

**EDITORIAL: POPE FRANCIS: APOSTLE OF CONTEXTUAL  
THEOLOGY**

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Pope Francis (original name Jorge Mario Bergoglio), who assumed the office of the bishop of Rome in March 2013, is the first Pope from the Western Hemisphere, and the first from South America. As the first non-European to hold the office of papacy since the 8th century, Pope Francis has providentially brought into this office a new vigour, vision and impulse comparable to that embodied in Pope John XXIII who convoked the great reformist and pastoral Ecumenical Council of Vatican II. His new vision for the Church beset by many contemporary problems, apparently derives its impetus and resources from a Latin American contextual theological heritage which had a formative influence on him especially while he was in Argentina as the archbishop of Buenos Aires.

This special brand of Latin American theology known as “the theology of the people” has been shown not only to have had a formative impact on Jorge Mario Bergoglio as an archbishop and a pastor, but also a continuing influence on his writings and gestures even now that he is Pope Francis.<sup>1</sup> This particular contextual theology is, therefore, of critical importance in understanding not only the Church in Latin America but also the Pope as he seeks to enrich the universal Church, by sharing with her, God’s gifts to the local Church in his home country and region. These gifts hold great promise for the renewal and reform of the Catholic Church in the 21st century. And any person who fails to understand this reality may fail to grasp the ground of the Pope’s many theological and pastoral options as the successor of St Peter today.

**ARGENTINE –LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGY OF THE PEOPLE**

The theology of the people is said to have emerged in Argentina during and after the Second Vatican Council. It was influenced by the 1966 pastoral declaration by Argentine bishops issued to lead the Church in Argentina into a new direction following the post-conciliar period which recognized the paradigm shift represented by Vatican II. This declaration saw to the emergence of important themes that would later blossom in the Church in Latin America such as poverty, service, collegiality, dialogue, communal form of the Church, and openness to the world. These are themes very much dear to the theology of

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of this theology see Rafael Luciani, *Theology of the People* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 2017).

the people – a theology that is committed to the option for the poor. The Argentine theology of the people takes the religion of the “faithful people of God” as a key source for theological reflection. It developed in the Church in Argentina and in conversation with diverse strands of Latin American theology of liberation as well as local political circumstances and movements.<sup>2</sup>

This theology strives for an inclusive Church, a Church that treats others as agents with shared responsibility and sees the people’s historical situation as the *locus* for God’s revelation. It is committed to a Church that understands herself not only as bearing and leading the poor, but also as being borne and evangelized by them<sup>3</sup>. These fundamental ecclesial issues were promoted by the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) at the Medellin conference in 1968.

The theology of the people must be distinguished from the Latin American liberation theology. Even though, there are genuine meeting points between the two, such as the deployment of the “see – judge – act” cycle of theological hermeneutic and the preferential option for the poor, they differ in one essential issue.<sup>4</sup> The theology of the people, which is also oriented to liberation, eschews the importance attached to economic class conflicts prevalent in other branches of liberation theology that draw from the method of Marx’s analysis. It rather highlights the distinct role of culture as well as the issue of structural injustice as a betrayal of a people’s unity. Its intellectual lineage is traced to sources such as *Gaudium et Spes* 53, Paul Tillich’s correlational theology, and the popular piety, especially as practiced in numerous Marian devotions prevalent in Latin America.<sup>5</sup>

The theology of the people has had a big impact on Church’s teaching in South America. This can be strongly perceived in the texts of CELAM such as *Puebla* and *Aparecida* texts. This approach to theology has a pastoral component in that it takes seriously the “mysticism of the people” or popular piety especially as incarnated in the most humble or lowly.<sup>6</sup> The major feature of the theology of the people lies in its understanding of the people as the *locus* for theological reflection and ecclesial credibility. Thus, there was no room for any kind of pietistic or privatized faith in the CELAM’s reading of the critical texts of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Juan Carlos Scannone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People” in *Theological Studies* 77 (1), March 2016, 118-135.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Michael Sean Winters, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People Book Review”, Part 2. See <https://www.ncronline.org> (assessed on November 11, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Michael M. Canaris, “A Theological Influence on Pope Francis” in *Catholic Star Herald* (South Jersey’s Official Catholic Newspaper). See <https://catholicstarherald.org> (assessed on November 8, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

Vatican II, such as *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. What was demanded is that the Church adopts the standpoint of the people of God. She must look at herself and at the world with all its hopes and fears, standing with and amongst the people.<sup>7</sup> According to Rafael Tello, a major proponent of this theology in Argentina:

The Argentine Church must see itself and its problems from the standpoint of the people. The people would then be the illuminating and unifying element of the problematic of the Church. That means seeing it not in terms of its internal conflicts, its internal difficulties, or its internal issues but in terms of its insertion, as people of God, in the Argentine people. This would lead to a course of action connected to that insertion, namely, the retrieval of the Christian values that are in the people...seeing from the viewpoint of the people and adopting a people-centred approach to pastoral action.<sup>8</sup>

The above emphasis on the concrete situation and experience of the people, majority of whom are poor, as a source for theological reflection and pastoral action qualifies the Latin American theology of the people as a genuine contextual theology. It had a profound formative influence on the theology and pastoral practice of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as archbishop of Buenos Aires (1998-2013). Here he acquired a public reputation for humility and solidarity with the poor. Thus, he lived in a simple downtown apartment rather than in the residence of the archbishop. He also travelled by public transportation or by foot rather than in a chauffeured limousine. He became an outspoken advocate for the poor and a vocal critic of the dehumanizing policies of Argentine government of his era as archbishop.<sup>9</sup> His effusive generosity and solidarity with the poor and those living on the margins of the society led him at the Holy Thursday Mass in 2008, to wash and kiss the feet of residents of a shelter for drug users at a Church in a poor neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina.<sup>10</sup>

### **IMPACT ON THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF FRANCIS AS POPE**

The impact of the Argentine theology of the people on the life and teachings of Pope Francis cannot be overstated. This theology which strives after a lowly Church, a Church that is poor and for the poor has left its imprint on the life and gestures of Pope Francis. First, his choice of the papal name ‘Francis’ bespeaks of what he wants to emulate in Saint Francis of Assisi: namely, to have

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Michael Sean Winters, “Theology of the People Critical to Understanding Francis” in *National Catholic Reporter*. See <https://www.ncronline.org> (assessed on November 10, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Winters, “Theology of the People...”

<sup>9</sup> Matt Stefon, “Francis, Pope: Biography & Facts” in *Britannica.com*. See <https://www.britannica.com> (assessed on November 12, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Winters, “Theology of the People...”

a poor Church, for the poor; to be a lover of peace; and to work for the preservation of the natural environment. Also, in furtherance of his humble and simple lifestyle or spirit of poverty, Francis at his election as Pope chose to live in a simple two-room apartment rather than the luxurious papal accommodations in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace.

On the other hand, the themes, phrases and priorities rooted in the theology of the people movement resounds virtually in every papal comment, writing, gesture and appearance. And they include: "The holy and faithful People of God," "time is greater than space," "evangelization as inculturation," *sensus fidei*, "the people's mysticism", popular piety, solidarity and "the whole is greater than the part".<sup>11</sup> Michael Canaris holds that all these ubiquitous papal themes can be understood anew when one recognizes them as central tenets of the theology of the people. According to him: "Non-paternalistic accompaniment of the forgotten and a pilgrim, synodal Church 'walking together' ... remain hermeneutical keys for unlocking the current pontificate and its enormous range of initiatives and agendas."<sup>12</sup>

The influence of the Argentine school on Pope Francis is remarkably evident in his programmatic apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) issued in 2013, which spelled out the nature and direction of his papacy. The theology of the people, whose birth-place is Argentina, helps us to learn the origins of a body of thought associated with this document and in fact also with other writings and speeches of the Pope. It was Pope Francis who took this theology to Rome and helped it to flourish to the enrichment of the universal Church. It is therefore, essential in a special way, to interpreting the gestures and tonalities of the Pope's ongoing call for a Church that is poor and for the poor. This approach to theology clearly influenced *Evangelii Gaudium* where Pope Francis argues that the key to the solution of the world's problems hinges on resolution of the problems of the poor. He writes: "As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Pope Francis theology can be regarded as pastoral. The hermeneutical key for interpreting it is his conviction and the principle that realities are more important than ideas.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the theology of the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Nairobi: Pauline Publication Africa, 2013) nos. 222-237.

<sup>12</sup> Canaris, "A Theological Influence on Pope Francis."

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 202.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, no. 231.

Pope just like the Argentine theology of the people stems from reality: from the reality of injustice, suffering, poverty and the destruction of nature, and from the reality of ecclesial clericalism. According to him, the primacy of realities over ideas calls for the rejection of various means of masking reality and the recognition of the truth that ideas or conceptual elaborations “are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis.”<sup>15</sup> For the Pope, “ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason.”<sup>16</sup> He also notes that “realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out.” Thus, “there has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities.”<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, in line with the theology of the people, the Pope is very much attentive to the issues of the poor and the marginalized. He notes that the option for the poor is primarily a theological category. They are the first beneficiaries of God’s mercy, a preference that has consequences for the life of faith of all Christians. For Pope Francis, the shepherds of the Church have to smell like the sheep.<sup>18</sup> As such, the Church has to be an outgoing Church that reaches out to the peripheries.

Finally, the theology of the people affirms popular piety as can be gleaned from the 2007 *Aparecida* Document of the Conference of Latin American bishops. This document places emphasis on popular religion as manifested in “patron saint celebrations, novenas, rosaries, the way of the cross, processions, dances and songs of religious folklore, affection for the saints.”<sup>19</sup> The above acts of popular piety are not to be regarded as ritual expressions parallel to the official ones. Rather they express a mystique that is manifest in its own (popular, cultural) manner - an “experience of interior pilgrimage” that relies on “the internal action of grace.”<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Pope Francis referred to the *Aparecida* document in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in order to underline the value of popular piety known also as popular spirituality or people’s mysticism as prevalent first and foremost in Latin America. Extolling its importance, the Pope says: “It is truly a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly. Nor is it devoid of content; rather it discovers and expresses that content more by way of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., no. 232.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., no. 231.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ibid., no. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Winters, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People....”

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24.

symbols than by discursive reasoning....”<sup>21</sup> He sees popular piety as a *locus theologicus*, a fruit of inculturated Gospel whose evangelizing power must not be underestimated.<sup>22</sup>

Pope Francis efforts to key into the insights of the Argentine and Latin American theology of the people have proved beneficial for the Catholic Church. It has enabled him to retrieve some fundamental options of Vatican II which offer tremendous promise for realizing the Council’s reformist agenda. In the first place, the Pope moves away from the exclusive reliance on an ecclesiology of communion so much emphasized by his immediate predecessors in capturing the deepest reality of the Church. According to Richard Gaillardetz, this new change in focus marks the end of the hegemony of *communio* as a privileged conciliar hermeneutic.<sup>23</sup> The Pope’s preferred point of departure for reflection on the Church was clearly expressed early in his pontificate: “The image of the Church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God.”<sup>24</sup>

No doubt, he was influenced by the Latin American theology of the people as evident in the reception of Vatican II Council by the Conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM). The early documents of CELAM used extensively the imagery of “the people of God,” a trend continued in its 2007 *Aparecidia* document which integrated into its reflection the ecclesiology of communion. Gaillardetz opines that the emphasis on the Church as God’s pilgrim people has enabled Francis to receive more fully the emphasis of Vatican II on the priority of Christian baptism, so apparent in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Lumen Gentium* - a priority which has also helped in the recontextualization of ordained ministry. The *Aparecidia* document privileged the teaching of the Council on “the common priesthood of the people of God.” It also taught, following the Council, that the ministerial priesthood was wholly at the service of the baptismal priesthood. Pope Francis has continued this emphasis. He is not interested in maintaining a neo-cultic theology of priesthood.<sup>25</sup> He has also consistently denounced “neo-clericalism” in its various forms. Thus, in a papal audience in March 2014, the Pope said:

Those who are ordained are placed at the head of the community. Yes, they are at the ‘head’, but for Jesus this means placing their authority at the service of the community...’ whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., no. 124.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, no. 126.

<sup>23</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The ‘Francis Moment’: A New Kairos for Catholic Ecclesiology” in *CTSA Proceedings* 69 (2014), 64.

<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America* (September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013). See <http://americamagazine.org> (accessed on November 18, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Gaillardetz, “The ‘Francis Moment’...”, 66.

to be first must be your slave'. ...A bishop who does not serve his community does not do good; a priest or a curate who does not place himself at the service of his community does not do good, he is mistaken.<sup>26</sup>

### **APOSTLE OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY**

Contextual theology is a theological approach that “takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel, the tradition of the Church, and the culture in which one is theologizing...”<sup>27</sup> It is an interpretation of Christian faith which arises in the consciousness of its context. Hence this brand of theology is one that occurs in connection and in dialogue with human experience, phenomena and traditions of our age and the surrounding world.<sup>28</sup> Contextualization of theology has become today a major way of doing theology whether in north Atlantic region or in the south.<sup>29</sup> This is so because, theologians have become increasingly aware that their work is marked by the mentality, world-view, sensibility, thought forms, categories or culture of their time and social location. And these consciously or unconsciously condition their understanding and interpretation of Christian faith or the texts of Christian tradition.<sup>30</sup>

As we have noted above, “the theology of the people,” whose birth-place is Argentina, and is also a distinct strand of Latin American theology, had a formative as well as a continuing influence on the life and teachings of Pope Francis. Although this theology is a contextual one marked by its time and social location, the export of the theology of the people to Rome and hence to the universal Church by Francis, is rooted in the fact that contextual theology, despite its limitations of time and space, has a trans-cultural relevance. This makes it possible for local Churches to share with others or with the universal Church God’s manifold gifts which the presence of the Gospel in their cultures makes possible. The key to the reform of the Catholic Church today by Pope Francis depends on how well he continues to appropriate the insights and riches

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<sup>26</sup> For a summary of this papal audience see <http://visnews-en.blogspot.com/2014/03/francis-to-faithful-help-your-pastors.html> (assessed on November 18, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Peter O. Okafor, “The Challenge of Contextual Theology,” in *Ministerium*, Vol. 1 (2014), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Justin S- Ukpong, “Current Theology: The Emergence of African Theologies,” in *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 501.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Onyekwelu Okafor, “Incarnation as a Fundamental Hermeneutical Principle: The Case of Christian Theology and the Issue of Theological Education in Nigeria” in *Ministerium*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (2016), 9-10.

of this theology of the people to the benefit of the universal Church. In this light, he will continue to be the apostle of contextual theology.