

**“I would like to see a Church that is poor and for the poor”:
Pope Francis and his vision of Reform and Renewal**

Catholic Charity Conference

15 May 2013

One of the treasures of Heythrop College – and I am not here referring to its Kensington Square location or to its extensive library and not even to our academic staff and their expertise in theology and philosophy – is its back gate.

This leads into a cobbled lane round the corner from which there is a pub, a very well appointed pub, which would be a favourite watering-hole of mine if only I could get there more often, the Builders Arms. It was there some three weeks ago that I met with Michael King and Ann Phillips and there we talked about the theme of today’s Catholic Charities Conference, “Openness”.

Michael explained that he had decided on this theme in part because he had watched on YouTube a lecture given last November in the United States by Robert Mickens, the Vatican correspondent of *The Tablet* in which he had spoken about the urgent challenges facing the Church. One of those challenges, he believed, not without reason, was for the Church to become more open, more transparent, in its way of conducting its business and in its way of going about its government.

Our talk of “Openness” that evening in the Builders Arms set me thinking. Many of us will have seen at first hand, and the whole world has seen second-hand, the damage done by a “closed clerical world” mentality, the mentality that can lead those who share it to say “no one quite understands us as we understand ourselves” and that consequently “we are accountable to none but ourselves”. This has compromised the whole-hearted authenticity and integrity with which we need to live the Gospel and has led to the all too well-founded criticism that some in the Church have at times, with tragic consequences, put the interests of its own before the well-being and even the safety of others, including the young and the vulnerable.

As Jesuit provincial, I saw all that had been done to adapt our policies and procedures to a culture of operational transparency, individual and corporate responsibility and public accountability, both in the all-important matter of safeguarding and in our financial affairs where openness about what we have, what investments yield and what we spend has made us better stewards of the property and money which others once gave us on trust.

And now, as Principal of Heythrop College, I find myself working, if anything, in an environment with still greater expectations of openness. The world of the university

is one in which decisions, and the reasons for and the arguments against decisions, are scrutinised both by individuals and in committees, with all the sharing of information this presupposes and the deliberation about process this entails.

But as I walked away from Kensington that evening, it occurred to me that what impedes such openness in the Church is not always a closed culture on the inside but can come in the form of pressure from without.

In December 2009 and January 2010, allegations of historic abuse were made against Jesuits who had taught at our college in Berlin. I remember how impressed I was when the German Jesuit provincial at the time, Fr Stefan Dartmann, spoke at a televised press conference and publicly apologised for the damage done and the hurt caused. He went on, before an audience one presumes of millions, to invite any others who had suffered abuse to come forward. Fr Stefan won the admiration of many and in the process did more than a little good for the Church in the midst of what was otherwise a most damaging situation.

But in England, the advice given by insurers and legal advisers has been not to follow his example. Here financial settlements are much higher and legal costs incurred in the process are considerable. So the advice was clear: any letter that I may have to write would need to be scrutinised and at any meeting I may have to have our lawyer would be present.

Some well publicised, recent cases have made me think about how unforgiving our society can be with respect to the personal failings of men and women in public life, maybe most of all in the Church. The threat of banner headlines in the red tops and even in the broadsheets encourages a culture of caution and a calculation of the consequences which can drive openness underground.

A few days after our drink at the Builders Arms, I watched all of Robert Mickens speech to the City Club in Cleveland, Ohio. Speaking three months before Pope Benedict's surprise resignation, Mickens listed the many challenges which he thought were facing the Church today and developing a culture of openness was only one. True, I didn't agree with all he said but, be that as it may, some of the points he made were echoed some weeks later in the numerous reports and commentaries which appeared in the media as, in late February and at the beginning of March, the opening of the conclave to elect Benedict's successor approached.

Calls for reform were numerous: the Church had become too concerned with itself and needed to become more outward-facing; its central government, the Roman Curia, needed to become more efficient, more effective and less inclined to put the break on change. There were calls for the vision of the Church found in the

documents of Vatican II to be realised, not least with a more collegial approach to Church government, and there were calls for an extension of ministry to married men and women. From what has been learnt subsequently, calls for change and agendas of change dominated the business of the congregation of cardinals that preceded the conclave itself and the election on 14 March of the new pope.

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected not least, so it has been said, because his analysis of the state of the Church was so penetrating and his proposals for change so convincing. So I thought it might be worthwhile spending this short while with you this afternoon reflecting on this man, on whether the many hopes for change which he carries on his shoulders are likely to be realised and, if so, how.

Above all, I would like to focus on the words he spoke at his first press conference, "I would like to see a Church that is poor and for the poor". Do these words sum up his agenda for change? But I hear you say, "It's all too early to judge". True, but the clues are already there in what he has already said and done as Pope, in what he said and did while Archbishop of Buenos Aires and also in his vocation as a Jesuit.

Notwithstanding all that has been written about relations between Jorge Mario Bergoglio and his Jesuit brothers in Argentina during or after his years as provincial, Pope Francis is a Jesuit through and through. On his first outing as Pope, the day after his election, he visited the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. Before travelling in a minibus back to the hotel where he personally paid his bill, he prayed before the altar where St Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, celebrated his first mass in 1538. During the homily which he gave later that same day, at a mass of thanksgiving in the Sistine Chapel, he spoke of life as a journey in the company of Jesus carrying his cross. This was a direct reference to the vision in which Ignatius saw himself being placed beside the Son who was carrying his cross. Ignatius' personal attachment to Jesus was one reason why he and his first companions resolved to name the order he founded the Society, or "Company", of Jesus.

Pope Francis' Jesuit background might give us clues about his agenda and the manner in which he will seek to bring about the change he spoke of in the congregation of cardinals.

I have already heard it said of this pope, most recently yesterday, that he is "all symbolic act; where's the substance?" Is that criticism justified? I think not.

For St Ignatius, superiors lead above all by their example. This is how they encourage, motivate and have a positive impact on the members of their community. The house of the Superior General in Rome in its manner of life is to serve as an example for houses throughout the Society. Ignatius took great care to explain how

and how not his men were to dress, to talk and to behave in public: the impact of our example on others was evident to him.

Bishop Jorge Eduardo Lozano, a close friend of Bergoglio, who worked under him as an auxiliary in Buenos Aires for six years, explains that gestures of humility and simplicity haven't just been about the pope's own personality. "They're actually an expression of his magisterium. He's sending a message to other cardinals, bishops and priests that this is what we need to do ... More broadly, he's sending the same message to all Catholics everywhere". In other words, Lozano insisted, these gestures aren't just a charm offensive but an expression of a whole pastoral plan, offering a clear signal about where the new pope intends to carry the Church.

On Holy Thursday evening, Pope Francis captured the imaginations of men and women the world over when he visited a prison for young offenders in Rome and, during the Mass of the Lord's Supper, washed the feet of ten men and two women, Christians and Muslims.

A week or so later, *The Tablet* reported the opinion of a liturgical expert on what had happened. He explained that the Church permitted priests only to wash the feet of men. While the Pope can dispense himself from his own rules, the report went on, others can't. In my view, he missed the point. What the Pope does and what he says are significant: he is issuing an invitation to come and do likewise. In the Jesuit tradition, but by no means uniquely there, this is how change is brought about. By our witness, by our example, hearts can be reached and lives possibly changed. In Ignatius' words, "love is manifested more in deeds than in words".

Much of what Cardinal Bergoglio did and said as archbishop and much of what we have already heard him say and seen him do as Pope, will, in my view, encourage attitudes which promote a greater openness and a more thorough-going authenticity in living the Gospel.

None of this is to deny that structural reform is necessary. The Pope has, after all, drawn together a council of eight cardinals from around the world, a representative group, including both reformers and conservatives, so that their pastoral and organisational experience can contribute to the decisions which need to be made about such changes. But for the Pope, I suspect, transforming underlying attitudes and values is as important as structural change. A transformation of attitude is the condition for the possibility of an effective change in structures.

So, far from thinking the Church's ministers are above criticism he has used the strongest language to reproach them. Archbishop Bergoglio once told his priests:

"In our ecclesiastical region there are priests who don't baptize the children of single mothers because they weren't conceived in the sanctity of marriage. These are today's hypocrites: those who clericalize the church, those who separate the people of God from salvation. And this poor girl who, rather than returning the child to sender, had the courage to carry it into the world, must wander from parish to parish so that it's baptized!"

Also when Archbishop, he encouraged his priests to leave the security of the sacristy and make their way out onto the streets where presumably they would, one might assume, need to face up to being challenged.

He is a man who values dialogue, who wants to promote constructive dialogue, witness the recent publication in English of *On Heaven and Earth*, his conversations with Rabbi Skorda, director of the rabbinical school in Buenos Aires, where he says this:

"Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their opinion and their proposals ... To dialogue, one must know how to lower the defences, to open the doors of one's home and offer warmth."

But what, in my view, may do most to create a culture of transparency and greater openness is his simplification of what he wears, where he lives, with whom he eats and how he travels. All this demystifies the Church, makes it all the more accessible and more approachable, less "over and above", more "next to and alongside". And in all of this, we can be sure there is an invitation, "come and live likewise".

So too there is in what he says about authenticity and integrity of life. This concerns Church institutions as much as it does private individuals. "Let us all remember this: one cannot proclaim the Gospel of Jesus without the tangible witness of one's life," Pope Francis said at the Basilica of St. Paul-outside-the-walls. "Those who listen to us and observe us must be able to see in our actions what they hear from our lips, and so give glory to God!"

None of this is to deny that structural reform is necessary, that systems of effective management which may include mechanisms of consultation and for greater accountability. The Pope has, after all, drawn together a council of eight cardinals around the world, a representative group, including both reformers and conservatives, so that their pastoral and organisational experience can contribute to the decisions which need to be made about such changes. But for the Pope, I suspect, transforming underlying attitudes and values is as important as structural change. A

transformation of attitude is the condition for the possibility of effective change in structures.

Which brings us back to the scene at the last supper: Jesus removes his outer garments, wraps a towel around his waist and washes his disciples' feet and asks us to do likewise. As I have been thinking about the Pope and his hopes for the Church, I have returned again and again to this image of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. It strikes me that this image is the key to his vision for the future of the Church as he invites us, as individuals and as institutions, to do likewise. This image orders our choices and our priorities. It shapes our moral imagination and leads us to ask "does this or that decision, this or that policy or course of action place us nearer to or take us further from Jesus, the servant, as he washes the feet of his disciples and asks us to do likewise?"

How does what Pope Francis, what he says and does, help us to understand our own mission of service?

It begins for him with a personal identification with the lives of the poor and an advocacy of the needs of the poor. The shepherds of Israel, he reminded the priests of his diocese on Holy Thursday, lived so close to the sheep that they lived with "the smell of the sheep". When Archbishop of Buenos Aires, as is well known, he lived in a small apartment, travelled by public transport and made a point of visiting families in the slum districts roundabout. "In Christianity", he said in one of his conversations with Rabbi Skorka, "the attitude we must have towards the poor is, in its essence, that of true commitment ... this commitment must be person to person, in the flesh...The sick must be cared for, even when we find it repulsive and repugnant ... it is terribly difficult for me to go to a prison because of the harshness of life there...but I go anyway, because the Lord wants me to be there in the flesh, alongside those in need, in poverty, in pain."

Why such an emphasis on personal involvement with the lives of the poor? It would seem that in his own case, this made him aware that the most urgent task is to confront those forces that would marginalise the poor and so deny them their dignity. As he says, we need to confront the attitude that says "we who are doing well give something to those who are doing badly but they should stay that way, far away from us". On the contrary, the Christian's duty is to integrate them into his or her community in whatever way possible". And we integrate them most of all by giving them the education and the skills they need to participate fully in community. This is why, for him, the great temptation when aiding the poor is a protective paternalism that doesn't allow them to grow. Rather, they need the means to get ahead in life, to change their lives for this gives them their respect and their dignity.

“What is degrading to the poor is not giving them the oil that anoints them with dignity, a job”.

The need for personal involvement with the poor also appears to explain why he is critical of help being given through charitable institutions if it means people do not have direct and personal contact with the poor. “When you give alms to the poor”, he asked a penitent, “do you look them in the eyes, do you touch their hand, or just throw them a coin?”

He speaks of a fundraising dinner for Caritas at the end of which a Rolex watch was auctioned. “It sought a person who would use this watch for vanity to feed the poor”. His emphasis on authentic and integrity of life leads him to insist that the Church and by extension its charitable institutions not spend money in order to do good without first asking about the origin of that money, how they raised that money, lest in the process they collude with injustice and so live a double life.

“The poor”, the Pope has written, “are the treasure of the Church and we must care for them. If we lose this vision of things, we will have a lukewarm Church. Our true power must be service.” And this service requires that the Church, and we, work for structural change. The Pope’s reported lack of sympathy with liberation theology has perhaps masked this aspect of this agenda.

I see the Pope as being rooted in another less well known Latin American tradition. In 1958, as a young Jesuit just out of the novitiate, he went to study in Chile and lived in a house dedicated to a Chilean Jesuit who had died just seven years before, Padre Alberto Hurtado. Hurtado is known as “God’s visit to Chile” and was canonised in October 2005. This tradition is rooted in the social teaching of the Catholic Church rather than in any Marxist analysis of society and is animated by a close, personal attachment to Jesus, the Jesus who chose to be poor, lived with the poor and made the concerns of the poor his own. It is seen as well in the former Jesuit General, Fr Pedro Arrupe, who appointed Bergoglio provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina in 1973.

I see this tradition informing the Pope’s social critique. Private property, he says, carries with it the obligation to put it at the service of others, within just parameters. He criticises those who make money in one country but keep it outside because they are failing to honour the people who generated their wealth. For Bergoglio, the capitalist system marginalises the Church and faith, and domesticates it. It is taken out of the public sphere so that it won’t cause too much bother. He says the system grants it a certain transcendence, but not much. Faith is promoted as an exercise of devotion rather than a way to follow in all life.

His emphasis on “a poor Church for the poor”, led some in the Church in Argentina to complain he was losing sight of the Church’s evangelising task. But in the Jesuit tradition, the two cannot be separated.

Ignatius Loyola was most concerned that his order be poor. He had a love for poverty akin to that of Francis of Assisi. Francis of Assisi spoke of “Lady Poverty”; Ignatius spoke of poverty as our “mother”. Ignatius knew that what would make his men apostolically effective were not so much human resources and technical skills but a living dependence on God, a “living from the hand of God”, as he put it. His Jesuits needed to be able to listen to the word of God and then generously to respond to it, that made the Society’s work prosper. But a concern for wealth or a desire for security and status and a position in the Church, would prevent his men, as he believed it was preventing many others in the Church at the time of the Reformation, from doing just this. So “being poor” was at the centre of Ignatius’ plan for the apostolic renewal of the Church, as it seems it is for Pope Francis.

Like so many of you, no doubt, I have been learning a good deal these past weeks about Jorge Mario Bergoglio. I have been learning about the example he has set and is setting; about what it means to live the Gospel of the Jesus who was poor, who lived amongst the poor, who made his the needs and concerns of the poor; the Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples.

In the process of learning all this, I have come to see that in setting this example, the Pope is issuing us with an invitation, “come and do likewise”. As his friend says, in what he does is his magisterium. And if I manage to do likewise, then I am contributing to the renewal of the ministry and to the reform of the life of the Church.

When many years ago I was studying theology before my ordination as a priest, one Jesuit lecturer would say, in a very Jesuit way, that the two most important words in theology were “so what?” What difference does this make to our living?

So, I’ve been asking, as I would encourage us all to ask, what might it mean for me, personally and professionally, to “come and do likewise”, to wash feet, here in Britain today and so be part of this renewal, part of this reform?

The poor, says Pope Francis, are “our treasure: we look after them”. If I were to accept that in my life, I would be looking for platforms to argue against the vilification of the poor which has, shamefully, become too much a part of our public discourse since 2010 as though they, and not the excesses of the money-makers, were responsible for the financial mess we find ourselves in.

The worst thing for a Christian, says the Pope, is to lead a double life. So perhaps you and I we need to ask more questions about where the money we use (and use well) is coming from. To what extent are we colluding with an unjust system, a system which bails out banks with public money, then allows those banks to pay their directors and executive excessive bonuses, while the poor, the working poor, are disproportionately being made to bear the brunt of the cuts in public spending while their children, so the teachers in our schools are telling us, come to them in the mornings hungry.

For the Pope, private property is held in trust and is to be used for others, for the common good. Margaret Thatcher apparently once spoke of her sorrow that the society of low taxation she helped bring about had not in turn brought about a “giving society”, a “philanthropic society”. The real task for David Cameron and his government in building a “Big Society” was, to my mind, not just to promote voluntarism but to challenge the shibboleth of low taxation and to persuade the wealthy that they need to pay more in taxes so that government can do what (in Catholic social teaching and elsewhere) it is proper for government to do, namely, actively to promote the common good. Taxation, Franklin D Roosevelt famously said, is the price we pay for a decent society. It’s my view that we need to use our classrooms, our pulpits, what we say and write in the media, to bring about a change of heart. And following Pope Francis, the way to bring about that conversion is to provide opportunities for a personal involvement in the lives of the poor.

The Pope’s agenda is one which promotes the dignity of each human life, we have seen that. So the question I put to myself is this. How can we use the resources of Heythrop College to argue for what (as I recall) Professor Michael Sandel argued for in his Reith lectures of four years ago, namely, that the business model when applied to the management of public services must be informed by values that promote the common good. Otherwise, in their task of driving up standards and cutting costs, the risk is that profit will be put before people. This is the kind of damage which we have seen in health and education: in health, in one report into failing hospitals after another; in education, as too great an emphasis on preparing young people for the world of work (which certainly has its place) threatens programmes and courses which make for their more rounded development as human persons.

For the Pope, as we have again seen, it is education that promotes human dignity, prepares the poor for work so overcoming their marginalisation and including them in society. During this time of high unemployment, of high youth unemployment especially, is there a way in which we can collectively target our resources towards those projects which provide people, maybe most of all young people, with the skills and the experience which will both make them more employable and more fulfilled? Is there a way in which we can persuade those with political power and influence

that at times such as these a government which has a care for the common good should be investing in and not cutting back on state provision for education?

This Pope is encouraging us to talk more radically, to question more awkwardly and, all in all, to live the Gospel more authentically and to invite others by our own example to come and do likewise. It's by living the Gospel that we and they will discover faith in Jesus, the joy of living our lives wrapped around Jesus. This is the renewal of the Church and the reform of the Church that is above all needed today.

These past weeks, as you can tell, I have been powerfully struck by this Pope and by the example he is setting. He inspires me along with numerous others. He has a language which reaches not only those of us within but others far beyond the Church, which is a source of hope for us all.

But I'm aware of resistances in myself, of questions and doubts, of inclination to live sensibly rather than to let the Gospel guide me. Each week, I help out in a parish in Northolt and South Harrow in Middlesex and over these past weeks we've been reading at mass from John's Gospel. I have been much encouraged by a promise which Jesus makes his disciples in the hours before his passion as it dawns of them just how much their discipleship of him involves.

Jesus invites us, as he did them, to live the new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us. He has shown us what this love is: like him, it is to wash feet, one another's feet, the feet of the poor. And to those who keep his word, this word, he makes a promise. "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word - And my Father will love him - and we shall come to him - and we shall make our home in him" (John: 14:23)

By his promise may you be encouraged too. Thank you.

Michael Holman SJ