

Pope Francis: Evangelising in ordinary ways and what this means for PFG's

The current Pope is the first to have taken the name Francis. He was inspired to do so by a comment from his good friend Franciscan Cardinal Claudio Hummes, from São Paulo, whom he was sitting next to during the conclave. When he was elected, Cardinal Hummes said to him: 'Do not forget the poor.' He said that the word made an impact on him and he immediately thought of Francis of Assisi.

It is clear that Francis of Assisi is inspiring him to consider concern for the poor, peace and care for creation in his ministry and that he has had these priorities for some time. It is also well known that St Francis once urged, "Preach at all time, and if necessary, use words". This is a clue to Francis' approach because some of his most powerful messages have been symbols, such as phoning to cancel his newspaper back home and calling in to pay his hotel bill after his election; carrying his briefcase on to a plane; replacing the papal Mercedes with a Ford Escort; living in moderate quarters; embracing disfigured and disabled people, celebrating Mass with homeless people, washing the feet of women and of Muslims on Holy Thursday etc.

It helps to look back a little to see how his attitudes developed because these kind of actions are not new. Jorge Bergoglio was elected Provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina at the age of 36 and served for six years from 1973-1979. He was unpopular among his own men and was not re-elected. Among other things, he was considered too authoritarian. He was sent to Córdoba and has described his time there as "wilderness years" which caused him great interior searching and pain. He has said, "I had to learn from my errors along the way because, I made hundreds of errors. Errors and sins."

He was appointed a bishop in 1992 and then Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998, and he served in that role until his election as Pope last March. He regularly visited homeless people early on Sunday mornings, lived in a simple apartment, cooked for himself, wore simple clerical clothing, used public transport and once stayed overnight in a jail. The main reception room of the Bishop's palace was changed into a storage room to provide food and goods for the poor. These actions reveal his deepest attitudes, and as a theologian and pastor living in Latin America, he has inherited a deep conviction that Church structures must serve people's needs.

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The Aparecida Bishop's Conference, 2007

"The Church needs to rid itself from all expired structures that do not favour the transmission of the faith." This is point 365 in the large concluding document of fifth Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) held in May 2007 in Aparecida, Brazil. It was held in a Marian shrine and the bishops had constant contact with the local people and pilgrims, and celebrated Eucharist with them. This greatly influenced their work and that document.

The conference was not held in a convention centre or major hotel complex, or in the quiet of a monastery. It took place in the midst of a continuous pilgrimage at the Marian shrine that involved an atmosphere of liturgy and prayer. As the bishops voted on propositions, and discussed particular paragraphs and amendments to the text, they could hear the people singing and praying around them, and for them.

At that Conference, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was elected to chair the committee that was charged with drafting the final document, and he noted that it was the first time one of the General Conferences of Bishops "did not start out from a pre-prepared basic text but from open dialogue" "to receive everything that came from below." The document has been described by Vatican journalist, John Allen, as Francis' 'Magna Carta' and we have already seen in the first year of his Papacy an announcement that prior to the October 2015 Synod of Bishops, the laity of the Church were to be consulted about key marriage and issues. The poll was sent in mid-October to every national conference of Bishops with a request from the Vatican co-ordinator, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, to "share it immediately as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received".

The world wide survey 2013-2014

We can digress briefly to comment on the survey and the process that occurred. Among the questions asked were whether gay marriage is recognised in their country and how priests minister to same-sex couples, including how churches can respond when gays seek a religious education or Eucharist for their children. The poll also asks "how is God's mercy proclaimed" to separated, divorced and remarried couples. Additional information is sought on the pastoral care of men and women who live together outside marriage.

The survey also asked parishes whether they believed married men and women tend to follow church teaching barring the use of artificial contraception. The questions for the survey seem to have been prepared more with theologians in mind and in order to make them understandable to laity, some local Bishop's Conferences, reworded some questions.

Some Conferences and dioceses advertised the questionnaire; others did not. Many made the survey available online. The German and Swiss Conferences of Bishops have made the results known of their national survey to their people, revealing that the vast majority of Catholics in their dioceses do not support church teaching on family and relationships issues. The Japanese Bishops called for the Vatican to reflect the reality of Asia and in particular, the Japanese church. The English and Welsh Bishops did not release this information because they said the Vatican had told them the results were confidential.

The Irish Bishops Conference took a similar line initially, but responding to criticism that they were not being transparent, they decided to make a statement, which includes, *“there is a serious gap or disconnect between official Church teaching on family, relationships and sexuality and Catholics’ beliefs and practice”*.

Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich was recently elected the president of the German Bishops’ Conference. In a homily not long before his election, Marx said, “The faithful ‘rightfully’ expect the Church to accompany those whose marriages have broken down. *“It must be clear that as a Church we say: ‘You are not second-class Christians. There is a chance of a new beginning and we would like to accompany you on this path.’ We must give this approach more positive support and step up our efforts here.”* He cautioned against quick solutions recognising that there are difficulties.

That there are cardinals openly asking for this issue to be given serious pastoral consideration, and that Pope Francis has called for it to be considered, is an encouragement to many people.

The Aparecida Bishop’s Conference

The request for input reflects previous experience Pope Francis has had. Jesuit Fr Ernesto Cavassa, was a participant at the May 2007 Conference in Aparecida, and has offered some valuable insights into the document that emerged from that Conference and which are reflected in what Pope Francis’ is saying now. Cavassa notes that the conference’s board, was headed by Chilean Cardinal Francisco Javier Errázuriz and that Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga was an important member of the conference’s drafting committee. Both of these men have been appointed by Pope Francis to the eight-member Committee advising him on reorganising the Roman Curia.

The Aparecida conference used a typical Latin American expression, “the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized,” and said, “Being preferential implies that it should permeate all our structures and guide our pastoral priorities” (No. 396). Benedict XVI’s endorsed this option in a speech he gave at the conference.

He noted in his letter after the Conference, *“This document contains an abundance of timely pastoral guidelines, explained in a wealth of reflections in the light of faith and of the contemporary social context.”*

The Aparecida document begins by calling for **“missionary disciples”**, the same expression used by Francis in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation, *“The Joy of the Gospel”*. The Aparecida document says, *“Our cultural traditions are no longer transmitted from one generation to another with the same fluency as in the past. This affects even the deepest core of each culture, formed by religious experience”* (No. 39). The document recognized that *“you do not begin to be a Christian as a result of an ethical decision or a great idea, but rather because of an encounter with an event, with a person, that gives a new perspective to life and with that, a decisive orientation”* (No. 1).

Aparecida concluded: **“Knowing Jesus Christ by faith is our joy, following Him is our grace and transmitting this treasure to others is a mission that the Lord, by choosing and calling us, has entrusted with us”**. Aparecida proposed an encounter with Jesus that transforms a Christianity based on tradition to a Christianity based on conviction. Francis has centered on this message that Jesus is the best news that could have happened to us and that we should follow Him and always remember that Jesus is the centre, not the Pope”.

In a very brief presentation before the Papal election, the then Cardinal Bergoglio expressed what he thought the Church’s mission should be: He said, *“The Church is called upon to go out of itself and go to the periphery, which is not only geographical, but also existential: where there is sin, pain, injustice, ignorance, and religious indifference, where there is human misery. He continued, “When the Church does not go out of itself to evangelize it becomes self-referential and then gets sick.”*

The Aparecida document used this same phrase (the periphery) and offered a powerful message of hope and helpful practices to pastoral ministers and church leaders. It had a strong evangelical thrust. It said that everyone in the Church is baptized to be a missionary. **No one comes out of the baptismal font without a job and there is no place that is not mission territory.** Everything in the Church must be mission-driven. It ends with a clear message, *“We have to begin a new stage of our pastoral journey by declaring that we are *in permanent mission*”*. This task is for all Christians: **no one can stand on the sidelines!** Let us be missionaries of the Gospel not only in our words but also with our own lives, giving ourselves over to service, even to martyrdom” (Final Message, No. 4).

What emerged from Aparecida is the image of a Church *“that puts mercy first, and tries to help people in their faith rather than trying to regulate it, and this Church wants and needs to be close to those suffering, “like a mother”. It is a missionary Church that is free from bureaucracy and pointless structures, that presents itself as a joyful and merciful entity that is not full of “sad, impatient and anxious evangelisers.”*

The document outlined these hopes:

- a) *To be a lively Church, faithful and credible, which is nourished from the Word of God and the Eucharist.*
- b) *To live our being Christians with joy and conviction as disciples- missionaries of Jesus Christ.*
- c) *To form lively communities that nourish the faith and encourage missionary action.*
- d) *To value the diverse ecclesial organizations in a spirit of communion.*
- e) *To promote a mature laity, stewards in the mission of announcing and making visible the Kingdom of God.*
- f) *To impel the active participation of women in society and in the Church.*
- g) *To maintain our preferential and evangelical option for the poor with a renewed effort.*
- h) *To accompany the youth in their formation and search for identity, vocation and mission, renewing our option for them.*
- i) *To work with all the people of good will in the building of the Kingdom.*
- j) *To strengthen with audacity Family and Respect Life Ministries.*
- k) *To value and respect our Indigenous and Afro-American peoples.*
- l) *To advance in the ecumenical dialogue “so that all may be one”, as well as in the inter-religious dialogue.*
- m) *To make of this continent a model of reconciliation, justice and peace.*
- n) *To be stewards of creation, home and family, in fidelity to the project of God.*
- o) *To collaborate in the integration of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean.*

What is evangelizing?

The four gospel writers are called evangelists; they each wrote a portrait of the “good news”.

Francis, in the tradition of the Aparecida document is calling for **evangelizing** (communicating and sharing the good news of Catholic faith), rather than proselytizing (seeking to convert others to Catholic faith). In an interview with Eugenio Scalfari in September 2013, Francis said. *"Proselytism is solemn nonsense, it makes no sense. We need to get to know each other, listen to each other and improve our knowledge of the world around us. Sometimes after a meeting I want to arrange another one because new ideas are born and I discover new needs. This is important: to get to know people, listen, expand the circle of ideas. The world is crisscrossed by roads that come closer together and move apart, but the important thing is that they lead towards the Good."*

So the language of evangelization, which we are going to hear a lot more about, should not to be confused with the usual understanding of 'missionary', often left to professionals and seemingly always requiring preaching. Rather, Francis is suggesting that every Christian, everyone, is a missionary, with the responsibility of sharing the Good News. As in that Aparecida document, Francis is suggesting every Christian is a **missionary disciple**.

If we consider one aspect of the Passionist Family Group Movement, there have been hundreds, perhaps thousands of PFG members who have become Catholics since joining the Movement. Hundreds of others have chosen not to. It is not a stated aim of the PFGM that everyone or anyone become Catholic, rather these decisions have been the result of people being evangelized by personal example, not by preaching or door knocking. Many people have wanted to belong more fully to this 'little church'. This is exactly what Francis is emphasizing.

Given the opportunities we have to promote and extend the PFG experience, we need to heed this challenge, *"If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life."*

He adds that, *"Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way. At times we have to be like the father of the prodigal son, who always keeps his door open so that when the son returns, he can readily pass through it."*

Many times in a Passionist Family Group this is how we live the gospel. A woman once said to a group of us, "I'm not that good at getting on my hands and knees, but I can make a casserole". That is a typical act of a missionary disciple. Francis also says that *"Evangelizers thus take on the "smell of the sheep"* Those in PFG leadership roles cannot do this is they just text or email their group members. There must be personal contact and active listening.

Evangelising communities - parishes

In 'The Joy of the Gospel', Francis says, "*An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. If we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?*" (#9). He suggests that "*Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good.*"

Repeatedly, Francis asks how can it be that people who have been profoundly touched by God's love would not want to share that experience. Rather, he says, as with any experience of good news, this is something that impels us to share. He has no time for 'sourpusses' or ministers who look as if they are returning from a funeral. He stresses that the 'good news' that we want to share must be a **message of joy**. Since no one can give what they haven't got, the starting place for evangelization is our personal encounter with Jesus.

Francis says, *I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unflinchingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord"* (#3). If any of us reflect on where we have encountered Jesus, it is most likely to have been in a community and certainly within relationships. In the **PFGM** that reality gives expression to the spirituality we promote.

Francis has called for a particular awareness within parishes. "*In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach*" (#28). Francis highlights that the priority for mission must be the people. "*In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time*" (#95).

In highlighting this particular kind of ministry, Francis calls for a pastoral emphasis. You cannot give a baby meat – you start with milk. Francis says, "*Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed...the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary.*" He extends this challenge to theologians: "*I call on theologians to carry out their service as part of the Church's saving mission.*"

In doing so, however, they must always remember that the Church and theology exist to evangelize, and not be content with a desk-bound theology” (#134).

Because of what we have seen and as part of the PFGM, we can well identify with Francis when he says, *“An evangelizing community is supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance. Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time. Such a community is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful. It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds. An evangelizing community is filled with joy. It celebrates every step forward in the work of evangelization”.*

Local church structure and the PFGM

Francis recognises that there are *“church structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization and even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them.”* Francis wants 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.”

Many times within the PFGM we have been frustrated that priests or parish pastoral councils have been unable to see that **we are involved in mission**. It is the creating of community that enables the gospel to come alive, and as Francis warns, it is easy for people to get focused on outdated structures and misguided priorities (including high brow liturgies) while the isolation of people grows and their belonging to the community is no longer a concern for those responsible for pastoral care.

Francis recognises some of the obstacles to people being involved in parish life. He says, *“We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization.*

“The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.”

He identifies the parish as “*the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters*”. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few. “It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.”

“Other Church institutions, basic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association are a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up by the Spirit for evangelizing different areas and sectors. Frequently they bring a new evangelizing fervour and a new capacity for dialogue with the world whereby the Church is renewed. But it will prove beneficial for them not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the particular Church. This kind of integration will prevent them from concentrating only on part of the Gospel or the Church, or becoming nomads without roots.” This is an endorsement of the fact that **the PFGM is parish based** and in touch with that vital but waning structure.

The need to move away from Centralisation

In addressing evangelizing, Francis has noted that centralization of the Church can harm evangelization. “*I do not believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralization'*” (#16).

Francis said in August 2013, that he has found it “amazing” to see complaints about “lack of orthodoxy” flowing into the Vatican offices in Rome from conservative Catholics around the world. They ask the Vatican to investigate or discipline their priests, bishops or nuns. Such complaints, he said, “are better dealt with locally,” or else the Vatican offices risk becoming “institutions of censorship”. Francis recognises that there are layers of evangelization, such as “*those who regularly take part in community worship and gather on the Lord’s day to be nourished by his word and by the bread of eternal life*”.[11] In this category we can also include those members of faithful who preserve a deep and sincere faith, expressing it in different ways, but seldom taking part in worship. Another layer is “*the baptised whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism*”, [12] who lack a meaningful relationship to the Church and no longer experience the consolation born of faith. The Church, in her maternal concern, tries to help them experience a conversion which will restore the joy of faith to their hearts and inspire a commitment to the Gospel.”

The need for formation

He highlights that *“We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will.”*

We might add some other factors to Francis’ recognition of Church belonging today, but certainly what he names is accurate: *“We cannot overlook the fact that in recent decades there has been a breakdown in the way Catholics pass down the Christian faith to the young. It is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition. Growing numbers of parents do not bring their children for baptism or teach them how to pray. There is also a certain exodus towards other faith communities. The causes of this breakdown include: a lack of opportunity for dialogue in families, the influence of the communications media, a relativistic subjectivism, unbridled consumerism which feeds the market, lack of pastoral care among the poor, the failure of our institutions to be welcoming, and our difficulty in restoring a mystical adherence to the faith in a pluralistic religious landscape.”*

The poor

It is not surprising that having chosen the name Francis, that the Pope says he wants to see **‘a poor church for the poor’**. *“God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself ‘became poor’ (2 Cor 8:9). (#197). Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society” (#187).* Francis asks, *“How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?”*

“This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase; and in the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.”

For the PFGM, we must be continually driven by the need to welcome and include those who are marginalized and without a supportive network or community. This requires us to challenge our own comfort when we recognise the need to reach out and include others. We are always engaged ‘in mission’. Francis advises, *“We need to help others to realize that the only way is to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude, which is to accept and esteem*

them as companions along the way, without interior resistance. Better yet, it means learning to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas”.

In addressing the Austrian Bishops during their meeting with him in February 2014, Pope Francis said, *“An important area of our work as shepherds, is the family. It is located at the heart of the evangelizing Church... The foundation upon which you can develop harmonious family life is mainly marital fidelity. Unfortunately, in our times we see that the family and marriage, in countries in the Western world, have suffered a profound interior crisis ...”*

*“Globalization and post-modern individualism promote a lifestyle that makes the development and stability of interpersonal relationships much more difficult and that is not conducive to promoting a culture of the family. Here a new missionary area is opened to the Church, for example, in **family groups** that create space for relationships between persons and with God where true communion, which welcomes each equally without confining them in elite groups, can grow.”*

Summary and questions.

- 1. “No one comes out of the baptismal font without a job and there is no place that is not mission territory”.**

How do you see your parish and your PFGM as ‘mission territory’ and what job have you been given?

- 2. “Knowing Jesus Christ by faith is our joy, following Him is our grace and transmitting this treasure to others is a mission entrusted to us”.**

How do these three elements excite you to be an effective missionary disciple?

- 3. ”Evangelizers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” Those in PFG leadership roles cannot do this is they just text or email their group members.**

How does the call to be a missionary disciple affect how you co-ordinate your PFG, or the PFG’s in your parish or diocese? What do you need to do to smell the sheep?

- 4. How can you actively promote and support the PFGM being a genuine response to Pope Francis’ vision of evangelization?**

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