



# **The Human Approach of Pope Francis to Enable a Hu- mane Society**

**Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ**

*Dean, Faculty of Philosophy, Jnana-Deepa Vidyap-  
eeth, Pune 411014*

**Abstract:** In this article, which explores the human and compassionate approach of Pope Francis in order to create a humane society, the author focus first on four of his prophetic actions followed by four of his challenging messages. Then he analyses his life and message as a meaningful and even controversial way of making ourselves more human and humane. . In the messages and actions of Pope Francis, we discern someone who is passionately in love with the society and deeply and intimately care for others by building bridges and walking together. His inspiration for this is listening to the presence of God in everyone and everything (discernment). This enables him to welcome everyone both individually and as a society.

**Keywords:** Pope Francis, Compassion, Humane Society, Human Approach to Life.

## Introduction

How can we make social life more human and humane? How can we make our common life more communitarian, fulfilling and caring? One example of a person who has changed the social life of the world is Pope Francis in the last eight years. In this article, we shall first focus on four of his prophetic action followed by four of his challenging messages. Then we shall analyse his life and message as a meaningful and even controversial way of making ourselves more human and humane.

### Pope Francis' Prophetic Actions

It is in this context of the Church's openness to the world and the willingness to share its joys and joys, that we look at the work and words of Pope Francis. We limit ourselves only to three encounters.

#### *a. Mingling with Migrants at Lampedusa*

On July 8, 2013 just three months after his Papacy, Pope Francis celebrated mass on the tiny Sicilian island of Lampedusa on Monday to commemorate thousands of migrants who have died crossing the sea from North Africa, underlining his drive to put the poor at the heart of his papacy.<sup>1</sup>

The choice of Lampedusa for his first official trip outside Rome was highly symbolic for the pontiff, who said news reports of the deaths of desperate people trying to reach a better life that had been like “a thorn in the heart”.

Thousands of islanders waving caps and banners in the Vatican's yellow colors welcomed Francis at the fishing port

where he arrived aboard a coastguard vessel accompanied by a flotilla of fishing boats and cast a wreath into the water.

He spoke to young African migrants before celebrating mass in a sports field that served as a reception center for tens of thousands of mainly Muslim migrants who fled Arab Spring unrest in North Africa in 2011, greatly increasing an exodus that has gone on for years.

His trip came at the start of the summer months when the island, one of the main points of entry into the European Union and just 113 km from Tunisia, sees a steady flow of rickety and unsafe boats arriving on its shores. He saluted the migrants, many of whom are preparing to fast during Ramadan, and thanked the people of Lampedusa for taking them in and setting an example of solidarity to a selfish society sliding into “the globalisation of indifference”.

“We have become used to other people’s suffering, it doesn’t concern us, it doesn’t interest us, it’s none of our business!” he said during his homily from an altar built from an old fishing boat painted in Italy’s red, green and white colors.

He had harsh words for people smugglers who he said profited from the misery of others as well and asked pardon for “those, whose decisions at a global level have created the conditions which have led us to this drama”.<sup>2</sup> During the mass he used a wooden chalice carved from the wood of a migrant vessel by a local carpenter.

### ***b. Embracing Man with Neurofibromatosis***

Pope Francis embraced several people with severe skin disorders in Vatican City on November 7, 2013,

and photos of him kissing the head of a disfigured man with neurofibromatosis have gone viral.

Many say the present Pope is a pope of the people and truly manifests Christian ideology of treating people with equality, taking to the streets to help the poor, and reaching out to stigmatised members of society. *The Washington Post* called his embrace of the neurofibromatosis victim as “the image worth a thousand words.”

Neurofibromatosis is a rare genetic disorder that causes tumours — usually benign — to grow from the ends of nerves, and can cause severe disfiguration. Sometimes, the tumours can become cancerous, according to the National Institutes of Health. It can be both a physically and emotionally devastating disease.<sup>3</sup>

Some people said that Pope Francis is living up to the ideals of his namesake, Francis of Assisi, a preeminent figure who considered himself a servant to the poor and destitute.<sup>4</sup>

### ***c. Meeting with World Leaders and Scientists***

In this spirit of humility and dialogue, the Pope has been meeting many world leaders, including Obama, Trump, Trudeau, Merkel and Putin. Some of the eminent scientists he met are Stephen Hawking and Mark Zuckerberg. Here I shall be focussing on two meetings the Pope had with scientists.<sup>5</sup>

On May 27, 2019 the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and United Nations Initiative, SDSN, hosted a meeting between Pope Francis, Climate Scientists, and more than twenty Finance Ministers to discuss the Sustainable

Development Goals and climate change. In line with Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si': Care for our Common Home*, the objective of the meeting was for climate experts and finance ministers to discuss new data and enhance awareness on climate change and sustainable development. The meeting specifically focused on the role of innovative climate financing as a critical next step to realise the Paris Agreement.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of the launch of the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action, co-chaired by Chile and Finland, discussions which took place during this meeting provided additional perspectives for Finance Ministers to consider in their efforts to strengthen collective action on the matter. More specifically, the Coalition recently endorsed the Helsinki Principles, a set of six common principles that foster climate action, especially through the use of fiscal policy. Leading up to COP25 that will take place in Chile this December, discussions supported work geared towards the Santiago Action Plan, a set of concrete actions that will be taken to make tangible progress to tackle climate change.

In an earlier address to Pontifical Academy of Science, Pope Francis acknowledged that the scientific world is more aware of how complex the world and human beings are. He noted that this has led science to be less isolated and more open to spiritual and religious values. "Commonly shared opinions" and the "desire for happiness" often influence scientific research, the Pope added. Therefore, the relationship between values and people, society and science "demands a rethinking" that promotes the "integral advancement" of each person and the common good. As a part of society, the scientific community is called to serve humanity and its integral development, the Pope said.<sup>7</sup>

Some areas Pope Francis named as “possible fruits” of that service of sciences are: climate change, nuclear arms, fossil fuels, and deforestation. Science has identified the risks in these areas, the Pope said, so they can also propose convincing solutions to the world’s leaders.

#### ***d. Apologising Genuinely***

Outside St. Peter’s Basilica on New Year’s Eve, 2020, we can see how the woman who held Pope’s hands forgot herself and why the Pope reacted so strongly. He was walking down the rope line, stopping to shake hands with the cheering throng. Then the woman crosses herself and folds her hands, as if in prayer, as the Pope draws closer. She stares intently, but he turned away. She reaches out and grabs him, with one hand, then another. She yanks him backward and will not let go. The Pope slaps her hand — twice He turns away, angry and sullen.

“Love makes us patient,” the Pope said the next day, moving away from his scripted homily. “So many times we lose our patience. Me too, and I apologise for yesterday’s bad example.”<sup>8</sup> At the dawn of a new decade, we live in a world on edge, understandably so. Every politician, every monarch, every pontiff who ventures onto a rope line understands that risks lurk — crazy people intent on doing harm, but also overzealous, overexcited fans. And those are just the uncertainties we can imagine.

There have been other moments when overexuberant fans tested papal composure. On a trip to Mexico in 2016, a fan grabbed the Pope’s robe, causing him to stumble onto a child in a wheelchair. “No seas egoista,” the Pope shouted at the fan. “Don’t be selfish.”

The Pope's apology came quickly and without condition. Rather than explaining himself or suggesting that responsibility was shared, which it surely was, his statement was powerful in its simplicity: "I apologise for yesterday's bad example." It is tempting to fantasise about such words emanating from the mouth of a spouse, a sibling, maybe a colleague or a companion.

He further made up for this act by kissing an elderly nun.<sup>9</sup> He had a light-hearted reaction more typical of his papacy on Wednesday, January 8, 2020, when a nun asked him for a kiss. He said yes, although only after she promised not to bite him. The good-natured exchange took place at the start of Francis' weekly general audience. As he was walking into the large hall where thousands of people were waiting, an excited nun asked if he would kiss her, shouting in Italian "Bacio, Papa!" (A kiss, Pope!)

Francis responded: "Oh, (but) you bite!", prompting laughter from the people near them. Then Francis joked: "Stay calm! I will give you a kiss but you stay calm. Don't bite!" The diminutive nun promised, saying "Si" (Yes). He then kissed her on the right cheek, leaving her even more ecstatic than before. She jumped up and down shouted "Grazie, Papa". (Thank you, Pope).

## **His Challenging Messages**

After having seen some of his inspiring actions, we look at some of his messages. We limit to four due to paucity of time.

### ***a. Amazon Synod: Concluding Speech: Four-fold Dimensions***

At the end of Amazon Synod (Oct 6-27, 2019), Pope speaks of the four dimensions of Christian life.<sup>10</sup>

Firstly, the cultural dimension: we worked on it; we spoke about inculturation, about the promotion of culture, and all this very animatedly, that it is within the Church's tradition. Inculturation: the Puebla Conference to name the nearest one, had opened that door.

Secondly, the ecological dimension. Here he pays tribute to one of the pioneers of this awareness within the Church, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. He was one of the first to pave the way to create this conscience. And many followed him, and with that concern, and always with the exponential acceleration of the Paris team; and then other encounters followed. This is how *Laudato Si'* was conceived; as an inspiration on which many people worked, on which many scientists, theologians and pastoral workers worked. Thus this ecological awareness advances and today denounces a path of compulsive exploitation, destruction, of which the Amazon is one of the most important aspects. For Pope Francis it is a symbol. This ecological dimension on which our future depends is very crucial for us. In the demonstrations by young people, in Greta's movement and that of others, several people held up a placard that read: "The future is ours", that is, "you do not decide our future". "It is ours!". In this, there is already the awareness of ecological peril, obviously not only in the Amazon but also in other places: the Congo is another one, other sectors; in my country, in the Chaco, there is the "Impenetrable" zone which is small, but in some way, we too know the problem.



Alongside the ecological dimension, there is the social dimension, which is no longer just all creation, Creation that is savagely exploited, but also people. And in the Amazon all kinds of injustices appear: the destruction of people, the exploitation of people at every level and the destruction of cultural identity. He recalls arriving in Puerto Maldonado at the airport there was a poster with the image of a very beautiful girl with the words: “Defend yourself and beware of trafficking. That is, this is the warning to the arriving tourist. Trafficking listens and trafficking at the highest level of corruption of people at every level. And this, together with the destruction of cultural identity, which is another phenomenon that you have singled out very well in the Document.

It is the fourth dimension which includes them all the pastoral dimension, the Announcement of the Gospel is urgent; it is urgent. But that it be heard, that it be assimilated, that it be understood by those cultures. There have already been discussions about the laity, priests, permanent deacons, men and women religious, on whom to rely in this field. And there has been talk of what they do and how to strengthen this. There has been talk of new ministries inspired by Paul VI’s *Ministeria Quaedam*, of creativity in this. Creativity in the new ministries and seeing how far one can go. There was talk of indigenous seminarians, and with great intensity.

One issue of the pastoral dimension was women. Obviously, women: what the Document says is “not enough”; what is woman, right? In transmitting the faith, in preserving culture. Pope Francis underscore this: that we have not yet understood what the woman signifies in the Church and we limit ourselves only to the functional aspect which is important and must be in the councils ... or in all that was

said. But the role of women in the Church goes well beyond functionality. And more work must continue on this. Well beyond.

He concludes the messages rather prophetically.

There is always an “elite” group of Christians which likes to interfere in this type of diagnosis, as if it were universal; in the smaller ones or in that type of resolution that is more intra-ecclesiastic discipline, I am not saying inter-ecclesial, intra-ecclesiastic, and to say that this section has won over that section. No, we have all won with the diagnoses that we have made and how far we have come in the pastoral and intra-ecclesiastic issues. But one does not close oneself in on this. Thinking today about these Catholics and at times Christian “elites”, but above all Catholics who want to go to “the small” [picture] and forget the “big” [picture], a verse from Péguy came to mind and I went to look for it. I will try to translate it well. I think it can help us, when it describes these groups who want the “small thing” and forget the “thing”: Because they do not belong to someone else, they think they belong to God. Because they love no one else, they think that they love God. I am very pleased that we did not fall prey to these selective groups that, concerning the Synod, just want to see what was decided on this or that intra-ecclesiastic point and they deny the *corpus* of the Synod which consists in the diagnoses that we have carried out in the four dimensions.<sup>11</sup>

### ***b. To the Seminarians: Four-Fold Closeness***

What is a seminary? Pope Francis sums up his answer on December 9, 2019: “It is a *house of prayer, a house of study, a house of communion.*”

The Holy Father’s remarks came when he received in audience the Community of the Pontifical Benedict XV Flaminian Regional Seminary of Bologna, on the occasion of the centenary of its founding.

“You are called to be evangelizers in your Region, which is also marked by de-Christianization,” Pope Francis said. “Those who are more exposed to the cold wind of uncertainty or religious indifference need to find in the person of the priest that strong faith which is like a torch in the night and like a rock to which they can attach themselves.”

In addition to prayer, study, and communion, the Pope presented what he called four “neighborhood” or “attitudes of closeness” of diocesan priests:

1. To be close to God in prayer, which begins with the seminary.
2. To be close to the bishop, always close to the bishop: without the bishop, the Church does not work, without the bishop the priest can be a leader but he will not be a priest.
3. The third form of closeness: being close to the presbytery, among yourselves. This is something that makes the Pope suffer when he sees fragmented presbyteries, where they are against one another, or all courteous but then they speak badly of each other.
4. And the fourth closeness: closeness to the people of God. This is to remember where the seminarians came from.

In his concluding remarks, Francis calls on Mary. “Mary shines in the Church for her singular vocation, lived following her Son, in humble and courageous obedience to God’s plan. May she who was always united to Jesus from conception up to His death on the cross, help you discover every day the ‘treasure’ the precious pearl’ that is Christ

and His Kingdom, and to become joyful proclaimers of His Gospel.”

To elaborate on the third dimension: the seminary as a *house of communion*. This aspect too is “transversal”, like the other two. It starts from a human basis of openness to others, of a capacity for listening and dialogue, and is called to take the form of priestly communion around the bishop and under his guidance. The priest’s pastoral charity cannot be credible unless it is preceded and accompanied by fraternity, first among seminarians and then among priests. A fraternity increasingly imbued with the apostolic form and enriched by the characteristics proper to the diocese, that is, by those particular characteristics of the people of God and of the saints, especially the holy priests, of a particular Church.

In this context, the seminary is qualified as a path that educates candidates to evaluate all their actions with reference to Christ and to consider belonging to the one presbytery as a prior dimension of pastoral activity and a witness of communion, indispensable for effectively serving the mystery of the Church and her mission in the world.

Here I would like to stop for a moment to summarise the four “neighborhoods”, the four attitudes of closeness of diocesan priests. To be close to God in prayer, I said, begins with the seminary. To be close to the bishop, always close to the bishop: without the bishop, the Church does not work, without the bishop the priest can be a leader but he will not be a priest. The third form of closeness: being close to the presbytery, among yourselves. This is something that makes me suffer when I see fragmented presbyteries, where they are against one another, or all courteous but then they speak badly of each other. If there is not a united

presbytery... That does not mean that we cannot discuss, no, we discuss, we exchange ideas, but charity is the one that unites. And the fourth closeness: closeness to the people of God. Please do not forget where you came from. Paul said to Timothy: “Remember your mother and grandmother”, that is, your roots; remember that you were taken from the flock and you came because the Lord chose you. You did not come to make an ecclesiastical career, as once was said, in a literary style of other centuries. Proximity to God, closeness to the bishop, closeness to the presbytery, among you, and closeness to the people of God. If one of these is missing, the priest will not work and will slowly slip into the perversion of clericalism or attitudes of rigidity. Where there is clericalism there is corruption, and where there is rigidity, under rigidity, there are serious problems.

### ***c. Pope stresses on human, spiritual formation in the life of seminarians, priests***

During a relaxed and informal meeting with seminarians and student priests on May 16, 2018 Pope Francis answered questions on priestly life and formation.

Pope Francis on Friday told seminarians and priests studying in Rome to care for their ongoing human and spiritual formation while being always open to the Holy Spirit. The seminarians and student priests who come from around the world for ecclesiastical studies reside in the pontifical colleges or ecclesiastical seminaries.

The relaxed question and answer session in which the Pope responded to 5 questions from the audience, was punctuated with jokes, laughter and cheer.

On the move together with others: Responding to a French seminarian who wanted to know about how a priest

could be a humble disciple and missionary at the same time, the Pope said that a priest must be a man who is on the move, who listens and who is never alone. He must be humble enough to be accompanied.

Importance of discernment: To a question from a Sudanese seminarian about how to keep discerning one's vocation even after ordination, the Pope underscored the importance of discernment saying it helps us to go ahead by making us understand what is right and what is not.

For an effective discernment, the Holy Father said one needs to do it before God in prayer, and secondly one needs a spiritual guide who will offer him guidelines. Without discernment, the Pope said, a priest's life stalls, becoming rigid and legalistic. One closes oneself to the Holy Spirit, who actually should be our companion on our journey. It's no use being good and live as if the Holy Spirit did not exist.

Human formation: To a question from a Latin American on how to maintain a healthy balance, the Pope underscored the importance of human formation. One needs to be a normal human person, capable of enjoying others' company, laughing and listening to a sick person or consoling him with a caress. A priest has to be a father and be fruitful, giving life to others. A priest, he warned is not an official of the sacred or an employee of God.

The diocesan priest: A US deacon asked the Pope about the spiritual traits of a diocesan priest and how they are practised in daily pastoral work. In answer, the Pope used the expression "dioceseness", which he explained as caring to maintain a healthy relationship with the bishop, even if he were a difficult person, and also maintaining one's relationship with brother priests and parishioners.

Maintaining these three fronts, he said, will make you saints.<sup>12</sup>

#### ***d. Priestly Formation: Four Pillars***

In an earlier meeting with seminarians on, May 12 2014 at the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican, Pope Francis gave a special audience for seminarians and priests studying in Rome. There he elaborates on the four pillars in priestly formation: spiritual formation, academic formation, community formation and apostolic formation. He reminds the seminarians that in Rome emphasis is placed on intellectual formation; however, the other three pillars must be cultivated, and all four interact among themselves. He cannot understand a priest who comes to get a degree in Rome and does not have a community life. This is not all right. Either he is not taking care of his spiritual life — daily Mass, daily prayer, *lectio divina*, personal prayer with the Lord — or his apostolic life: on the weekend doing something, for a change of air, but also the apostolic air, doing something there.... It's true that study is an apostolic dimension; but it is important that the other three pillars are also looked after! Academic purism is not beneficial, definitely not! The Lord has called you to be priests, to be presbyters: this is the fundamental rule.<sup>13</sup>

Once, an old bishop from Latin America said: “The worst seminary is better than no seminary”. If one prepares for the priesthood alone, without a community, this is harmful. The life of the seminary, that is, community life, is very important. It is very important because there is sharing among brothers who are journeying towards the priesthood

He acknowledges that there are also problems, “there are battles: battles for power, battles over ideas, even hidden

struggles; and the capital vices arise: envy, jealousy.... And good things also arise: friendships, the exchange of ideas, and this is what is important for community life. Community life isn't paradise, it's at least purgatory – no, it's not that ..., but it's not paradise!" A Jesuit saint said that the greatest penance for him was community life. It's true, he admits. Therefore, he urges the seminarians go forward in community life.

There are two activities that helps the community life great deal. One: Never, never speak ill of others. "If I have something against another, or if I don't agree with him: I have to tell him to his face! But we clerics are tempted not to speak to another to his face, to be too diplomatic, that clerical language." However, it harms us, it harms us! He remembered, 22 years ago, when he had just been appointed bishop and in that vicariate he had as secretary, a young recently ordained priest. And in the first months, Francis did something, I took a somewhat diplomatic decision with the consequences that come from such decisions that are not taken in the Lord. And in the end, I said to the secretary: "See what a problem this is, I don't know how to put it in order...". And he looked at me in the face — a young man! — and he said to me: "Because you acted wrongly, you did not make a fatherly decision." He was very respectful, but he did say them to me. And then, when he left, he thought: "I will never remove him from the post of secretary: he is a true brother!" Instead, those who tell you lovely things to your face and then say not so lovely things behind your back... This is important... Gossip is the plague of the community; one must speak face to face, always. And if you do not have the courage to speak to someone's face, speak to the Superior or to the Director. And he will help you, but don't go to your companion's rooms and speak ill



of other. We, both men and women, gossip enough! And this destroys the community.

Regarding the second activity, Francis recalls another experience. When he was a student of philosophy; he met his spiritual father, who was a philosopher and a metaphysician. Francis went to him and the problem emerged that he was angry with someone: “But I’m angry with him because of this, this and this ...” He told the spiritual Father everything he felt. . And he asked me only one question: “Tell me, have you prayed for him?”. Nothing more. And Francis said: “No”. He was silent. “We’re done”, the spiritual father said to young Francis. To pray, to pray for all the members of the community, but to pray primarily for those with whom we have a problem, or for those whom we don’t love, because sometimes not loving a person is something natural, instinctive. Pray, and the Lord will do the rest. But always pray. Community prayer. With these two things, the community will move forward, you can live well, speak well, discuss well, pray well together. Two small things: do not speak ill of others and pray for those with whom you have a problem.

## **Humanising Social Life**

Based on the inspiring actions and messages, we can cull out four ways Pope Francis is attempting to humanise our society, radically and prophetically.

### ***a. Experiencing God’s Compassion and Mercy***

Speaking to nearly 600 Missionaries of Mercy on Tuesday, Pope Francis said that to be “collaborators of mercy” with the Lord, they must remember that they have been recipients of that mercy first.<sup>14</sup>

“We must always start from this fixed point: God treated me with mercy,” the Pope said. “This is the key to becoming God’s collaborators. One experiences mercy and turns into [a] minister of mercy.” “In short, the ministers do not place themselves above the others as if they were judges of the sinful brothers,” he continued.

“A true missionary of mercy is reflected in the experience of the Apostle: God has chosen me; God trusts me; God has put his trust in me by calling me, despite being a sinner, to be his collaborator to make it real, effective and let his mercy touch.”

In his message Pope Francis referred to the parable of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke, in particular, the part that reads, “While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.” He added: “God is not idle to wait for the sinner: he runs towards him, because the joy of seeing him come back is too great.”

“When we welcome the penitent, we need to look at him in the eye and listen to him to allow him to perceive the love of God who forgives in spite of everything, dresses him in the festive dress and the ring, a sign of belonging to his family.”

We know that to sin is to turn away from, or abandon God, he said. But there can also be moments that one might feel the opposite: the silence and abandonment of God.

If these moments are not viewed in a lens of love, “abandonment becomes meaningless and tragic, because it does not find hope.” That is why we must understand them

in the light of Golgotha and of Jesus' cry upon the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

"The God who loved the world to the point of giving his Son, to the point of abandoning him on the cross, he will never abandon anyone: his love will always be there, closer, bigger and more faithful than any abandonment." Once we experience God's mercy, we become humble and share it with others.

### ***b. Building Bridges and Not Walls***

In a related talk, Pope Francis urges young Catholics "to build bridges, not walls." In an apparent reference to Trump's border plans, the Pope said those who build walls are trying to "divide people and box them in."<sup>15</sup>

He made it clear that he wants young members of his flock to be the kind of people who build bridges.

"These builders of walls that sow fear are looking to divide people and box them in," the Pope said during the opening ceremony of World Youth Day in Panama City. "What do you want to be?" Francis asked the estimated 250,000 young people assembled for the rally.

"Builders of bridges," his audience replied. Francis also praised the youth for joining together for the rally, even though they come from diverse cultures and speak many different languages. During his flight to Central America, Francis responded to a reporter's question about the border wall by stating that the irrational fear of migration drives people "crazy."

He urged Central American church leaders, dioceses and parishes to help the rest of society overcome its fears about migration by welcoming migrants.

“The Church, by virtue of her universality, can provide the fraternal hospitality and acceptance that can enable the communities of origin and of destination to dialogue and to help overcome fears and suspicions, and thus to consolidate the very bonds that migrations — in the collective imagination — threaten to break,” Francis said.

Francis has made the plight of migrants and refugees one of the key issues of his papacy. In the past, he’s made many pronouncements on the morality of a border wall. “In the social and civil context as well, I appeal not to create walls but to build bridges.” Building bridges foster collaboration, acceptance and affirmation of the other, who are different from us!

### ***c. Caring for the Poor and Marginalised, Periphery***

Quite frequently, Pope Francis speaks of the need for all of us go to the peripheries, the margins. Take the Church (we are the Church) and be there among the people who are marginalised.<sup>16</sup> Why is Francis putting so much emphasis on our going out to the periphery?

If we listen to the Christmas Gospel, we find that’s exactly what God does, working through the angels at the birth of Jesus. Those shepherds were what we would call people on the margin; they were on the periphery.

Shepherds were almost like outcasts in the society where Jesus was born. They lived a rough and difficult life, spending their time in the countryside, sleeping outdoors,

but protecting their sheep. They were not well-educated; they were not wealthy and important people of any kind.

But those were the ones who received the first message that the Son of God had entered into human history, had become part of our human family. They were the first ones to receive that news. God sent the message about Jesus first of all to people on the margins, to the poor, the rejected.

So Francis is merely following up on the way God acted at the birth of Jesus. He sent out and found 12 homeless people to bring to the small hotel where he lives, and he shared breakfast with them, meeting each one, introducing himself, finding out who the person was, reaching out to those that are on edge, are marginalised — the poor who are so numerous in our world, even in our country, even in our city — everywhere we see them. Francis is simply following the direction that God gave when Jesus was born.

The Son of God entered into human history as helpless, homeless, poor — poorest of the poor. We hear in the Gospel that the angels told the shepherds, “You’ll find Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger,” and we make it look something like our crib scene over there. It was a cave, and in the front of that cave a small shelter was built so homeless people could stay in that shelter, but it was crowded. In the back of the shelter, in the cave, was where their animals stayed. So Mary and Joseph, when Mary was ready to give birth, went into the cave part among the animals.

The Son of God was born with nothing, totally poor. That’s almost impossible to believe that God would enter into our history in this way. But God, in Jesus, wanted to identify with those who are the poorest in our society so he could lift them up, proclaim good news to the poor.

If we are going to find Jesus in our world today, we must do what Pope Francis does. We must go to the periphery. We must take time to be with the poor. That's where we'll discover Jesus most of all. Among the poor and the most desperate poor in our world today are those who are refugees.

Thus Pope Francis wants to create an inclusive society where the poor, marginalised and disadvantaged are respected and cared for and thus treated as human beings.

#### ***d. The Synodal Church: Walking and Discerning Together***

Marking the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis outlined his vision for a church that is “synodal” at every level, with everyone listening to each other, learning from each other and taking responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

“The journey of synodality is the journey that God wants from his church in the third millennium,” the Pope said on October 17. “A synodal church is a listening church, aware that listening is more than hearing. It is a reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn.”

Francis, members of the Synod of Bishops on the family, theologians and other guests dedicated a morning to marking the anniversary of Blessed Paul VI's institution in 1965 of the synod as a forum for sharing the faith and concerns of the world's Catholics, reflecting together and offering counsel to the Pope.

Referring to the Greek roots of the word “synod,” Francis said, “walking together – laity, pastors, the bishop of Rome

– is an easy concept to express in words, but is not so easy to put into practice.”

Using the synod on the family as an example, the Pope said it would have been impossible for the 270 bishops and priests who are voting members of the assembly to speak to real needs and concerns without listening to and trying to learn from Catholic families.

“It was that conviction that led me when I asked that the people of God be consulted” before the synod, the Pope said. “How would it have been possible to speak of the family without calling upon families, listening to their joys and their hopes, their pains and their suffering?”

The need for everyone in the Church -- from the Pope on down -- to listen and to learn from others is based on the conviction, clearly explained by the Second Vatican Council, that through baptism and confirmation all members of the Church have been anointed by the Holy Spirit and that the entire Christian community is infallible when its members discern together and speak with one voice on matters of faith and morals, Francis said.

“The ‘*sensus fidei*’ (sense of faith) makes it impossible to rigidly separate the ‘*ecclesia docens*’ (teaching Church) and the ‘*ecclesia discens*’ (learning Church) because even the flock has a ‘nose’ for discerning the new paths that the Lord is opening up to the Church,” the Pope said.

But ensuring the synodality of the whole Church will be impossible, he said, if people misunderstand the Church’s hierarchy and see it as a structure in which some people are placed above others.

During his General Audience, the Pope reflected on an episode from the Acts of the Apostles. He recalled how, “In

the midst of the Sanhedrin, which feels threatened by the Apostolic preaching, a different voice is heard. The highly regarded doctor of the Law, Gamaliel, demonstrates the “art of discernment.” Filled with prophetic wisdom, he invites the leaders of the people not to give in to haste, but to wait for developments over time.”

The Pope said that this discernment is valuable for the Church, because “it invites us to be farsighted, to contemplate events and not to make hasty judgments. Discernment is an art that does not provide standardised solutions.” Further, he adds “Discernment is a choice of courage,” said the Pope. Discernment helps us to perceive God’s will in all our actions and helps us to accomplish it. It is for the good of all concerned.

## Conclusion

In the person of Pope Francis, we see someone who has been humanising the Church and society by reaching out to the periphery, embracing the marginalised and reaching out to the others in compassion. In his message and actions we see someone who is passionately in love with the society and deeply and intimately cares for others by building bridges and walking together. His inspiration for this is listening to the presence of God in everyone and everything (discernment). This enables him to welcome everyone both individually and as a society.

## Notes

1. Bianchi, Alessandro. 2013. “Pope Francis Commemorates Migrant Dead at Lampedusa.” *Reuters*, July 8, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-lampedusa-idUSBRE9660KH20130708>. The three incidents mentioned are taken from my earlier talk at Jnana-



- Deepa for the symposium on JDV-CCBI Symposium on “Towards Renewing Church and World: Revisiting Vatican Council II through the Eyes of Pope Francis” held on November 29-30, 2019.
2. Bianchi, Alessandro. 2013. “Pope Francis Commemorates Migrant Dead at Lampedusa.” *Reuters*, July 8, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-lampedusa-idUSBRE9660KH20130708>.
  3. Bushak, Lecia. 2013. “Pope Francis Comforts Man With Neurofibromatosis, Kisses Head Full Of Tumors.” *Medical Daily*. November 9, 2013. <https://www.medicaldaily.com/pope-francis-comforts-man-neurofibromatosis-kisses-head-full-tumors-262464>.
  4. Karimi, Faith. 2013. “Pope Francis’ Embrace of a Severely Disfigured Man Touches World.” *CNN*. November 7, 2013. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/11/07/world/europe/pope-francis-embrace/index.html>.
  5. Pandikattu, Kuruvila. *Pope Francis: His Impact on and Relevance for the Church and Society : Commemorating Five Years of His Papacy*. Pune: JDV, 2018.
  6. Crete, Elene. 2019. “A Special Address with the Pope: Climate Change and New Evidence from Science, Engineering, and Policy.” May 29, 2019. <http://unsdsn.org/news/2019/05/29/a-special-address-with-the-pope-climate-change-and-new-evidence-from-science-engineering-and-policy/>.
  7. Reis, Bernadette Mary. 2018. “Pope to PAS: Science Provides the ‘Charity of Knowledge’ - Vatican News.” November 12, 2018. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-11/pontifical-academy-science-pope-plenary.html>.
  8. Ruth Marcus, “Most of us are bad at apologizing. The pope just showed us how it’s done.” *The Washington Post*, Jan 3, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/most-of-us-are-bad-at-apologizing-the-pope-just-showed-us-how-its-done/2020/01/02/711aea90-2d99-11ea-bcb3-ac6482c4a92f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/most-of-us-are-bad-at-apologizing-the-pope-just-showed-us-how-its-done/2020/01/02/711aea90-2d99-11ea-bcb3-ac6482c4a92f_story.html)
  9. Pullella, Phillip. 2020. “After Slapping Incident, Pope Kisses Nun Who Vows Not to Bite.” *Reuters*, January 8, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-bite-idUSKBN1Z71TN>.
  10. Francis, Pope. 2019. “Closing of the Works of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region on the Theme: ‘Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology’ (26 October 2019) | Francis.” October 26, 2019. <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/october/>

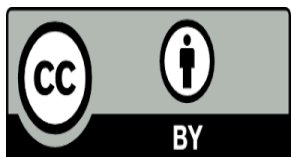
documents/papa-francesco\_20191026\_chiusura-sinodo.html.

11. Ibid.
12. Francis, Pope. 2018. "Pope Stresses on Human, Spiritual Formation in the Life of Seminarians, Priests - Vatican News." March 16, 2018. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-03/pope-francis-seminarians-student-priests-.html>.
13. Francis, Pope. 2014. "To Rectors and Students of the Pontifical Colleges and Residences of Rome (12 May 2014) | Francis." May 12, 2014. See [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140512\\_pontifici-collegi-convitti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140512_pontifici-collegi-convitti.html).
14. Brockhaus, Hannah. "Pope Francis: We Experience God's Mercy before We Share It." Catholic News Agency, April 10, 2018. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-we-experience-gods-mercy-before-we-share-it-19527>.
15. Kuruvilla, Carol. 2019. "Pope Francis Urges Young Catholics To Build Bridges, Not Walls." HuffPost India. January 26, 2019. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pope-francis-urges-young-catholics-to-build-bridges-not-walls\\_n\\_5c4b29d7e4b06ba6d3bc5e8a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pope-francis-urges-young-catholics-to-build-bridges-not-walls_n_5c4b29d7e4b06ba6d3bc5e8a).
16. Gumbleton, Thomas. 2016. "We Must Go to the Periphery -- That's What God Does." National Catholic Reporter. December 29, 2016. <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/we-must-go-periphery-thats-what-god-does>.
17. Wooden, Cindy. 2015. "Pope Calls for 'Synodal' Church That Listens, Learns, Shares Mission." National Catholic Reporter. October 17, 2015. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-calls-synodal-church-listens-learns-shares-mission>.

No of Words: 6943

Article Received: Nov 28, 2019

Article Accepted: Jan 23, 2020



© by the authors. *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*. This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).