Mission Shifts from Pope Benedict XVI to Pope Francis

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Pope Francis has been in office for a little over three years, and in that time his pontificate has been a big story on many fronts. Part of that story concerns the changes he is promoting in the area of mission. How is he advancing mission as it has been understood in Catholicism since Vatican II? What teachings in the area of mission is he promoting that are new and distinctive? In what new ways is he leading the church in mission? This paper seeks to address these questions.

To understand Francis’ influence on the topic of mission, it is necessary to begin with a few observations about the influence of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. Following this, I will outline the shifts in mission thinking that I see occurring under Francis.

I - Joseph Ratzinger’s / Benedict XVI’s Understanding of Mission

The thought of Benedict XVI has had a marked influence upon Catholic mission thought and practice as a result of the combined effect of his twenty-four years as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1981-2005) and eight years as pope (2005-2013). His numerous writings, speeches, and publications – both on the official and unofficial levels and both as CDF prefect and as pope – express a distinctive theological outlook and set of priorities which have had the effect of emphasizing certain aspects of mission and underemphasizing others. Some many argue that it has had the effect of diminishing mission overall.

What is this theological outlook? Benedict’s / Ratzinger’s theological outlook is marked by a strong church-world division which reflects a similar grace-nature division. Grace and salvation are predominantly seen by him as in the church but lacking in the “world” – a term which refers most to secular culture but more widely includes other religions and even other Christian denominations. The official “inclusivist” Catholic position, of course, is that grace and salvation are in the world as well as in other religions and other churches, but in a different manner or degree than in the Catholic church. Benedict would not deny this, but his attention is almost always focused on the dissimilarity between church and world and rarely if ever on the similarity, almost always on the grace in the church and the sin outside it, rarely if ever on the opposite. His is a particular approach to the Catholic teaching on grace and salvation. It is not technically exclusivist but it is on the exclusivist end of the inclusivist spectrum. His view of the church tends toward the idealistic and his view of the world tends toward the pessimistic.
This way of looking at church and world follows in part from Benedict’s way of understanding the relationship between nature and grace. His anthropology is Augustinian, emphasizing that human nature and activity are fallen and deeply marked by sin. Sin for him is essentially lack of faith – lack of a lived relationship of dependence upon God – and the assertion of independence from God; hatred, selfishness, injustice, and immorality in general follow from this. God’s overcoming of sin as lack of relation to God is God’s doing; we don’t contribute to our own salvation because our native human tendencies as a result of the fall tend to not have much goodness left in them. Benedict’s position is not one of total human depravity, for the Catholic tradition does affirm some goodness left in human nature and activity after the fall and some role for human cooperation with the divine in receiving salvation. But Benedict does not emphasize these much, and he can be critical of the strand of Catholicism that is optimistic about these human potentialities (for example, in Aquinas or Rahner). As a result, he tends to present salvation as a passive reception of God’s grace, and human activity apart from faith as mostly expressing sinful autonomy from God. Enter the church, acquire faith, and this situation can change.

The reception of grace alters one’s nature and one’s actions to more and more mirror God’s actions, one’s life more and more the life of Christ. But apart from grace, outside the church, this shouldn’t be so quickly affirmed, and Benedict never chooses to discuss the degree to which it can. So human action informed by faith has the power to reach the heights of love and goodness; human action uniformed by faith does not. It all comes down to the presence of absence of faith – a lived relationship with God, and the place to find this – or to find it fully – is in the church, or to be precise, in the Catholic church.

Benedict’s overall theological vision has significant consequences for his understanding of mission. Since the fundamental human problem as he sees it is sinfulness understood as lack of faith or relationship with God with all the problems of the world flowing from this basic problem, and since the existence of the church is God’s fundamental solution to this problem, mission for him is fundamentally about the continuance of the church in its authentic self, being in the world but not of the world. By extension, mission primarily is about inviting individuals to explicit faith in Christ, existence in the church, and access to the sacraments – in a word, to conversion. Proclamation thus becomes mission’s first order of business: “come out of the world and into the church, from the natural human state to the graced human state.”

The Catholic understanding of mission, however, includes other elements besides proclamation – dialogue, charity, and working for justice, for example. What place do these have in his thinking?
1) As for dialogue – with other religions, other churches, or the secular world – given Benedict’s emphasis on what is lacking in these contexts (grace, or the fullness of grace), he tends to see the value of dialogue mainly in its offering an opportunity for proclamation, religious truth-telling. Dialogue for purposes other than sharing the truth as one sees it has little value for him.

2) As for charitable activity, acts expressing love of neighbor – Benedict affirms the value of these in the strongest terms. They express the deepest nature of the church and are a responsibility of all the faithful. However, his promotion of these activities is overshadowed by his emphasis on proclamation, and he tends to speak of this missionary duty in a way that may not motivate very well. Christians should do these, he says, because such acts are expressive of the true, graced nature of Christian life. We do these to “be ourselves” and to witness to our deepest identity. This may certainly be true theologically, but it is not necessarily a framing of this duty in a way that stings the consciences of the faithful or enflames the moral imagination to action. Francis’ approach is much different.

3) Working for structural changes leading to greater justice, peace, and environmental stewardship – Benedict sees these as a subset of charitable activity. As in (2) above, he is affirmative of all these activities; the church (notably the lay faithful, not the hierarchy) must engage in them to express the church’s deepest identity. Benedict’s framing of these missionary responsibilities, though, tends to be undercut additionally by other elements of his thought.

- In promoting structural transformations, he insists on the point that our actions don’t contribute to or build the kingdom of God (in contrast to the views of various liberation theologians). A strict distinction should be made between the progress of history, which will always be fallen however much things may improve from time to time, and the coming of the kingdom, which is entirely God’s doing. God’s kingdom is certainly present incipiently in history now, but this is not as a result of human action, only of divine action. It is present whenever God is loved or whenever God’s love reaches us, both of which indicate the presence of faith. For the presence of the kingdom, in other words, look to the church. The most that improved social and material circumstances can provide for people is a better setting for salvation to be received, which is internal and individual.
• Benedict makes these points so strongly because he sees different forms of secular hope in the improvement of the world (e.g. Marxism) as expressing a sinful human hubris and independence from God – a kind of alternate faith to compete with genuine religious faith as dependence upon God. This concern is understandable, given the influence of Marxism and other philosophies of progress in the twentieth century (though the concern seems a bit dated today). However, Benedict’s arguments against these views end up emphasizing innate human sin, evil, and what we cannot change about history to such an extent that the wind is taken out of the sails of his call to missionary activism on these fronts. He so emphasizes what we can’t accomplish in the present or shouldn’t presume to accomplish in the long run in history, and he so sharply distinguishes social and material improvement from the growth of the kingdom, that it is easy to see Christian faith as necessitating a kind of hopelessness about history in his view, an extreme under-emphasis on what we humans might be able to accomplish, even with God’s help. His teachings as a result have been analyzed as giving space to those who would do nothing for the poor or to promote justice.

In sum, Benedict’s vision of mission tends to largely center on proclamation and conversion. It includes the other elements just mentioned, particularly charity (of which working for justice is a part). But these other elements seem to function in a mostly supportive role to the main task of communicating the faith in words. This stress on verbal communication was the essence of his “new evangelization” initiative, launched in 2012 and leading to the creation of a new Vatican department. It was an effort to awaken or increase the church’s practice of proclamation, particularly in the West, where many have fallen away from the Christian faith and where, in Benedict’s assessment, the gospel faces strong resistance from a variety of ideologies (secularism, scientism, relativism, etc.)

Apart from noting the stress he put on words, proclamation, and ideas overall in mission (fitting for a professor become pope), it is worth noting finally that Benedict’s overall thinking leads him to take a more defensive posture toward the world. The world is a threat to the church and preserving the church from it is perhaps his greatest concern. The best thing the church can offer the world is its own authenticity.
II – A Few Contrasts Between Benedict and Francis

In comparison to Benedict, Pope Francis has brought a new way of thinking about mission, new ideas and priorities, as well as new leadership. To set the stage for a discussion of these novelties, though without in any way attempting to be comprehensive, let me highlight three important and relevant areas of difference between them which lie at the root of the significant shifts in mission that are occurring under Francis.

First, Francis is much more a man of action than Benedict. Whereas Benedict is best viewed as a theologian-churchman who led most through careful custody of church teaching, Francis is best viewed as a bishop-pastor or mission administrator who leads most by example, service, and attention to actual church functioning and practice. A good deal of Francis’ teaching as a result is teaching that attends to, critiques, nurtures, and advances the actual living out of the faith in the church.

Second, I believe Francis sees the center of the Christian faith and practice differently than Benedict. For Benedict, the center of the church is unitary and it is Jesus Christ. The greatest possession of the church is faith – the lived experience of relationship to God leading to divinization, union with and conformity to Christ. Jesus established the church as the best means for humans to experience this vertical or mystical dimension of life, which overcomes sin. The church’s mission then is to preserve and pass on this treasure of new life in Christ.

Francis would certainly affirm this mystical and Christic center of the faith, but for him it is more binary than unitary. As a man of deep prayer and spirituality he sees transforming vertical relationship with God as non-negotiable and essential. But this transforming relationship for him necessarily extends into the horizontal dimension of relationship with others in the manner Christ related to others – it extends into love. There can be no thinking about the vertical apart from the horizontal. In fact, the measure of one’s growth and authenticity in the vertical dimension is the measure of one’s growth and authenticity in the horizontal. Christian action in love of others in imitation of Christ, in other words, is as significant and as central to the faith as drawing close to and being changed by God. They are two sides of the same coin. The one is God’s gift to us, the other is our gift to God and others in return. The one takes us to the resurrection and to the source of new life in Christ, the other to the ministry of Jesus and to the cross.
This difference between Benedict and Francis can be put in a few other ways. One way is in terms of dominant Christology – Benedict’s is definitely Johannine. The center of the faith is sharing in the life of Jesus, discovering this gift and passing it on; Jesus is the kingdom in person. To know Christ is salvation and life in the kingdom. Without denying this, Francis would add more Synoptic elements: Christian life includes following in the way of Christ, imitating him in his actions of love and compassion for all, especially the poor and the marginalized. Benedict’s Christ is mystically encountered in prayer. Francis’ is too, but Francis adds the Christ we also encounter in the poor and the suffering, which he calls “the suffering flesh of Christ.” A final way to put this is in terms of visible and invisible. Benedict’s Christ is invisible, the one encountered in prayer and liturgy. Francis’ is this, but in addition is also visible – the suffering of the earth. Our Christian calling is to be with Christ in both forms, according to him.

A third and final difference between these two popes. Francis attends to the realities of sin and grace in ways very different than Benedict. Instead of lopsidedly focusing on sin in the world and grace in the church in the stark dualism of Benedict who sought to highlight the supernatural distinctiveness of the church, Francis (a) sees and affirms the good outside the church where it is to be found, and (b) is unhesitating in exposing the depths of sin he sees as much in the church as in the world. For Francis, judgment of sin and grace comes down to discerning particular cases, whereas for Benedict the analysis of church and world operates on a level of abstraction from history and particular cases.

In terms of grace and nature, Francis’ anthropology is definitely more positive than Benedict’s. He is not Augustinian but stands more in the theological tradition of Aquinas and Rahner – humans, even in their fallen state, retain a notable capacity for the good. That doesn’t necessarily lead Francis to a more rosy assessment of the depth of sin in the world, but it does enhance his assessment of the possibilities for free human action. There is a lot of good that humans can do apart from faith, he believes, and therefore are responsible for doing. Francis thus speaks with a much louder voice to the world on moral issues than Benedict who harbored more pessimism about human change apart from faith. He more happily carries on Vatican II’s recognition of grace and the activity of the Spirit at work in the world than Benedict who read this inclusivist teaching perhaps in the most exclusive way he could.

These basic theological differences lead Francis to frame and advance mission in the Catholic church with a whole new kind of force and focus. In the final section of this paper, I will outline the major features of Francis’ rejuvenation of mission.
III – The Francis Shift

What new ideas and practices in the area of mission is Francis promoting? Now, over three years into Francis’ pontificate, there is quite an extensive and significant list of items to enumerate. But let me try to present them roughly in their order of importance, as I see them. I will make eight points.

First, Francis is reemphasizing Christian identity in the Catholic church fundamentally in terms of missionary identity. Vatican II taught that “the church is missionary by its very nature” (AG 2) and subsequent popes including Benedict have all affirmed this. However, in practice and in terms of the church’s day to day operating theology, this teaching has not been deeply encouraged and promoted. For two generations of Catholics have not been strongly raised to understand that they have a mission and church leadership in this time has often tended to stress the importance of participation in the sacramental life over participation in mission.

But Francis is challenging this. He has introduced a first in Catholic magisterial teaching – *a vivid portrait of the ideal missionary* to guide and challenge the church’s self-understanding. He has simultaneously said (1) that this is what the church as a whole should be and (2) what every baptized person is called to become. In other words, like every pope, he has a vision for the church as a whole, and his is a vision which is fundamentally missionary and which he pointedly insists must be lived out on the individual level. Francis is making the missionary the standard and ideal for all the baptized. We are all, in his words, “missionary disciples.” There is no being a disciple of Jesus without also being a missionary.

I will explore Francis’ vision of mission in more detail below, but let me just add a few more points detailing how, for him, this is a vision which applies to all the faithful and in a fundamentally equal way.

A great deal of Catholic magisterial teaching prior to Francis (one might say, all of it?) has made much of the distinctions between clergy and laity – bishops and priests have been seen to operate on one level and laity on the other, with religious men and women and deacons somewhere in between. Read Catholic magisterial documents and one often finds separate sections addressing these different groups in different ways. To an extent, certainly, there is a place for such distinctions since there are differences in ministry in the church. But notice how dwelling too much on these distinctions takes attention away from the fundamental identity and equality of all of the baptized. Francis seeks to bring us back to this basic equality. In his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he does something new. He
dispenses with addressing different groups and simply speaks of “pastoral workers” – a term broad and inclusive enough to encompass bishops, priests, religious, and lay people working in all their varied capacities. In many different speeches and addresses he also is clarifying what it means to be a priest, a bishop, or a cardinal essentially in terms of being a pastoral worker. The church is a church of pastoral workers, and priests, bishops, and cardinals are to be the models of service and pastoral activity par excellence, not something other than servants and pastoral workers, and certainly not little lords or princes. In this respect, Francis has spoken out intensely against clericalism – any sense of superiority clergy may feel over laity which would entitle them to assign special privileges to themselves, especially those which would bring them away from meaningful pastoral activity and outreach. No, Francis insists, every individual baptized person is called to be a missionary disciple in the church, especially the ordained, and no individual ordained person may see himself as dispensed from this obligation as a consequence of some supposedly higher function within the church. There is no higher function within the church than pastoral ministry and the pope himself has modelled this by keeping up as pope his pastoral outreach to different groups.

So – first – Francis is powerfully promoting the missionary identity of all the baptized and of the church as a whole. Now – second – what does this identity look like? What is his vivid portrait of the ideal missionary?

His description is striking. He calls Christians to tend the wounded of the world, to go to all the places of pain and isolation, exclusion and desperation humans find themselves in and bring hope, comfort, friendship, and the light of the gospel. His primary image of the church is of a field hospital after a battle and the gospel passages he cites most are Matthew 25 and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Individual Christians are called to communicate God’s compassionate care and mercy in a world which so often leaves the poor, the weak, and the wounded alone to fend for themselves and in many cases die.

This description of the missionary identity of the church is striking for several reasons.

a) It is focused. By comparison, as one reviews what has counted as missionary activity in Catholic teaching on mission since Vatican II, one sees an extensive and diffuse list – proclamation, catechesis, sacramentalization, inculturation, dialogue in various forms (ecumenical, interreligious, and with secular culture), charitable activity, and promotion of peace, justice, and the common good, etc. All these have been understood to form part of the church’s mission; moreover they are to be seen together and not separated from each other.
Now Francis is not at all doing away with this cohesive and interconnected list – he supports and advances every one of these individual activities as part of the church’s mission - but he does something quite unique, which is to raise up and highlight for the church as a whole the one kind of activity that every baptized person can take part in – person to person acts of mercy. Anyone can do this, even a child. In contrast, consider the difficulty of mission as promoted by Benedict in the form of the new evangelization, which highlights informed and skilled proclamation and directs people inwardly toward personal encounter with the invisible God. This is not an easy task for you’re average Christian. Many will find it too esoteric a task, because in a pluralist age speaking adequately and with conviction on faith in the context of the mysterious aspects of life is not easy. Not so Francis’ focus on the suffering and needy. This focus will certainly challenge one, but it doesn’t present immediately intellectual difficulties.

b) *It is focused on the poor, the vulnerable, and the needy,* in all the forms these states take – from the economically poor (such as the hungry, migrants, and the unemployed) and the physically poor (such as the elderly and the unborn), to the socially and spiritually poor (slaves and trafficked human beings, criminals and those in prison, the lonely and forgotten). This emphasis on helping those in need is known in Catholic social teaching as “the option for the poor,” and together with “solidarity” (identification with, personal relationship with, and assistance to vulnerable groups and individuals) - Francis is promoting it as a basic mark or criterion of the life of every baptized Christian, every missionary disciple. Here we see Francis presenting mission as an encounter with “the suffering flesh of Christ” in the world.

c) *It restores authenticity to the church’s proclamation.* A person’s words always signify in the context of their actions, and the same is true of institutions – churches. At first blush Francis’ action or witness-focused paradigm of church mission may appear to underserve or detract from energy spent on proclamation, but in fact the opposite is true. According to Francis, the church’s efforts at proclamation and passing on the faith are currently lagging because of a lack of authenticity in the realm of action. The church on the whole, and too many Catholics individually – including priests, bishops, and other church leaders – aren’t walking the talk, and so they send a powerful contrary message about the meaning of being Christian. Francis would like to turn that around to give significance to the church’s proclamation, and his ideal missionary identity is the means.
Having described Francis’ rooting of Christian identity in mission (first), and having examined his core conception of what that identity looks like (second), let’s now move on to consider several additional aspects of his thought on mission. I will consider in turn the topics of proclamation, the gospel, sinfulness within the church, sinfulness outside the church, dialogue, and finally conversion.

Third, and speaking of proclamation, Francis is promoting a return to the kerygma in all aspects of the church’s self-communication. This necessarily includes both words and actions. The field-hospital plan described above covers the action part of this self-communication: Francis wants the church to so consistently reach out to the wounded of the world that people will know without a doubt that Christianity most stands for the compassionate love and mercy of God, which reaches out to and assists all humans in their travail.

He wants the same focused message to ring out loud and clear in the church’s verbal communication of its message. In this respect he has made clear that prior exercises of proclamation, in his view, have in many cases been wanting. Church leaders and Christians in general have emphasized things other than the kerygma and thus obscured the gospel, likely unintentionally. He especially singles out the church’s moral and sexual teachings which have often been stressed to the point where the church becomes more known for what it is against than what it is for. Here in this country, for example, one thinks of the US Catholic bishops’ strident and vocal opposition to abortion, contraception, and gay marriage which were trumpeted to such a degree that, in the words of one of my teachers, “the good news of Jesus Christ got turned into the bad news about sex.”

This transformation of the way the church proclaims its message isn’t about changing doctrine or adopting more liberal positions on various issues. Church teaching remains the same. Rather, it is about emphasizing primary things (the kerygma) most and communicating secondary and tertiary church teachings in proportion to their relative importance within the whole body of the church’s message, and with sensitivity to how the church’s overall message is being perceived by outsiders. This involves a political or public relations kind of awareness – a sensitivity to and care for how one is being perceived and an associated self-discipline over one’s intended public communications, so that what the church most stands for is most frequently communicated, and not something else.

Fourth – But what then is the good news, the kerygma, or the gospel, according to Pope Francis, and does it allow any room for prophetic critique?

Alongside his depiction of the paradigm missionary activity of the church (a field hospital tending the wounded of the world), Francis also provides a clear statement of what he believes the fundamental message of the church is (as well
as should be in its public expressions). The key ideas are mercy and justice for the poor. “The name of God is mercy” as the title of a book-length interview with him expresses. God offers to each of us the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation. No matter how gravely we have sinned, God passionately desires to forgive us and to fill us with his love. He comes out to meet us in love. Like the father of the prodigal son, he waits for us.

Sin also exists socially, though, in vast networks that oppress and harm human beings. In his mercy and outreach to the world, God therefore also passionately desires the transformation of sinful human structures and the establishment of true justice and peace on earth. The proclamation of the gospel as “good news for the poor” thus implies a strong critique of all those forms of bondage which hold humans hostage – sinful structures of privilege and exploitation and indifference. We receive God’s mercy fully in our own lives to the extent that we are drawn into the works of mercy which express God’s passionate outreach to the world in love. And to the extent that we are indifferent or uninvolved in works of mercy, or worse, complicit in structures of injustice, we have not yet fully received the mercy of God. This is a point Francis makes by speaking of Christian life as involving two kinds of encounter or two forms of transcendence beyond the self: (1) the transcendence into encountering God in prayer and (2) the transcendence of outreach and encounter with others.

This brings us– five – to what ails us, or how Pope Francis conceives of sinfulness within the church – that which disfigures and undermines our deepest identity. Characteristically, he describes sin in the church as fundamentally anti-missional in nature and structure. The core sin he speaks of is an ecclesial self-centeredness which locks individual Christians and the church as a whole into a selfreferential way of being. What is left out, in either case, are other people and the poor. The church’s core problem, in other words, is that it doesn’t “go out” to encounter and serve others, and part of the cause of this is its failure to encounter God in prayer, who always calls us out of ourselves. The church, in his estimation, is like a closed room, whose air has become stale and lifeless. Or, to provide another image, the church is no longer existing before God as “the mystery of the moon.” It is not reflecting the light of the sun, God’s divine mercy. This is a very concrete assessment of the church, quite unlike Benedict’s idealistic way of reflecting on it. Once again, Benedict focused on the invisible, supernatural dimension of the church as the place of grace. Without denying this, Francis turns to the visible, concrete human dimension and calls us out for failing to live the mission.

Francis’ internal critique of the church is extensive, unrelenting, and quite unlike anything the Catholic church has heard in modern times. Anyone who reads paragraphs 76-109 of Evangelii Gaudium on the “Temptations Faced by Pastoral Workers” or his 2014 and 2015 “Christmas Greetings” to the Roman Curia will be amazed at the breadth and intensity of his criticisms. Every church
worker, in his view, should aspire to embody the missionary ideal. Instead, however, one sees far too much self-concern, careerism, disengagement from the church’s evangelizing mission, and joyless pragmatism – an anxious and narcissistic tomb psychology and a sterile pessimism. Even worse, one sees in-fighting, rancor, and profound perversions of Christian spirituality which boil down to spiritual elitism and condemnation of others. The gospel cannot be communicated when this characterizes so many of us. The church itself must be converted before there is to be any new chapter of evangelization in its history.

Several observations are in order here regarding Francis’ internal critique of the church.

(a) Once again, it is a critique that challenges everyone in the church to live up to an identical missionary ideal assigned to all the baptized. Cardinals, bishops, and priests are not measured by a different standard. Rather, they are measured more intensely and severely given their greater responsibilities. Connecting back to the first point made – that mission is everyone’s responsibility – Francis also seems to be implicitly critiquing a kind of “parlour general” mentality on the part of clergy. A bishop or priest isn’t doing his missionary duty just when he is calling the shots. He needs to be a foot soldier on the ground who also interacts with people and gets his hands dirty. Francis clearly does this as pope, sending a message to other bishops.

(b) Given the importance and necessity of a continuing internal critique for the sake of the church’s mission, one wonders whether Francis has inaugurated a new form of missionary activity analogous to inculturation, interreligious dialogue, or service to the common good of society. This would be a specifically internal intra-ecclesial form of mission centered on drawing the church and individual Christians back into the mission of God.

Six – and sticking with the topic of sinfulness – this brings us to the question of how Francis addresses sinfulness outside of the church, in individuals, cultures, and in social structures.

Francis here is nuanced. On the one hand, he is unrelenting in his prophetic denunciation of larger cultural trends which foster violence, injustice, and disregard for human life. He thus speaks often of the evils of consumerism, of a global economy that disregards human beings (creating vast unemployment and exclusion of many from the necessities of life), of war, and of the trade in arms, drugs, and human persons, among many other issues. In speaking of larger sinful social structures, he pulls no punches.
In regards to sin in the lives of individual human beings, though, he tends to take a very different approach. Except in the worst cases of human corruption (drug lords, the mafia, traffickers, certain kinds of church leaders – and here he addresses classes of people, not individuals) he strictly avoids condemnation. Rather, as noted above, he emphasizes the mercy of God and asks that the church “accompany” people – meet them where they are at in their spiritual journeys and love them like a mother. This point applies to proclamation as well – the key is to communicate what is most essential of the gospel – God’s infinite love – to an extent and in a measure that the particular person hearing it can positively understand and assimilate it given their specific history and current capacity for change. This requires of the witnessing Christian care, discernment, and an understanding that God deals patiently with all of us as sinners. The opposite of this is an approach that hurls stones and condemns people for sins – whatever they may be. This Francis sees as a betrayal of mission and a distortion of the gospel, a Pharisaic elevation of rules over the mercy of God and the dignity of the individual. This approach, along with point three above on the need to focus on the kerygma, seem to mark real advances in Catholic thinking – teachings on effective vs ineffective proclamation.

Seven – now what about interreligious dialogue or dialogue with those without any religious identity?

Francis’ approach, as noted above, is marked by a positive anthropology and by an affirmation of the presence of the Spirit enlivening all peoples and religions. In contrast to the approach of his predecessor Benedict XVI who tended to see religious and non-religious others more as a threat and who defensively stressed the specialness and superiority of Catholicism over alternative ways, Francis sees others as no threat. Rather they have goodness and gifts of God which we get to discover in coming to know them. This is true both on the macro level of religions and cultures and the micro level of specific individuals – everyone has some gift to share with us, some unique insight into life or quality of heart. The Christian in dialogue should focus on this. She doesn’t need to be anxious about the non-Christian or non-religious identity of the other, but rather, secure in her own identity and certainly not hiding it, she should engage in an exchange of gifts, keeping in mind the goods of friendship, greater mutual understanding, and cooperative effort on some common cause that dialogue can achieve.

Returning to the theme of ecclesial self-criticism and correction, Francis believes the overly inward-looking, self-referential character of Catholic church culture has resulted in a church body relatively unaccustomed to dialogue, to going out of itself, and to engaging creatively and meaningfully with difference. This needs to be replaced by a new, outward-looking culture of encounter and dialogue within the church. One might call this a true missionary culture.
With regard to dialogue with other Christians, Francis’ approach is even more affirmative of the other. He doesn’t call other Christians to all become Catholic, but affirms their Christian identity and prizes the gifts they have to share with Catholics, and vice versa. While recognizing the real obstacles to Christian unity that exist, he seeks a unity that acknowledges the diverse expressions of the Christian faith – what he calls a “reconciled diversity.”

Eight - But what about conversion, Benedict’s deepest concern? Isn’t the church called to go out to the world, to proclaim the gospel, and to make disciples of all nations? Yes, Francis would say. Absolutely. But his affirmation of the goodness of the other is joined to a recognition that conversion works mainly by attraction and that one’s primary job as a Christian witness is to authentically represent Christ. The rest is in the hands of the other and God. And in many cases the grounding of the other person in their particular religious or non-religious identity is deep, putting conversion quite out of consideration. So the main work of Christian witness is instead to focus on Christlike action in the world (especially for the benefit in the needy and forgotten) and the good of encounter itself. When opportunities for proclamation arise, one should take them, but there is a great deal of good in other realms that Christians are also called to do.

Conclusion – In sum, Francis has issued a powerful call to the church to live its mission. All the baptized, from priests and religious to bishops and lay people, have a missionary responsibility. And to focus the challenge upon all, he presents a focused missionary ideal – all should go out to the margins, to the existential and economic and social peripheries and tend to the suffering flesh of Christ. All also should take a thoughtful, sensitive approach to encountering others who aren’t Christian or Catholic, valuing first the goodness that is in them, communicating with wisdom and respect the kerygma when appropriate, and seeking with all the common good of humankind.

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