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## Pope Francis' Prophetic Mission

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**Abstract:** In spite of the opposition and the objection he is facing from some of his fellow-Christians, Pope Francis continues to make a difference and send out waves of positive energy through his *un-complicated faith* in the Gospel, through his *unassuming attitude towards others*, through his *simple life*, through his *insightful perception of reality* with its problems and chances, and through the *simple, direct and distinct language* he uses to preach the Good News to everyone.

His life-style represents a new way of living faith, hope and charity as did the prophetic figures of the Old Testament, challenging the powerful both inside and outside the Church to care for the neglected and the underprivileged. What he says and does is so surprising and disturbing that one begins to ask oneself whether he is the Pope or a Prophet of God who has been sent to warn us and call us all to return to the Lord.

Through his life and ministry the Pope seems to direct the Church towards this goal of being transparent and credible. "Pope Francis' courage coupled with humility and firmness offers great hope that he will lead the church like Jesus who was a great agent of change."

The main reasons for this hope and positive energy which he instills in the hearts and minds of the poor are the following: how proves

his solidarity with the poor again and again, the pastoral concern he has for the people of God and which he attempts to instil into the hearts and minds of his fellow clergymen by asking them to move to the peripheries, the joy and happiness he discharges both in his faith life and in his relationship with fellow human beings and above all his conviction about God's mercy and compassion which he tries to translate into everyday life. His life and mission are truly prophetic.

Keywords: Pope Francis, prophet, simple life, uncomplicated faith, unassuming attitude towards others, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Misericordiae Vultus*, *Laudato Si.* '

In the parishes of the diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, Germany a signature-campaign called *Pro Concilio* was initiated in early 2017 in support of making a request to the Holy See to get the so called *virī probati* ordained as ministers for the different parish communities. This and many other such initiatives are happening in the Catholic Church today under the leadership of Pope Francis, though not all members of the Church including a few of those who play the leading roles agree with him in every point.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the opposition and the objection he is facing from some of his fellow-Christians, Pope Francis continues to make a difference and send out waves of positive energy through his *uncomplicated faith* in the Gospel, through his *unassuming attitude towards others*, through his *simple life*, through his *insightful perception of reality* with its problems and chances, and through the *simple, direct and distinct language* he uses to preach the Good News to everyone.

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It is not easy for an ordained minister to integrate the demands of the sanctification, leadership and prophetic ministries especially when a conflicting situation arises. Further in the life of every minister one of the three functions stands out though the other two are not neglected. When we observe the way Pope Francis carries out his holy office, what stands out, in my opinion, is the ‘prophetic’ aspect, though as a Pope he does not neglect his sanctifying and leading responsibilities. This short essay attempts to focus on the prophetic dimension of the ministry of Pope Francis. Since our understanding of what is ‘prophetic’ is based on the biblical understanding of prophet and prophetic ministry, let us first make a few clarifying observations on this matter.

## Biblical Prophets and the Word of God

The most fundamental thing about the biblical prophets is that God’s word was personally made known to them (cf. Jer 11:18) whereby the Spirit of the Lord played a central role (cf. Hos 9:7; Mic 3:8; 2 Sam 23:2; Ezech 3:12-14). The primary function of the biblical prophets is not *foretelling* or *predicting*, something which is popularly expected of a prophet, but *forth-telling*, that is, proclaiming what has been received from the Lord and doing it in his name.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Greek term *prophets* contains the verbal stem *phe* meaning to ‘say’ or to ‘speak’ and the prefix *pro* meaning both ‘forth’ and ‘fore.’<sup>3</sup> Its Hebrew equivalent *nabi*<sup>4</sup> refers both to a “speaker” or “proclaimer” and to the “one called” or “appointed”<sup>5</sup> (cf. Amos 7:14-16; Is 6:1-13; Jer 1:2-10; Ezech 1:2-3.11). In any case, every biblical prophet is a called proclaimer as is attested to by the call narratives in which God is the one who calls<sup>6</sup> the prophets and commissions them with a specific mission. However, the Bible also contains a number of instances of prophets ‘foretelling’ or ‘predicting’ which serve as a sign of prophetic authority (cf. Deut 18:22; Is 41:22; 43:9). Such proclamation of prophets took different forms like judgements and assurances of salvation (Hos 4:1-5; 2 Kg 1:6; 20:6; Is 66:7-15), oracles of woe or of assurance (Is 5:8-24; Jer 30:10-11), admonitions (Amos 4:4-5) and prophetic symbolic acts (Is 20:2-4; Jer 28:10).<sup>7</sup> Texts like Deut 18:18-22 and Jer 28:8-9 also make a distinction between true and false prophets.<sup>8</sup>

Though it is the Old Testament which has a separate section on prophetic literature, we also find a number of occurrences of this term in the New Testament having the same meaning as declaring an inspired or revealed statement (Mt 7:22; 13:14; 1 Cor 14:6; Acts 2:17), or predicting something that is hidden (Mt 26:68; Lk 22:64) or lies in the future (Mk 7:6; 1 Pet 1:10). Apart from calling John the Baptist (Lk 1:76) and Jesus (Jn 4:19) as prophets, the New Testament also speaks of Early Christian missionaries as prophets (cf. Mt 10:41; 23:34; Lk 11:49).<sup>9</sup> Today as was in the biblical times, we are faced with the difficulty of identifying and assessing authentic prophets. We are faced with the questions: Does God continue to inspire or speak to certain men and women even today? Does what is called prophecy today really communicate God's word? The Bible instructs its readers to 'test' (1 Thess 5:20-21) prophets and their prophecies.

## **The Manner the Prophets Spoke**

The prophets of the Old Testament appear to "make much ado about paltry things, lavishing excessive language upon trifling subjects" and "even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions" and they were breathlessly impatient with injustice (cf. Amos 8:4-8).<sup>10</sup> Indifference and incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by the plight of human beings is a matter of serious concern for them. Their language is not charged with harmony but with agitation, anguish and a spirit of non-acceptance, but also with firmness and compassion. They are impatient of excuse and contemptuous of pretence and self-pity. The mouth of a prophet is "a sharp sword" and a "polished arrow" taken out of the quiver of God (Is 49:2).<sup>11</sup>

The prophets were not faithfully defending the traditionally cherished beliefs and institutions such as sacrifices, priesthood and temple but questioned their scandalous pretensions (cf. Amos 6:8; Jer 6:20; 7:4.8.9-15.21-23). They even called the enemies of the Israelite people like Assyria (cf. Is 10:5; 5:26; 7:18, 8:7; 13:5) and Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jer 25:9; 27:6; 43:10) as God's 'instruments' which he would use against his own people.<sup>12</sup> The prophets preferred to speak the truth even though it appeared to go against their own people of Israel.<sup>13</sup> Not modesty, compromise, satiety, tolerance

and understanding but honesty, critique and challenge were the values predominant in the lives of the biblical prophets, though sometimes they exaggerated the guilt of the people and made them appear hard to believe (e.g. Jer 8:10; cf. Jer 5:1.5; 6:6.13).

The prophets also emphasize the mercy and love of God for the people. For example, the prophets present God as the Good Shepherd (cf. Ezech 34) and as a loving parent (cf. Hos 11:1; Is 42:1-9; 46:3; 49:15; 66:13). A number of prophetic texts bear witness to this mercy of God. For example we read in Is 54:10: *For the mountains may go away and the hills may totter, but my faithful love will never leave you, my covenant of peace will never totter, says Yahweh who takes pity on you* (Cf. Is 54:7-8; 55:3; 63:7; Jer 31:3; 33:11; Mic 7:20).

And finally the prophets of the Bible had to face threats and challenges from the people and had to suffer a lot. The best example of such sufferings of a prophet is found in Jer 11:18-12:6 which is one of the so called confessions of Jeremiah<sup>14</sup> where Jeremiah laments over the betrayal of his friends and family in Anathoth. Amos is also hated for reproving the people on behalf of God (cf. Amos 5:10). Loneliness, misery and frustration were part of the prophetic ministry and they had to go on even though the people would not listen to them (cf. Ezech 2:4-5).

Thus we see that the biblical prophets were “extra-institutional charismatic leaders” who were called by God “through a special call experience” and they were sent to “recall” the people of Israel and its leadership, namely the kings and priests, “from the errant ways” into which they had strayed, and to “re-new” their God experience.<sup>15</sup> They, in turn, “lived the faith with radical example. Embracing poverty, extreme religious vows and calling for renewed commitment, they spoke out against injustice” of the powerful and “defended the poor.”<sup>16</sup> They were not defenders of the institution against all odds but went to the extent of questioning the institutional structures in order to re-establish justice and harmony among the people and to renew the covenantal relationship between God and the people.

## Pope Francis' Prophetic Mission

When Pope Benedict XVI stunned the world by resigning from his Papal office he honestly admitted that it was due to his lack of strength of mind and body. Such an honest admittance of one's dwindling energies also speaks volumes about the seriousness of the difficulties and problems the Church was facing, both internally and externally, and about the radical response such a crisis moment demanded from the Papal Chair. Declining number of vocations, increasing examples of scandalous behaviour from clergy and religious including accusations of sex abuse against Church leaders, reports of corruption inside Vatican itself, issues of abortion, contraception, same-sex marriages, communion to the divorced, ecumenical and inter-religious relations, ruthless killing of the innocents and the growing misery of the migrants and the profit-oriented market economy which epitomizes money as the almighty are only a few of the challenges inherited by Pope Francis, the successor to Pope Benedict XVI. In the following we make an attempt to understand the 'prophetic' response of the present Pontiff.

### Through Simplicity in Life

The popularity of Pope Francis derives from the simplicity of his life. The plastic watch, iron cross, frayed cassock, black shoes and socks instead of the expensive handmade scarlet silk slippers, ring of the fisherman in silver, Ford Focus instead of the Papal Limousine, the missing traditional shoulder-cape and the gold-embroidered ceremonial stole are the loud *signs* of his simplicity which attract the ordinary person. When Pope Francis saw the Papal Apartment after his election to Papacy in March 2013 he commented saying "the entrance is so narrow that people could enter only in debris and drabs."<sup>17</sup> Since he wanted to live with the people, he chose to live in the Papal guest house Casa Santa Maria. This was not a strategy adopted by him after he was elected Pope but had practiced it in his years of ministry in the *villas miseria*, the teeming slums of his native city, Buenos Aires.<sup>18</sup> "A church of the poor, for the poor" is the motto of his Papacy he made on the day of his election. He never likes to be portrayed as a 'superman' or as a star but prefers rather to be considered a normal man who laughs, cries and has friends like

everyone. To a question asked by Mathilde Imberty on question of the Pope being a star, he answered, “Stars are beautiful ... But the Pope must be, must be the servant of the servants of God.”<sup>19</sup>

His simplicity is not limited to how he lives his personal life but is extended in the concern he has for the poor and the afflicted. In his address to the bishops of Brazil the Pope clarified saying “Without the grammar of simplicity, the Church loses the very conditions which make it possible ‘to fish’ for God in the deep waters of his Mystery.”<sup>20</sup> He is convinced that the poor have a special place in God’s people. This is what he says about the poor in *Evangelii Gaudium* 197:<sup>21</sup> “God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself “became poor” (2 Cor 8:9; cf. Lk 2:24; Lev 5:7); ... He made himself one of them: “I was hungry and you gave me food to eat”, and he taught them that mercy towards all of these is the key to heaven (cf. Mt 25:5ff.).”

According to him it is the poor teach us “the *sensus fidei*,” and we need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. Our commitment to them should not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance but in loving attentiveness which considers the other “in a certain sense as one with ourselves” (EG 199). The worst discrimination the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care and therefore our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care (EG 200). Whatever be our lifestyle no one can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice (EG 201).

The Pope expressed his option for the poor already during his first pastoral visit of his Papacy outside Rome which he made to Lampedusa in South Italy on 8 July 2013 which is indicative of his special concern for the dislocated refugees and migrants who are on a permanent search for a place to live in. When he went there he threw a wreath of flowers into the sea and wore purple colour mass vestments (which is usually worn during the time of fasting in the Church) in remembrance of those who had drowned in the Mediterranean while attempting to cross over to Europe. In his homily he also came down heavily upon the indifference of the powerful and the rich to the plight of the poor and called for a “reawakening of consciences” to counter the “globalization of indifferences” being shown to the migrants. Inspired by the appeal made by him,

a wealthy Italian American couple that now lives in Malta, Regina Catrambone and her husband Christopher, founded an association named Migrant Offshore Aid Station and bought a 131 foot rescue boat, the *Phoenix* spending their own money of 3.7 million UD dollars.<sup>22</sup>

Pope Francis calls every Christian to care for the vulnerable and help the slow, the weak or the less talented to find opportunities in life (EG 209). He identifies the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly, and particularly the migrants as belonging to this group of vulnerable (EG 210). He exhorts that on the face of human trafficking we should not look the other way like Cain (EG 211). Special attention should be paid to women who are doubly poor and the unborn children who are the most defenceless (EG 212-213) by accompanying women in difficult situations, even when abortion appears to be the only way (EG 214).

## Through Deep Faith in the Gospel

In his Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*<sup>23</sup> (LF) the Pope refers to Jn 12:46 and 2 Cor 4:6 and asserts that faith is *light brought by Christ* and it illuminates the entire journey of the believers (LF 1) and every aspect of human existence (LF 4). This faith is in a living God who calls us and loves us through Jesus Christ who demonstrates God's love for us through his death (LF 4). The death and resurrection of Christ is the proof of utter reliability God's love for us (LF 16-17). This faith is transmitted by those who have seen God's light and heard his voice from generation to generation through an unbroken chain of witnesses. It is the lived memory of the life bringing act of Jesus' love kept alive in the Church and taught under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26) that makes the believers contemporaries of Jesus (LF 37-38). This faith is absorbed and deepened in the family (LF 52-54).

Without this faith in God our mutual trust would be weakened, we would remain united only by fear and our stability would be threatened (LF 55). This faith involves painful testing, trials, suffering and weakness which can become an act of love and entrustment into the hands of God (LF 56). It is *a lamp which guides our steps in*



*the night.* God's response to those who suffer is that of *an accompanying presence*,... *Christ is the one who, having endured suffering, is "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"* (Heb 12:2; LF 57). Suffering reminds us that ... only from God, ... can our society find solid and lasting foundations. .... The dynamic of faith, hope and charity (cf. 1 Th 1:3; 1 Cor 13:13) thus leads us to embrace the concerns of all men and women on our journey ... *Let us refuse to be robbed of hope*, or to allow our hope to be dimmed by facile answers and solutions which block our progress (LF 57).

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* in which the focus is on the *Joy* of the Gospel, the Pope identifies consumerism, desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience as the danger of the world today makes the believers callous to the joy of God's love (EG 2). This joy can be regained through a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ (EG 3). This regained joy urges (2 Cor 5:14) and obliges (1 Cor 9:16) everyone to share with others (EG 10) the message that God has *revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ* (EG 11). The Church must carry on this proclamation (EG 169).

Thus he sees faith as a challenge calling for changing the human predicament. He posed the same challenge to the priests in his homily during the Chrism mass at St. Peter's Basilica on 28 March 2013 admonishing them "to go out to the *outskirts* where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight." He also said that the priest who seldom goes out of himself, ends up as sad priests instead of being shepherds living with *the odour of the sheep*. Finally he asked the priests to "be shepherds, with the *odour of the sheep*" and so be "fishers of men."<sup>24</sup>

The depth of his faith can be understood from the very title of his Encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) which discloses his fundamental attitude of joy for the Gospel message. That he is immersed and filled with this joy finds its expression in his address to the Jesuits during their General Congregation on 24 October 2016 in which he warned them not to allow the enemy of human nature<sup>25</sup> to rob oneself among other things of the joy of evangelizing, because joy is constitutive of the Gospel message and one cannot give a good

piece of news with a sad face.<sup>26</sup> It looks as if the Gospel message alone is sufficient for him to be happy in life.

According to Pope Francis the Gospel continues to be a vital source of eternal newness for the Church, against all those who would “indoctrinate” it in dead stones to be hurled at others”.<sup>27</sup> In his opinion one of the three temptations against missionary discipleship is to “transform the Gospel message into an ideology” which refers to “the attempt to interpret the Gospel apart from the Gospel itself and apart from the Church.”<sup>28</sup>

In one of his informal letters to the German youth admonishing them to remain faithful to reading and living the Bible, the Pope narrates his own association with his ‘old, well-worn’ copy of the Bible. All that he tries to explain in the contents of this letter is how the Bible contains words God wishes to speak to every human being and how it can be read on all occasions and in every circumstance. In lieu of a ‘theological introduction’ to and critical questions on the Bible, he is evoke interest for Bible in the young people by describing his own personal experience of and attachment to his Bible which is naturally the source of his faith.

As he understands his faith in an uncomplicated manner, so also is his view on prayer and meditation as tools for daily life and as acts of speaking and listening by which humility has to be the governing attitude. The only way one could grow in relationship with God is to pray with humility.<sup>29</sup> For him prayer is when he makes his decisions and it should be an experience of giving way, of surrendering, where our entire being enters into the presence of God. Further he believes that prayer is the place where dialogue, listening and transformation occur, looking at God, but above all sensing that we are being watched by him.<sup>30</sup> It is inspiring to recall that on the first day of his office as the Bishop of Rome one of the first things he did was to go to the Mary Major Basilica to pray.<sup>31</sup>

## **Through Insightful Perception of Contemporary Reality**

Like the prophets who saw what the others failed to see and who always had an insight into the reality and called for a renewed rela-

tionship with it, Pope Francis too proves himself again and again to be creative and innovative. Already in the pre-conclave meeting before his election to Pope when he spoke forcefully to the Cardinals that the Church “must go to the peripheries” in both a geographic and existential sense and must beware of “theological narcissism.”<sup>32</sup> Narcissists are those who are blinded by the radiant glow of their self-perceived greatness and they don’t see what havoc they create or what misery they inflict on others.<sup>33</sup> He repeats the same clarion call in EG 20: “Each Christian and every community must discern the path ... to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.” This reflects his vision of the Church as a ‘centrifugal Church.’<sup>34</sup> Such a vision of the Pope was also reflected in his warning to the Vatican diplomats-in-training that careerism is leprosy and in his invitation to his fellow bishops to be men who love poverty, simplicity and austerity of life.<sup>35</sup>

Twenty months later into his Papal office four days before Christmas 2014 he presented the Roman Curia with a list of fifteen ailments from which the Curia had to heal itself. This list voiced the prophetic call for conversion from the sicknesses of “leading double life,” “of teaching others with severity and leading a hidden, sometimes dissolute life,” “of gossiping,” “of rivalry and vain glory,” and “of worldly profit and exhibitionism” among the other things.<sup>36</sup> In order to arrive at a fairer representation at the Vatican he first created a council of eight (later nine) cardinals from across the world to reform the Roman Curia, and has started appointing new Cardinals to the College of Cardinals more and more from countries like Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Haiti, Nicaragua, New Zealand, Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand. Such actions reveal the direction of correcting Eurocentric imbalance in the College of Cardinals by adding a number of curial Cardinals from poorer countries.

## **Through Doing Justice to Women**

His concern for including women in the Church activities is also evidenced by a number of activities. On 4 May 2015 he welcomed the female head of Sweden’s Lutheran Church Archbishop Antje

Jackelen of Uppsala on an official visit to Vatican.<sup>37</sup> On 5 December 2014 when he appointed new members Vatican's International Theological Commission, for the first time seven female theologians were included as part of the twenty member commission. He has also spoken repeatedly of the need for the Church to develop a deeper theology of women and of his determination to promote women to senior positions in Rome. Though he has no intention of modifying the Church teaching on ordination of women priests still he intends to promote the participation of women in Church life. On 11 May 2017 he told the Canadian bishops that it is "vital" that more women be involved, including in decision making, and that we need to "bring the voice of women into the responsibility structures of the church."<sup>38</sup> And a number of people all over the world believe that a radical decision with regard to ordination of women priests cannot be ruled out with the ever-surprising Pope Francis at the helm.<sup>39</sup>

## **Through Putting Own House in Order**

The dragging and nagging corruptions at the Vatican bank is known to many of us under the headword *Vatileaks*. Pope Francis has not hesitated to invite a number of agencies consisting of renowned lay financial experts to review the operations of the Vatican bank. Though it is suspected by some Vatican Cardinals that such external scrutiny might amount to voluntary renouncement of Papal sovereignty and might lead to attack from outside to destabilize the Holy See, Pope Francis goes ahead with the reforms. In February 2014 he handed over the authority for running the Vatican finances to Cardinal George Pell one of the so called "Group of Eight" who since 2014 releases the balance sheets about the Vatican financial situation with facts and figures and who since January 2015 has introduced draconian new accounting rules for every Vatican headquarters department. Total financial transparency is the order given by Pope Francis.<sup>40</sup>

## **Through Discerning Mercy as Foundational**

The great jubilee year of mercy lasting from 8 December 2015

to 20 November 2016 which was declared by Pope Francis on the fourth Sunday of Lent in 2015 was a seminal idea that was born out of a deep conviction that the Church and the world today are very badly in need of becoming ‘merciful’ towards fellow humans and towards nature. The official document *Misericordiae Vultus* which contained the message of the Pope on this theme of mercy is founded on the principle that God is rich in mercy (Eph 2:4) and he is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6).

This declaration created a ‘hype’ about mercy and at least in the ecclesial circles to say the least, it initiated a renewed awareness and a reawakening about nature of God and the nature and the mission of the Church. In a situation of indecisiveness, ambiguity, indifference, profit-oriented market, achievement based entrepreneurs, conformity promoting education and political systems which reduces the human beings as instruments of usefulness and leaves behind anxiety and uncertainty, it was highly necessary to remind humanity of the God of the Bible who has revealed himself as someone cares, loves and is merciful. The call for a year of mercy was a prompt and appropriate response of Pope Francis to the situation humanity is in at the moment. In EG 114 the Pope has also invited the Church to be a place of mercy, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel. Thus the Church is supposed to become a ‘mother’ and a ‘shepherdess.’<sup>41</sup>

Quoting the *Summa Theologica* (I-II, q. 66, a. 4-6; q. 108, a.1) in EG 37, Pope Francis makes the following assertion: “... as far as external works are concerned, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues.”<sup>42</sup> It becomes clear from the context of the Exhortation that mercy is considered to be the same as the ‘works of love’ mentioned by Paul in Gal 5:6.<sup>43</sup> By equating mercy with the works of love, the Pope is actually qualifying mercy as *the* ‘Christian’ way of relating to one’s neighbor. He also referred to this mercy in his address to the Jesuits on the occasion of their General Congregation describing that this mercy is not an abstract word but a lifestyle of concrete gestures and an expansion of the colloquy with the Lord placed on the cross.<sup>44</sup> In the same address he also states that the “Lord who looks at us with mercy and chooses us, sends us to bring with all its

effectiveness, that same mercy to the poorest, to sinners, to those discarded people, and those crucified in the present world, who suffer injustice and violence.<sup>45</sup>

The visit of Pope Francis to the migrant camp in the Greek island Lesbos on 16 April 2016 to highlight the humanitarian crisis was a concretization of this message of mercy the Pope intends to drive home in the hearts of his contemporaries. The Pope spent five hours on Lesbos with Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians and with the Archbishop of Athens and on his return journey he took with himself twelve refugees to Vatican all of whom were Syrian Muslims. It was indeed a symbolic gesture from the Pontiff to tell the people in plight that they are not alone in their struggle. He also appreciated the efforts made by Greece to take care of them. At the same time it also posed challenge to the international community to become more sensitive to the issue of migrants and refugees.

## Through Hearing the Cry of Mother Earth

Much acclaimed is also the concern of the Pope for creation. Already in EG he has expressed this concern pointing out that creation as a whole is 'frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation' (EG 215) and that desertification of the soil and extinction of species is a painful disfigurement and has invited all Christians to watch over and protect the fragile world following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi (EG 215).

Further his Encyclical *Laudato Si'* (LS) came as a pointed expression of his concern for creation and nature. First of all it must be said that this Encyclical is a timely response to the international situation when the countries of the world are discussing climate change and environmental protection. His calling the earth as 'common home' for human beings is very surprising, because here is a Pope who calls not the heaven but the earth which is usually considered as 'banished' in the Christian theology as common home. Of the twenty nine occurrences of the word "home" in this Encyclical, sixteen of them are used to call the earth as the common home of humanity. He rightly identifies that this common home

is falling into serious disrepair (LS 61) and it is the human beings who have “hurt and mistreated” the common home in the last two hundred years (LS 53). The Encyclical also attests to the discoveries of science and technology (LS 102-136), appreciates the efforts made by the international community to save the earth and calls for more serious and committed action (LS 164-198) and calls for a dialogue between religions and science (LS 199-201).

## **Through Identifying Family as the Nucleus**

The Pope has rightly and prophetically identified that the future of the Church lies actually in the ‘family’ the most fundamental unit of the society where the making or the breaking of the society begins and ends. Realizing its importance for the Church he decided to call a synod on family this time using a new method of first consulting the local Churches followed by a discussion among the Cardinals on the results of the consultation and then a first synod (in October 2014) to formulate the questions and another one (in October 2015) to vote on concrete proposals. His aim in the synods has not been to change the doctrines of the Church on the sacraments or indissolubility of marriage but find ways of integrating those alienated from Church life due to some tragic personal situations.<sup>46</sup> The Church has the responsibility, in his opinion, ‘not to lose the saved’ and ‘to save the lost.’

The post-synodal document ‘*Amoris Laetitia*’ *On Love in the Family*, moves in the direction of caring for the alienated ones, especially in chapter eight which actually addresses the concern the Pope had before the council, namely, integrating those who are alienated from the Church. The chapter begins by articulating the desire of the Church to show mercy and to help those who are struggling to live according to God’s plan for marriage and family because of moral weakness (AL 291). The pastors must lead those living without proper marriages to live according to the Gospel and motivate them to live according to the law helped by grace (AL 293-295). Following Jesus the Church must show mercy (AL 296) by first understanding those who are into ‘irregular’ scenarios (AL 298) and then discerning ways of integrating the “divorced and civilly remarried” into the community, without compromising the faith or

causing scandal (AL 299). Instead of condemning people based on general laws, pastors should seek to bring those people out of their disordered state regardless of their culpability (AL 305).

## Through Remaining Open

Another important concern the Pope has is to relate with other denominations and religions. Speaking to the leaders of the Protestant Salvation Army he mentioned to them that he learned the spirit of ecumenism from his grandmother way back in 1940 when she commented about two Salvation Army women walking on the other side of the road saying, ‘they are good Protestants!’<sup>47</sup> The joint-declaration “From Conflict to Communion” made by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) to commemorate the 500 years of Reformation, is a significant milestone in the ecumenical history of the Church. This document calls for mutual positive appraisal of the Reformation movement and the Catholic response and engages itself in the theological discussion instead of a political conflict to promote further encounter among the Christians.

Pope Francis is also emerging as a model of dialogue both in word and deed.<sup>48</sup> The Pope looks at truth and love as intimately related and as caught up in the dynamism of life, relationships and history rather than in abstract speculation.<sup>49</sup> Such a perception of reality could help as a common platform for a dialogue with other religions.

The insightful perceptions of Pope Francis can be summarized in his six foundational commitments as formulated by Chris Lowney: Know yourself deeply, live to serve others, immerse yourself in the world, withdraw from the world daily, live in the present and revere tradition and create the future.<sup>50</sup> As he himself mentioned in his homily on the inauguration of his ministry as the Bishop of Rome, every leader must follow the example of Joseph in exercising the role of the protector “discreetly, humbly and silently, but with an unfailing presence and utter fidelity, even when he finds it hard to understand” and “By being constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God’s presence and receptive to God’s plans, which calls for



... “a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love.”<sup>51</sup> According to him “authentic power is service, and that the Pope too, when exercising power, must enter ever more fully into that service ... and must open his arms to protect ... the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). Only those who serve with love are able to protect!”<sup>52</sup>

## Through Unassuming Attitude towards Others

Pope Francis is a person who approaches other human beings in an unassuming manner. This was evident already when he, as twenty eight years old young priest at Immaculate Conception College in Buenos Aires, went out of his way to help the young boys to form a musical band because they wanted. His desire to bring human beings together finds its expression in his address to the Jesuits on 24 October 2016 calling for “harmonizing the tensions brought about by the diversity of men.”<sup>53</sup>

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One of the main accusations made against Pope Francis is that he behaved in a conservative and authoritarian way when he was the provincial superior of the Argentinian Jesuits when he had banned guitar-songs, insisted on clerical dress and discouraged the Jesuits from learning subjects like politics, sociology and engineering in order to prevent them from becoming involved in political activities. He is also accused of not having protected the Jesuits Francesco Jalics and Orlando Yorio who were among the kidnapped during the military regime.<sup>54</sup> It was even said that Bergoglio even gave ‘green light’ to arrest them.<sup>55</sup>

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When we consider all this, it appears today odd to imagine that such an unassuming Pope was so authoritarian then. However, one should consider the context in which all this happened. It was a situation of a deep economic crisis in Argentine<sup>56</sup> which led the country into a military dictatorship that ruthlessly killed even priests and nuns. It was in this context that the then Jesuit provincial warned the two above mentioned Jesuits to leave *Bajo Flores* where they were working for the poor. When they refused to comply with his instruction, thereby also defying the obedience vow of the Jesuits,

he withdrew their religious license in order save their life from the military dictatorship. Evidently, the two Jesuits refused to obey because of their 'preferential option for the poor' as one of the serious follow-up actions of the then much acclaimed 'liberation theology.'<sup>57</sup> One can understand that the efforts of the provincial only helped to prevent victimization of the Jesuits by the then military regime. Later on one of the two Jesuits Francesco Jalics clarified a statement saying, "The fact is: Orlando Yorio and I were not denounced by Father Begoglio."<sup>58</sup>

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The Pope's unassuming attitude towards life becomes vivid from a few instances such as celebrating his first mass as Pope in a surplice and greeting the congregation one by one as they came out, kissing the Argentinian President Cristina Kirchner thereby abandoning the tradition that popes never kiss or receive kisses, rejoicing at a small boy taking over his Papal seat on an occasion, washing and kissing the feet of prisoners on Maundy Thursday and hugging and kissing the face of a disfigured poor man the photo of which went viral in the social media. These and many other things which he does express the joy he finds in accepting and relating to the underprivileged and the unfortunate people.

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## **Through Simple, Direct and Distinct Language**

About himself the Pope has said that he is a sinner upon whom the Lord has looked. About the Church he says that it 'is a field hospital after battle.' About following the principle of collegiality and moving towards a synodal Church he says, "Periphery shapes the centre."<sup>59</sup> He does not hesitate to name the difficulties of the Church such as 'functionalism' and 'clericalism.' 'Who am I to judge?' was his answer, when he was asked about his opinion on homosexuality. He is sensitive to the difficulties and challenges that people go through. He does not judge but understands their struggle.<sup>60</sup> One can make an endless list such concise but vivid statements made by the Pope which are examples of his direct and distinct language.

## **Conclusion**

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Prophetic character demands transparency and credibility. The

important question to be asked is: ‘Are the institutions of the Church transparent and credible?’<sup>61</sup> Through his life and ministry the Pope seems to direct the Church towards this goal of being transparent and credible. “Pope Francis’ courage coupled with humility and firmness offers great hope that he will lead the church like Jesus who was a great agent of change.”<sup>62</sup> The main reasons for this hope and positive energy which he instils in the hearts and minds of the poor as well as in all human beings of good will who dream of establishing the Kingdom of love, peace and justice which Jesus preached are the following: how proves his solidarity with the poor again and again, the pastoral concern he has for the people of God and which he attempts to instil into the hearts and minds of his fellow clergymen by asking them to move to the peripheries, the joy and happiness he discharges both in his faith life and in his relationship with fellow human beings and above all his conviction about God’s mercy and compassion which he tries to translate into everyday life. May all who see him also perceive his prophetic invitation and commit themselves to cause of God!

## Notes

- 1 It is not an unknown fact that four Cardinals wrote the so called ‘dubia’ a letter on 19 September 2016 to the Pope with five questions seeking clarification on the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and on 23 September 2017 a document “formal correction” to the alleged errors in the above said Exhortation has been published on blogs and online newspapers which accuse the Pope of seven heresies.
- 2 D J McCarthy, “Prophecy in the Bible,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* 11 (1967), 861.
- 3 Helmut Krämer, Profh,thj ktl., in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6, 784. The understanding of a prophet as one who “foretells” is usually derived from the practice of considering the Old Testament prophets as ‘foretellers’ of Jesus the Messiah. However, it must also be noted that such messianic proclamations are relatively few in number in the Old Testament. Cf. Erich Zenger, “Die Bücher der Prophetie,” in: Erich Zenger (ed.), *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohnhaller, 2008), 417.

- 4 Cf. Hatch Edwin, Redpath A Henry, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament Including the Apocryphal Books* (Grand Rapids – Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998), 1231-1233.
- 5 In the recent times the passive meaning is preferred to the active one. Cf. R Rendtorff, *aybn* in the Old Testament, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6, 796.
- 6 C Brown, *profh,thj*, in: *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 3 (1986), 77.
- 7 Cf. Ake Viberg, *Prophets in Action: An Analysis of Prophetic Symbolic Acts in the OT* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2007), 27-45. In this book we find a definition and a list of such prophetic symbolic acts.
- 8 Cf. Willem A. VanGemenen, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 63-66. On page 63 of this book the author is making a table comparing the characteristics of false and true prophets.
- 9 For more info on the origin and development of early Christian prophecy kindly see Ulrich Luz, “Stages if Early Christian Prophetism,” in *Prophets and Prophecy in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, ed. Joseph Verheyden et. al. (WUNT 2.286, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 57-75. Further see David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 189-232.
- 10 Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophets* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2000), 3-4.
- 11 Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophets*, 5-7.
- 12 Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophets*, 8-12.
- 13 We read in Jer 38:3 where the prophet prophesies saying that the city of Jerusalem will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, and he will capture it. Such prophecies were very much displeasing to the people and the kings who ruled over them.
- 14 Traditionally five such confessions are identified in the Book of Jeremiah: Jer 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-21 and 20:7-13. See Georg Fischer, Knut Backhaus, *Beten – Die Neue Echter Bibel Themen 14* (Würzburg: Echter, 2009), 41-42.

- 15 G.M. Soares Prabhu, "The Dharma of the Biblical Prophet," in Scaria Kuthirakkattel (ed), *Biblical Spirituality of Liberative Action: Collected Works of George M. Soares Prabhu*, vol 3, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Theological Series, Pune 2000, 110.
- 16 Dwight Longenecker, "Francis is a great prophet, but he also needs to be pope," accessed on 12.05.2017 from: <https://cruxnow.com/commentary/2016/12/08/francis-great-prophet-also-needs-pope/>.
- 17 Pope Francis interview by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Opens to God," in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, September 2013.
- 18 David Willey, *The Promise of Francis: the Man, the Pope and the Challenge of Change* (New York: Gallery Books, 2015), 23-50.
- 19 Radio Vatican Asia Newsletter, vol. 3, no. Spl 4, Sept 29, 2015
- 20 Pope Francis Address to the bishops of Brazil in Rio De Janeiro on July 27, 2013 (Zenit.org).
- 21 Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2013). All the subsequent references to *Evangelii Gaudium* is taken from this volume and will be referred to by the abbreviation EG with the respective number referred to.
- 22 Ibid, 135-136.
- 23 All subsequent references to this document are made to an on-line version of the document downloaded from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html) on 10.10.2017.
- 24 Pope Francis' homily at the Chrism Mass at Saint Peter's Basilica Holy Thursday, 8 March 2013 accessed on 12.10.2017 from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130328\\_messa-crismale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html)
- 25 The 'enemy of human nature' is the way Ignatius calls the force of evil in human beings in his Spiritual Exercises 140.
- 26 Pope Francis' Address to the Jesuits, in Asian Journal of Religious Studies, 62/1-2 (January-April 2017): 9-10.
- 27 From the Address of His Holiness Pope Francis on 24 October 2015 on the occasion of the Conclusion of the Family Synod, accessed on 15.08.2016, from: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151024\\_sinodo-conclusionione-lavori.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151024_sinodo-conclusionione-lavori.html).

- 28 Pope Francis' address to the coordinating committee of CELAM in Rio De Janeiro on 29 July 2013 (zenit.org).
- 29 Cf. Mario Escobar, *Francis: Man of Prayer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 165-167.
- 30 Paul Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 144.
- 31 Cf. Chris Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2013), 79-80.
- 32 David Willey, *The Promise of Francis*, 12.
- 33 Cf. Chris Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads*, 2.
- 34 Alphonse Arockiaswamy, *Decoding Pope Francis: the Man, the Pastor and the Missionary* (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2016), 43.
- 35 The statements of this sentence are taken from Chris Lowney who has collected them from different news agencies in Chris Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads*, 7.
- 36 David Willey, *The Promise of Francis*, 17-18.
- 37 Ibid, 73.
- 38 Cindy Wooden, "Go out now, share the Gospel, get messy, pope tells Quebec bishops," in *Crux. Taking the Catholic Pulse*, accessed on 12.05.2017 from: <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/05/12/go-now-share-gospel-get-messy-pope-tells-quebec-bishops/>.
- 39 Cristina Odone, "For the Sake of the Priesthood's Future, Catholics Need to Talk about Women Priests," *Daily Telegraph*, January 21, 2015.
- 40 David Willey, *The Promise of Francis*, 50-71.
- 41 Paulraj Mariapushpam, "God Who is Rich in Mercy (Eph 2:4): Mercy in the Bible," *Asian Journal of Religious Studies* 64/1 (July-August 2016), 18-20.
- 42 Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2013), 36.
- 43 This verse Gal 5:6 expresses, in my opinion, Paul's most complete understanding of religion, namely as 'faith working through love.'
- 44 Pope Francis' Address to the Jesuits, 11.
- 45 Pope Francis' Address to the Jesuits, 12.

- 46 Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 374-375.
- 47 Cf. David Willey, *The Promise of Francis*, 28-29.
- 48 Michael Amaladoss, "Pope Francis and Dialogue," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 79 (March, 2015), 165.
- 49 Ibid, 181.
- 50 Chris Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads*, 9-10.
- 51 "Homily of Pope Francis for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome," 19 March 2013 accessed on 11.10.2017 from [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130319\\_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html).
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Pope Francis' Address to the Jesuits, 7.
- 54 Cf. Mario I Aguilar, *Pope Francis: His Life and Thoughts* (Cambridge: The Luther Worth Press, 2014), 72-77.
- 55 Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 130.
- 56 Cf. Mario I Aguilar, *Pope Francis*, 63-65.
- 57 Cf. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, Maryknoll, 1971).
- 58 Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 130.
- 59 Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 374.
- 60 Michael Amaladoss, "Pope Francis and Dialogue," 166.
- 61 Michael Amaladoss, "Is Prophecy Still Alive?: Institution and Charism in the Christian Community in India," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 69 (Feb – 2005), 94-96.
- 62 Arasakumar R, "Pope Francis An Agent of Change," *Indian Currents*, 22-28 April 2013, 41.

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