



Breathing

November 2014

Volume 1, Issue 8

Breathe—Respira

MERCY POPE FRANCIS' PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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The most common and predominant perception that I see and hear in educational and Church circles express great optimism and great admiration for the example, the person, and the teachings of Pope Francisco. His "Apostolic Exhortation" (1), "*The Joy of the Gospel*", is an easy-to-read document that not only educates but motivates and inspires to new way of living the faith. The emphasis of this document is once again, "The New Evangelization", which seeks new models, new languages, and a renewed attitude of openness impregnated by the mercy of Jesus. Jesus who commands us to "be merciful as the father is Merciful". Jesus who embodies the merciful love of God. Jesus who receives "sinners", welcomes them and all of us to his table, and shares his bread with all. Jesus offers his friendship to all those who want it. If Jesus is the model, Pope Francis embodies it, lives it, and reflects it in his pastoral theology.

The pastoral teaching of Pope Francis comes from his intimate knowledge of God in prayer. As a Jesuit, he has an outstanding academic and theological formation. He also has what is known as "discernment of spirits", which is a spiritual practice based on the Jesuit founder, Ignacio de Loyola's Spiritual Exercises (30 days in silence, meditation, contemplation, and deliverance from the self and disorder attachments to freely respond to the call of Christ) He is a Jesuit, however he chooses the name of Francis, lover of nature, simplicity, Evangelical poverty and missionary impulse. What a profound combination: intellectual,

pastoral, brave, and at the same time, simple and merciful. Contemplative in action.

For centuries, the kind of theology that is emphasized in the Church and seminars has been predominantly a systematic and philosophical theology. This type of theology or study of God, centers on philosophical concepts, ideas, doctrinal formulas, and abstract theories very difficult to understand by most of us. A systematic theology emphasizes which focuses only on doctrine, often becomes an intellectual exercise that does not necessarily transforms lives or does it unites the person with God. It is based on ideas in our head rather than experiences in our heart and soul.

Today, theology is not only systematic, but also is also experimental or mystical. We come to know God from personal and intimate experience rather than abstract philosophical ideas. Both are necessary, but only until today, we have been recovering the contemplative and experiential dimension of the eternal and unconditional love of God. As one experiences His love, one changes and is transformed. When a person experiences and knows first hand the mercy of God he or she begins to naturally be more merciful.

Pope Francis also reminds us of what one of the most important theologians our history, Saint Thomas Aquinas taught. He wrote that in the hierarchy of virtues



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"the greatest virtue to the exterior is mercy". This means, that mercy is the most important virtue for us to live in our ordinary lives and one that is to be practiced in every day life. The pastoral theology of Pope Francis invites us to open our arms and not to judge, to approach with tenderness and value those who suffer and feel outside the community and church life. Moreover, the Pope asks that we not welcome, but rather, go get those who suffer and need the love and healing of Jesus the most.

This welcoming, receptive, non-judgmental and missionary attitude, is the fruit of a deep prayer life which I manifested in compassionate and courageous action. This type of understanding of God and the Gospel is called: Pastoral Theology. The pastoral attitude is one that meets and accompanies people where they are at. It means accepting people in the emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually state that they are in. Just as they are and just as much God loves them for who they are. Mercy is attracted by the "misery" of the other, not by what the 'other' can reward me with. Mercy is a grace so it must be received and must be given freely.

The Pope asks us to have a change of attitude and heart. And he calls for not only an individual change, but a change of structures. Pope Francis says:

"We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization." (Evangelii Gaudium #63)

At the end of the extraordinary Synod of the Family (a meeting of hundreds of bishops from around the world), complex issues were discussed. Among them it was discussed how to provide compassionate Christian pastoral care to persons with same sex attraction, persons who are living together outside of sacramental marriage, the provision of sacraments to the divorced and re-married individuals, and others, what was reported by both Catholic and secular media was that there were major debates and differences of theological and pastoral models and approaches. The outcome was welcomed by Pope Francis. The good news is that the Synod rather than causing confusion as some may say, was a clear reflection of the pastoral model based on transparency and more importantly based on the mercy of Jesus that Pope Francis is reminding us of. However, there are two temptations that can limit the progress done, says the Pope. One of which is the temptation of "hostile doctrinal rigidity" and the second is the temptation to do good under the prism of a false mercy without truth. Again the Pope, a wise pastor and realistic man, offers us a third option and route: the mercy that welcomes all based on a sound theology that takes into account the reality in which we live and the problems we face in today's world.

Jesus healed all those whom approached him with sincerity, without questioning their doctrines, moral and personal situation, or fulfillment of mandatory religious practices. Jesus welcomes and heals today all those who need it through communities based on a healthy systematic and pastoral theology. "Let those who have ears hear and those who have eyes see" the prophetic message of Pope Francis to the church and the world today.

"Come to my ALL who are tired and weary, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28)