withdrawing, faced with secularism, from the People of God. An abusive Church, as Francis told the Jesuits in Ireland, is ‘a Church that is elitist and clericalist, unable to be near to the people of God’.³⁰

Bergoglio once told his catechists in Buenos Aires that Aparecida’s great insight was to see that the worst danger to the Church came not from without but from within, ‘from the eternal and subtle temptation of enclosing ourselves and putting on armour [*abroquelarnos*] in order to be protected and secure’.³¹ The word he deploys there, *abroquelamiento*, is the same one he used in April 2018 in a letter to Chile’s bishops calling them to Rome to discuss the clerical sex-abuse crisis. There, he wrote that at times of tribulation, when we are ‘frightened and armour-plated in our comfortable “winter palaces”, the love of God comes out to meet

³⁰ Pope Francis, ‘It Is Not Enough to Turn the Page. Life Must Be Given Anew’, *La Civiltà Cattolica* (13 September 2018), at <https://laciviltacattolica.com/it-is-not-enough-to-turn-the-page-life-must-be-given-anew/>.

³¹ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, ‘Él llama a cada una por su nombre y las hace salir’, in *En tus ojos es mi palabra*, 691–696.

us and purifies our intentions so we can love as free, mature and critical men'.³²

This is a powerful description both of a fearful, defensive Church that does not evangelize ('armour-plated in our comfortable "winter palaces"') and of what rescues the Church from its paralysis: God's offer to us in our tribulation and failure. 'A wounded Church does not make herself the center of things, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the center the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ', Francis told Chile's bishops in January.

To know both Peter disheartened and Peter transfigured is an invitation to pass from being a Church of the unhappy and disheartened to a Church that serves all those people who are unhappy and disheartened in our midst.³³

Like St Peter, transformed from disciple into apostle by God's forgiveness of his betrayal, only in God's mercy can we experience the missionary and pastoral conversion capable of turning the Church into a fruitful mother. As in our lives, our moments of defeat are opportunities for conversion and growth. But first we have to learn not to lament and condemn, but rather to discern and reform.

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³² Pope Francis, 'Letter to the Bishops of Chile, Following Archbishop Scicluna's Report', *Zenit* (12 April 2018), available at <https://zenit.org/articles/pope-francis-letter-to-the-bishops-of-chile-following-archbishop-sciclanas-report/>.

³³ Pope Francis, address to priests, consecrated men and women, and seminarians, Santiago Cathedral, 16 January 2018, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180116_cile-santiago-religiosi.html. More or less the same words are repeated in each of his three subsequent 'Chile missives': the first, to Chile's bishops after receiving Archbishop Scicluna's report, on 8 April; the second, on the first day of their emergency summit with him in Rome, on 15 May (which was private but leaked); and the third, his letter to the People of God in Chile of 31 May. See Austen Ivereigh, 'Discernment in a Time of Tribulation: Pope Francis and the Church in Chile', *Thinking Faith* (8 May 2018).