

Pope Francis and the Periphery

Introduction

The Church is collectively catching its breath in these extraordinary months following the election of Jorge Bergoglio to the chair of Peter. Through his genuine kindness and easy familiarity with people of every religious viewpoint and attitude, we are witnessing nothing less than a recasting of the Petrine office. The Church is embracing a servant leader who, inspired by the *Poverello* of Assisi, has cast aside the trappings of the papal court.

A recurring theme in these first months is what Pope Francis calls “the periphery.” In a pre-conclave speech to his fellow cardinals that may well have sealed his election, he provided an insight into his agenda for the Church.

There is a tension between the centre and the periphery.... We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-absorbed: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. [...] Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first. (Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio to the pre-conclave General Congregation of the Cardinals, March 2013)

I would like to examine what he means by the centre and the periphery, and in particular its relevance for religious communities as they determine their apostolic engagements.

Finding the Periphery

One could look at various groups and decide whether they occupy the periphery in societal terms, or ecclesial terms, or both. Migrant workers, undocumented persons and street people seem to be situated both at the socio-economic and ecclesial periphery. In Western Europe and North America, gay and lesbian or divorced and remarried Catholics experience virtually no social stigma but often find themselves relegated to the periphery of Church life.

One could reverse the equation. Devout Catholics who publicly oppose abortion and same-sex marriage occupy a kind of ecclesial centre in terms of their adherence to magisterial teaching, but their views are increasingly at odds not only with civil society, but even with a significant number of self-identified Catholics. Traditionalist Catholics as well share an ecclesial experience of marginalization.

Is it possible to speak of a doctrinal periphery? *Lumen Gentium* gave us a tool to understand how not all Church teachings are equally important, particularly in terms of their relationship to the central revelation of Christ. But I think the weighting is theological rather than sociological, and it would be misleading to suggest that Catholics’ self-understanding is predicated on such a hierarchy.

When comparing doctrines with one another, they [i.e., theologians] should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith. (Documents of Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11)

I think Francis' approach to the periphery needs to be interpreted in light of another closely related message. In an audience for journalists only days after his election, he set forth his agenda in the clearest possible terms: "And how I would like a Church that is poor and for the poor." [*E como vorrei una chiesa povera e per i poveri!*] (Address to members of the communications media. March 16, 2013)

Poverty in a New Light

It seems that poverty, heretofore the province of consecrated men and women, has been extended by Francis to the Church as a whole. Further, the intended periphery now comes into focus: he is calling the Church (including his fellow bishops and religious superiors!) to discard the trappings of wealth and identify with those who are materially poor.

Pope Francis' embrace of poverty at the periphery was particularly evident in two symbolic gestures. On Holy Thursday he celebrated the Mass of the Lord's Supper in the *Casal del Marmo* juvenile detention facility and washed the feet of several young offenders including a young Muslim woman. Later in July, his first trip outside of Rome took him to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, situated only 110 km from the Tunisian coast. Hundreds of African and Middle-Eastern migrants had died in those waters attempting to reach the European periphery and escape the chaos of the Arab spring.

In his homily at Lampedusa, he lamented what he called the anesthesia of the heart: "We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion – "suffering with" others; the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep! (Homily July 8, 2013)

In Canada, we have seen many religious who have concretely demonstrated the opposite of indifference in their ministries. We have witnessed an outreach to single mothers, immigrants, persons suffering from drug addictions and psychological disabilities, sex workers, and aboriginal women and men in the inner city. We share the question posed by the rich young man in the Gospel: what *more* remains for us to do in our faithfulness to Christ?

Poverty and Sacramentality

Francis' call for us to embrace the periphery is explicitly Christocentric. In a meeting at the Jesuit Refugee Centre in Rome, he chastised communities who were creating tourist "bed and breakfasts" from strategically-located former religious houses:

Empty convents don't belong to you; they are for *the flesh of Christ*, the refugees. The Lord calls us to welcome them courageously and generously into empty communities, religious houses and convents. (Visit to the *Centro Astalli* for Refugees, September 10, 2013)

He has identified a new and startling sacramentality in our engagement with the poor who are transfigured into Christ's own flesh. It calls to mind the invitation of Pope Paul VI of almost forty years ago. His Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* indicated the importance of proclamation and teaching, but more forcefully identified Christian witness as a key constituent in evangelization.

It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus – the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity. (Paul VI. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975. 41)

One has the sense that Francis is incarnating the essence of Pope Paul's clarion call. We are witnesses to an unexpected and inviting kind of holiness that may well transform the Church. The question remains for us religious: Have we the courage to take to heart a call to conversion of heart that is both disquieting and profoundly evangelical?

Questions:

1. Where is the centre and where is the periphery in my ministerial engagements?
2. What would it mean for my community to embrace the periphery?
3. How is Pope Francis' call resonating in our communities today?

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