

Understanding Pope Francis



Two words are at the heart of the Pope's drive to reform the Church: accompaniment and discernment. And they are key to understanding the document at the centre of increasingly heated debate, *Amoris Laetitia*

Pope Francis has made it clear what he wants to achieve in and for the Church. In his apostolic letter, *Misericordia et Misera*, issued at the end of the Year of Mercy last November, he speaks of “a perennial activity of pastoral conversion and witness to mercy”. He speaks of generating a “culture of mercy” in the Church. This, it seems to me, is Francis' real programme.

As I was reading this letter for the first time, I was also listening to a young man who was talking with a group of bishops as we were engaged in preparations for next year's Synod of Bishops, which will be on “Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment”. When he was asked what young people feared most today, he replied with one word, “failure”. Reflecting on the Church's teaching, especially on sexuality, he said: “It has no room for failure. It is impossible for us to work with.”

This phrase, “the culture of mercy”, and the words of this young man hold the key to understanding the entire reform that Pope Francis is trying to bring about. It is important to understand this, as it is related directly to *Amoris Laetitia* (“The Joy of Love”), the apostolic exhortation from the Synod of Bishops on the Family.

Two words are at the heart of Pope Francis' drive to see the Church become a place of mercy and salvation: accompaniment and discernment. These words were central to the Year of Mercy and they will be central to the next Synod of Bishops. And they are central to understanding *Amoris Laetitia*.

This passionate drive of Pope Francis arises from the conviction that the whole point of the Church founded by Christ is to bring us to the Father, to God, through the transformation of grace. This, he

insists, is God's entire project, working through creation and redemption, and through every moment in the life of every human being. In a wonderful phrase, Pope Francis describes the world as "God's construction site".

Francis is calling for a radical reform of the Church, of you and me, asking us to go back to these very basic truths and learn again how to live by them and be shaped by them. I say "go back", because I see in these truths the very best of much traditional teaching, pastoral wisdom and practice.

For Francis, reform or renewal is not an idea, or a theory, imposing itself on history or on the Church. Reform is an accompaniment of each other – bishops with the Pope in the Synod, priests in a council, pastoral reflection in a deanery or in a parish, the confessor in the confessional box – as we try to discern the working of God in each concrete circumstance. To be part of this process, we may have to allow some models we had formed in our heads to be broken down.

Two axioms lie at the heart of the Pope's vision. The first is this: time is greater than space (explored in his encyclical letter, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 222-225). We should not be trying to fill, or dominate, space and shape it as we believe it ought to be shaped. Rather, we must respect the speed, the timing – slow or fast – of processes of growth and change.



This runs contrary to much that we are accustomed to in our hurried, busy culture. Yes, as we face a new problem or challenge, we bring our ideas to it. But we must always give time to respect and grow close to the reality, to attend carefully to its complexity and allow its own dynamic to become clear. This means exercising some self-restraint in expressing our opinions – and certainly never shouting them. It means not rushing to separate the wheat from the tares. It means thinking twice – at least – before we tweet.

There is an interesting application, or reflection, on this first axiom. It has been pointed out to me that, for many, the first step on the road to a return to the full practice of the faith is one of being embraced by the Church, of experiencing a sense of belonging. Often we might be tempted to think that true belonging only comes after the necessary changes or reform of life. On the contrary, if a concrete sense of belonging is created and experienced, then the pathway of conversion can open up, with all the time that it might need. Pope Francis is a genius at creating this sense of belonging for those who feel they are excluded.

A second axiom that lies at the heart of the Pope's vision is this: reality is more important than ideas (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 231-233). For Francis, reform is always a matter of spiritual discernment,

whether in the life of the Church or of the individual. Such discernment attends first of all to the realities, to the limited degrees of goodness and failure that are to be found there. We accompany one another in our slow progress towards the revealed fullness of life to which we are called. What we are looking for, in this discernment, are the shades of progress, not the black and white of a final judgement.

The reform of the Church, and the pastoral care of individuals, should not be seen as a battle of ideas. A battle of ideas, so beloved of the media, tends to take us away from the very place that should fill our hearts and minds: the respectful, even reverential, regard for the reality of a person's life and how God is at work in it at any moment. We are often tempted to retreat into ideological clashes between so-called "liberals" and "conservatives". This ends up taking us away, often for our comfort, from the reality before our eyes. Yet that is precisely where God is to be found and where he wants us to be.

"I know that you face many challenges," Pope Francis said to the bishops of the United States in September 2015, "and that the field in which you sow is unyielding, and that there is always the temptation to give in to fear, to lick one's wounds, to think back on bygone times and to devise harsh responses to fierce opposition. And yet we are promoters of the culture of encounter.

"We are living sacraments of the embrace between God's riches and our poverty. We are witnesses of the abasement and the condescension of God who anticipates in love our every response. For this, 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."

In understanding that reality is more important than ideas, we have to take limitations – not least our own – seriously and learn how to work within them. This is the antidote to what the Pope calls, in his blunt way, the "aggression of idealism" or "pastoral autocracy". This does not mean we have to simply surrender to our limitations, and sink deeper into the sofa. We should be clear where the signposts are, pointing to the path we are to try to follow, discerning the next steps and walking, as best we can, together with others who are making the journey.

A third key perspective of Francis is that before the mystery of God nothing is too big and nothing is too small. We should not turn away from the radical demands of the Gospel – and its unfolding in practice – which always seem unrealistic. But nor should we disdain the simplest of gestures, which often give expression to the greatest of truths.

The art of accompaniment and discernment is the art of learning to recognise our limits and to embrace our desires. It takes humility to recognise our limitations, to let go of the last vestiges of seeing myself as a hero and to acknowledge that I stand in need, constantly, of forgiveness, especially from those who love me most. And we also have to embrace our deepest desires: that pervading longing to be better, the lingering hope of holiness; the marvellous moments when we catch a glimpse, through the clouds of our everyday lives, of the bright horizon of our hopes and dreams, and everything again seems possible.

This takes us right through to the moment of death, for which life is a trial run. Cardinal Basil Hume expressed this lasting power of faith and hope beautifully. As he was facing death, he said he felt a

little like he was sitting in the front row of the stalls, waiting for the curtain to go up.

Francis seems to be inviting us to learn to give deep respect to the reality of life, to recognise the limits of the possibilities open to us at each point. Day by day, we are to seek to deepen our desire for goodness, for conversion, for closeness to the Lord. Gradually we learn how to discern the next step in response to God's mercy, and how to see the longer and challenging pathway we are to take. This can only be done if we give it time, if we are in tune with the Spirit through prayer.

This is the wisdom of the reform that Pope Francis is laying before us, with persistence and patience. He is remarkable. He is our shepherd and he is to be lovingly followed.

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