

Pope Francis, the Ethicist: Ignatian Roots, Jesuit Priorities, Contemporary Challenges

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The teachings of Pope Francis on such ethical issues as economic justice, family life, ecology, refugee rights and peacemaking reflect core elements of Ignatian spirituality. These include careful discernment, respect for individual consciences, Christian humanism, personalism, attention to the affect and a commitment to practical pastoral flexibility. The pope's engagement with global challenges also reflects the influence of recent institutional priorities of the Society of Jesus, particularly its 2019 Universal Apostolic Preferences and Jesuit responses to globalization and structural injustice.

Pope Francis has received extraordinary attention in both global media and theological circles. But one area that has so far eluded adequate coverage is the contribution Pope Francis has made to the field of moral theology and ethics, and specifically social ethics. Recall the central questions driving the enterprise of moral theology: What are the behavioral implications of Christian faith? If we are sincere in the beliefs that we profess as Catholic Christians, how are we to act? What moral obligations do faithful followers of Jesus recognize and resolve to enact in our daily lives? What specific guidance for our daily decisions derives from our religious commitments and reflection on the Gospel? We of course need to consider both personal morality, which considers the duties that each of us observes in our intimate face-to-face relations with family, friends, and neighbors, on one hand, and social ethics, which treats the principles and priorities that are appropriate for large-scale social relations, on the other hand. The latter is the realm of collectivities such as governments, corporations, nonprofits and other organizations holding power and influence in our society.¹

1. It may be helpful at the outset to acknowledge the widely acknowledged tensions that exist between ethics that proceed on the small scale (i.e., personal or interpersonal morality) and on the larger scale (the principles of social ethics appropriate to governments and their policies, for example). Some influential theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr (see

While it is certainly possible to benefit from strictly secular philosophical reflection on social principles such as justice and human rights, it is in religious communities where the most profound grappling with the meaning of social justice and right order has unfolded in the course of human history. We are thus all heirs of valuable religious traditions which have posed and pondered the most sweeping questions of all: What is the good life? What constitutes the deepest meaning of human existence? To what ultimate destiny are our lives rightly oriented? How should we shape our society in order to serve immediate goals and long-term objectives? What moral obligations do I have to my neighbors, near and far? We could multiply these questions *ad infinitum*, and to each of them, religious voices, traditions and communities have made outstanding contributions.

Every pope is conscious of being an heir to this tradition of religious reflection and seeks to play his special role in adding to the distinctively Catholic discourse on social ethics. For well over a hundred years now, popes have exercised special leadership in continuously updating the tradition of modern Catholic social teaching, so that members of the church enjoy the advantage of plugging into an entire grammar of principles and priorities appropriate to our complex contemporary economy and our political and social institutions. Even if it is still true in some sense that Catholic social teaching remains our church's "best kept secret," it is nevertheless quite evident that the vocabulary of Catholic social thought has insinuated itself, almost by a process of osmosis, into common parlance. We regularly hear talk of the common good, solidarity, human dignity, responsible stewardship of the environment, and a preferential option for the poor. Even when we do not hear any explicit attribution to the Christian theological doctrine undergirding and supporting these notions, the lines of causality are nonetheless undeniable. Even in our era of waning religious institutional affiliation, the evident idealism and dedication to service of neighbor that one witnesses in so many youth today often exhibits religious or quasi-religious commitments. The valuable and influential tradition of Catholic social thought, whether transmitted through catechesis and years of exposure to Catholic education or not, seems to enter public discourse almost by osmosis.

Enter Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope and the first pope from the Southern or Western hemispheres. The early months of his papacy occasioned

his *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932]) posit a thorough rupture between the moral imperatives that operate on these two levels. With regard to the moral claims of Pope Francis, an awareness of these distinctions might problematize, for example, to what extent his call for mercy (presumably at the level of small-scale human relations) applies to social ethics involving, for example, criminal justice systems and national reconciliation processes.

a particularly great amount of speculation regarding his leadership priorities. At the time of his election in March 2013, little of the prognostication about likely future papal agenda items mentioned the updating of moral theology or renewing Catholic social teaching in any specific way. Nearly a decade later, to the potential chagrin of Vatican watchers left agape, it is no exaggeration to say that a well-focused theological eye will easily recognize an extraordinary contribution on the part of Francis to advancing the moral theology and social ethics inherited within our Catholic community.

The majority of this essay will investigate five aspects of the ethical approach and contribution of Pope Francis. Though none of them are exclusively Ignatian in an ultimate sense, the treatment of each will emphasize how the Jesuit background and identity of Francis exerts considerable influence upon these values, priorities and concerns that he routinely adopts in his ethical teachings and example. Having established these roots in Ignatian spirituality of Francis' moral theology leadership, the essay will (more briefly) document the overlap of these moral theology concerns with contemporary Jesuit priorities. The claim in this second part of the essay is that the ethical topics that Francis emphasizes display many of the same social priorities that the Society of Jesus has pursued in its global work for social justice in recent decades. The third and briefest section of the essay examines how Francis has contributed in outstanding ways to the Catholic community's ethical response to several momentous contemporary global challenges, including the threat of climate change, the ongoing refugee crisis, the urgent need for arms control and peacebuilding, and persistent economic injustices such as mistreatment of workers and escalating economic inequality.

The central claims in this essay will hardly surprise close observers of this papacy; it is uncontroversial to posit a connection between the Jesuit spirituality that Francis imbibed in his decades of Jesuit formation and apostolic life, on one hand, and the ethical priorities he has pursued as pope, on the other hand. But there nevertheless remains substantial value in connecting the dots, as it were, regarding papal initiatives and their spiritual roots. Themes familiar to any practitioner or student of Ignatian spirituality—from "finding God in all things" to the imperative to pursue the *magis* (ever broader service to the greater glory of God)—are readily on display in so many of the ethical commitments and actions of Francis. In other words, Francis's ethical leadership is deeply nested in his Jesuit spiritual identity. Drawing these connections will allow a deeper appreciation for how Francis has accomplished a thorough renewal of our church's approach to numerous ethical issues, as well as a deeper understanding of the sources and motivations that undergird his social concerns and ethical leadership in addressing them.

PART ONE: IGNATIAN ROOTS

It is always somewhat perilous to attempt to explain the ethical stances of any one person in terms of an underlying spirituality. In the end, only that person is qualified to give an account of how he or she bridges the distance between inner spiritual perspectives and outward-facing ethical commitments. Whatever outside observers might venture to claim about these linkages remains guesswork—educated hypotheses at best, baseless conjecture at worst. At one extreme lies the danger of excessive vagueness and indeterminacy; you might waste your time stating the obvious and not penetrating very far into valuable territory. At the other extreme, you may get caught overstating the case and pretending to have explained too much. This latter error is a strange kind of determinism, claiming falsely to have pinned down the entire psychology of a public figure merely by highlighting a few core spiritual principles. It is prudent to be vigilant about avoiding the Scylla of indeterminacy and the Charybdis of objectionable over-statement.

One helpful way out of this dilemma surrounding the establishment of reasonable expectations about the ethical commitments of Pope Francis and how his Ignatian spirituality influences his moral stances is by relying on certain helpful metaphors. Metaphors have a felicitous way of saying neither too much nor too little, but rather suggesting a complex matrix of causality and influence. One such metaphor is to speak of the Jesuit or Ignatian “DNA” of Pope Francis. As is the case with biological DNA, exposure to a spiritual heritage has a way of shaping a person in certain directions without determining precise outcomes, whether we are investigating organic structures or personal behavior.

When speaking of the spiritual DNA of Francis, the first thing to note is the several decades that the young Jorge Mario Bergoglio spent in Jesuit communities and apostolates—fifteen years in his own formation followed by a whirlwind of leadership positions, including novice director, provincial superior of several hundred Argentine Jesuits, and then a number of other rectorships, academic posts, and pastoral responsibilities. Long before he became an auxiliary bishop in 1992 and later archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio was considered a spiritual master, conducting retreats and providing spiritual direction to hundreds, in addition to being faithful to the practice of making eight-day annual retreats himself, and occasionally the full month-long *Spiritual Exercises*. By all accounts, he has remained a man faithful to prayer and the spiritual life in the Jesuit tradition. Even though Francis has not actually lived in Jesuit communities for 30 years now, his thorough and enduring exposure to Ignatian spirituality is beyond doubt. To invoke another instructive metaphor, the “fingerprints” of Jesuit life and the Ignatian spirituality that imbues it are highly evident in the homilies, formal addresses and the

many writings of Pope Francis, and especially in his moral teachings, as we shall proceed to investigate.

Equally helpful to the project of capturing this profound influence on Francis is a bundle of metaphors relating to water. A simple one evokes the image of a river which is formed by the confluence of various streams. If a person (in this case Pope Francis) can be said to bear the marks and reflect the content of various influences that come together to form that person, then the river metaphor evokes the complex interplay of the many tributaries that form the finished product (which is never quite finished, as humans have known since at least the time of Heraclitus, with his quip that one never steps in the same river twice). Ignatian spirituality is admittedly just one of many tributaries that contributed to shaping the Francis we know today, but it certainly appears to be a highly influential stream, perhaps the single most dominant font or source of all.

Supporting this analysis are the several occasions when interviewers tried to pin down the newly elected Pope on an intriguing question: the significance of his choice of papal name. Without exception, the new pope identified Saint Francis of Assisi (notably, not the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier) as the inspiration for his selection, and proceeded to praise the humble Italian saint for his love of nature, his dedication to peace and closeness to the poor (three items that, in retrospect, have provided programmatic guidance to papal ethical initiatives over the subsequent decade). But mischievous interviewers seeking to press the point were met with stern denials that this church leader had in any way traded in wholesale Ignatian for Franciscan spirituality. He hastened to offer this clarification: “I feel I am a Jesuit in my spirituality, in the spirituality of the Exercises, the spirituality I have in my heart. I have not changed my spirituality, no. Francis, Franciscan, no. I feel Jesuit and I still think like a Jesuit.”²

Another water metaphor that captures the perduring Ignatian spiritual influence on Pope Francis involves not rivers and streams flowing together, but the water that one draws from deep artesian wells. Authentic spiritual influences run deep in our souls and, once we drink deeply of a tradition of prayer, this water nourishes our whole body and our very being. A profound exposure to Ignatian spirituality has a way of marking the practitioner permanently—this is the hinge of the informal motto of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps: ruined for life. An obvious connection to Bergoglio’s native South America is apt here. That continent produced a man of the same generation, Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, who is recognized as the father of liberation theology. A

2. From a 2013 interview cited in Philip Endean, “Writings on Jesuit Spirituality by Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 45, no. 3 (autumn 2013): 2.

remarkable book published in English in 1984 by this Dominican theologian bears the title *We Drink from Our Own Wells* and the subtitle “The Spiritual Journey of a People.”³ Gutierrez weaves a narrative of how the people of Latin America forged a distinctive spirituality from the experience of oppression and the aspiration for liberation, all the while avoiding an overly deterministic approach to the influence of one’s cultural background upon one’s subsequent actions. In a parallel way, it is easy to affirm a strong Ignatian influence at work in the ethical teachings and actions of Pope Francis without insisting on excessively tight lines of causality. Francis drinks consciously and especially deeply from the well of the Ignatian spirituality he knows so thoroughly, and the nourishment he imbibes contributes markedly to the overall shape of his identity and actions.

By considering what it means to inherit and to be influenced by a spiritual legacy, we have cleared the ground for the next stage in our examination of Pope Francis as an ethical thinker and agent. If Ignatian spirituality does indeed shape the style, method, orientations and content of the moral theology of the pope, then what specific elements within Ignatian spirituality are on display in the ethical teachings and commitments of Pope Francis? At least the following five items belong on any such list.

1. *Christian humanism*

There was nothing narrow about Saint Ignatius Loyola, and the spiritual vision he lent to his followers is broad and richly open-ended in nature. Ignatian spirituality is remarkably appealing and adaptable to people of many cultures and backgrounds because it rejects nothing that is true and genuinely human in our experience and aspirations. Though the *Spiritual Exercises* and indeed all the achievements of Ignatius were thoroughly Christ-centered (hence the adjective “Christian” modifying the noun “humanism” here), in principle anything worthy of the label Ignatian exhibits an expansiveness of horizon and openness to all people of good will (that is what supplies the “human” in “humanism”). In keeping with the Renaissance and early modern movement of humanism associated with Erasmus, Petrarch and other exemplars who were even closer contemporaries of Ignatius, the humanistic impulse is one that drives us to seek ever greater levels of knowledge and mutual understanding, especially with those who are quite different from us. The humanist seeks truth wherever it may be found, unafraid of novelty or the challenges that may confront accustomed modes of thinking. It includes an eagerness to explore commonality and to open up lines of communication—

3. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

themes that were among the most brilliant legacies of the classical civilizations undergoing a revival and reappraisal in the very time of Ignatius.

The ethical tilt here includes not only an embrace of so many positive things, such as a cosmopolitan spirit and sincere dedication to the common good, but also a firm disavowal of any tribalism or defensiveness that might prevent meaningful human interaction across artificially constructed boundaries.⁴ This humanistic feature of Ignatian spirituality has echoed through the history of the Society of Jesus, with its constant efforts to inculcate the faith with sensitivity and enthusiasm. Notably, it has imbued Jesuits down through the ages with a love of learning and a sturdy commitment to genuine dialogue. This pattern of commitments was especially evident in the style by which the efforts of Matteo Ricci brought the Catholic faith to an initially leery China, and in the missionary work of Robert de Nobili and John de Brito in seventeenth-century India. Despite encountering sharp resistance, none of them proceeded in the style of culture warriors, but rather as brilliant evangelizers displaying a keen sensitivity to local cultures and native religious traditions—men who garnered a favorable hearing for the Christian faith precisely because of their commitments to an inclusive humanism.

Pope Francis is a worthy successor of these Jesuit achievements and an utterly credible exemplar of this element of Ignatian spirituality. His words and actions reflect a certain magnanimity of character and broadness of horizon that is characteristic of Ignatius and his followers. The pope's practice of Christian humanism comes across especially clearly in his dedication to build bridges rather than walls (an image for broad and wholehearted engagement that Francis has invoked frequently in his diplomatic pursuits, and most appropriately so given the longstanding papal title of *pontifex maximus*). Promotion of dialogue is a hallmark of so many initiatives of Francis, including his ambitious and unprecedented outreach to Islam across the world, his ready embrace of insights from climate change science in drafting his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'* and especially in his calls for a "culture of encounter" on many high-profile occasions. The genuine Christian humanist never feels threatened by unfamiliar cultures and religions nor intimidated by secular disciplines of learning. These are features that unite Ignatius, Francis and the best works and members of the Society between their times. Conversely, these very qualities relating to open-ended pursuit of truth and collegial relationships across previous divides are among the things that have

4. And of course, great care must be taken to reach moral judgments that carefully balance the values of universal love and particular loyalties. Without a due recognition of duties to those closest to us (by measures of consanguinity, affinity or even geography), it may be impossible to generate the social solidarity that the Catholic social tradition, including works of Francis himself, consistently recognizes as a positive virtue.

prompted the harshest criticism of Jesuits (Ignatius and Francis included) over the centuries.

2. *Christian personalism*

The twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of individuals and groups who embraced the label personalist—from Emanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain in France near mid-century to Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement in the US to a loose school of thought at the University of Lublin, Poland that influenced John Paul II, as well as many others in Catholic circles as well as Protestant (consider the Boston University Personalists who taught and influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.). The inherently imprecise descriptor personalistic can be applied to any figure who places the value of the human person at the center of the moral universe, with evident concern to preserve and uphold its dignity against the various forces and adverse conditions that might threaten it. Since personalism exhibits both spiritual and moral components, it seems appropriate to ascribe this moniker to Ignatian spirituality, and further to identify Pope Francis as a premier contemporary practitioner of this commendable approach to the moral life.

These claims will surprise no one familiar with Ignatius or Francis. Each man embodies deep concern for the needs and well-being of the persons they encounter—refusing to treat them as abstractions, but ever eager to extend care and attention to all, even supposed enemies, in all their concreteness. Near the end of his first major teaching document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis proposes the axiom “realities are more important than ideas,” signaling his aversion to any ideologies that might turn us against flesh-and-blood persons.⁵ The personalistic commitments exhibited by these two exceptional Jesuits can also be detected as operative principles within Jesuit-sponsored institutions, especially educational apostolates. Perhaps the most oft-repeated soundbite associated with Jesuit education is its dedication to the principle of *cura personalis*—care for the whole person: body, mind and spirit as well. This ubiquitous motif is the centerpiece of the entire Jesuit educational philosophy, intent as it is to serve the full set of human needs of students everywhere.

The power of Christian personalism to orient the choices of an individual and the activities of organizations such as Jesuit schools absolutely depends upon the implicit commitment to respect the individual human person in all his or her freedom and complexity. This commitment bears a holistic stamp. This appealing all-inclusive quality leaves ample room for both the material and spiritual dimensions of the human person. A premier faculty of the

5. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 Nov. 2013), 231.

human person in this regard is the conscience, the very foundation of full moral agency which directs a person's actions in accord with one's intellect and free will. In writing the *Spiritual Exercises* as well as the *Constitutions* of the Society of Jesus, Saint Ignatius consistently defers to the well-formed conscience of individual persons, who are rightly empowered to adapt norms and rules to specific circumstances. Indeed, a key presupposition of the *Spiritual Exercises* is that each individual person, regardless of station in life, is capable of making a unique decision to follow Christ; the direction that this discipleship takes is bound up not only with contingent factors but with the operations of free will and conscience. In his writings on morality, Pope Francis also displays utmost respect for the individual conscience. The best example falls in number 37 of his 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family*, where Francis asserts: "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them." Needless to say, it is an ongoing challenge for church administrators, given their roles as authoritative gatekeepers of moral doctrine, to uphold consistently the Catholic tradition of the inviolability of the voice of conscience. Regardless of how it may play out at a given historical moment, the influence of Ignatian spirituality certainly amplifies this personalistic impulse in the full range of moral matters.

3. *Embrace of the emotions*

So far, our survey of the Ignatian roots of Francis's moral teachings has remained rather cerebral in focus. It is time to add balance to this portrayal by recognizing the insight that Ignatius is indeed a theologian of the heart, with a keen appreciation for the role of the emotions, of the affect, for moving people to right action. In his lifetime, he was known as a man given to profound emotions; some derided him for being a fiery Basque, while others recognized him as a mystic displaying the spiritual gift of tears on many occasions. The *Spiritual Exercises* evoke the full range of emotions, most prominently consolation and desolation, but also contrition, indignation, joy, desire. A bedrock principle of spiritual direction in the Jesuit tradition is to consult the emotions at every turn, for they emerge as generally reliable resources for the moral judgments and decisions we face. Ignatius appreciated this dynamic abundantly and passed it on to his followers, including Pope Francis.

Acknowledging the role of the affect in the moral life in no way contradicts the role of the intellect in morality. Ignatius of course highly valued the life of the mind, and the contemporary Society of Jesus continues to be closely associated with intellectual apostolates, including a global network of schools at every level. Recall that Ignatius spent several prime years of his life returning belatedly to school to study classical languages, philosophy and theology in preparation for priesthood and to enhance the credibility he would need

within learned circles to launch a new religious congregation. As the first Superior General of the Society, Ignatius prioritized learned ministry, missioning many of his companions to acquire prestigious university degrees in order to serve the church effectively. He eagerly responded to the request of Pope Paul III to provide theological counselors to the papal legates presiding over the opening sessions of the Council of Trent, and these included the esteemed Pierre Favre, Diego Laínez and Alfonso Salmerón.

Francis walks capably in this tradition of integrating the affect and the intellect—in his moral teachings and in every aspect of his papal ministry. He hesitates neither to display his own feelings nor to speak about his emotional reactions to world events. He has referred on many occasions to the tears of sorrow and even outrage that well up within him when he hears of preventable human tragedies such as the cruel, senseless deaths of refugees and the exploitation of persons trafficked as sex slaves. His embrace of certain elements of Franciscan spirituality may well be interpreted in part as an indication of his desire to integrate further the emotional dimension of ministry—to express the heart of the loving pastor that he is, as he is drawn to a balanced spirituality appropriate to our times.

While the integration of the intellect and the emotions is a complex (and perhaps never fully resolved) matter, potentially helpful is a reference to a *tertium quid* that in some ways bridges them. Related to both emotions and intellect is the human imagination—a faculty that plays a role (often implicitly) in the contributions of both Ignatius and Francis. Without the ability to picture a better world, one with alternative and ethically superior arrangements for both church and society, the operative theologies of both the first Jesuit Superior General and the 266th pontiff would be unrecognizable. For each, creative thinking that generates visions of a transformed world is a constructive force and an essential tool of effective leaders.

4. *Spiritual freedom linked to social action for material improvements*

No phrase captures the goal of the *Spiritual Exercises* better than enhancing spiritual freedom. Through prayer and increased self-knowledge, the retreatant following a dedicated program of prayer may achieve an inner freedom that produces great spiritual fruit which, not incidentally, fosters ethical action free of inordinate attachments. Particularly valuable is the gift of indifference, a stance that allows one to rise above self-interest and narrowness of perspective to attain a more comprehensive picture of reality—one more in line with God's intentions for the universe. The ethical import of this call to radical humility is clear: if I truly see the world more and more as its Creator does, I will readily accept whatever is in line with divine purposes, which will eclipse my own partial and possibly distorted perspective.

When ethicists speak of the importance of avoiding conflicts of interests, such as with holders of public office or those serving on institutional boards of trustees, their discourse parallels quite closely the spiritual principle of inner freedom explored by Ignatius five centuries ago. Whether we think in terms of attaining spiritual freedom to set aside self-regard or of ethical imperatives to engage in dispassionate analysis, these are rare and difficult attainments indeed.

A closely related aspiration comes at the very end of the *Spiritual Exercises*, where Ignatius proposes a meditation called “Contemplation to Attain Divine Love” that includes the observation: “love shows itself more in deeds than words” (no. 230). Genuine love for God, which necessarily includes love of neighbor, must issue forth in effective acts of service. Lip service does not suffice, as words alone do not completely fulfill our moral obligations to others. Further, our neighbors possess bodies as well as souls, so their concrete material needs, especially their sufferings and afflictions, issue duties and rightly set our moral agendas. The disciple of Jesus Christ must be a servant of others—on a small scale, a doer of good deeds; on the larger scale of social ethics, an agent of constructive change in society.

That is admittedly a lot to unpack from a short meditation written five centuries ago by a mystic and saint in another social context entirely. But those spiritual admonitions and directions for service in freedom provide the moral compass for the entire worldwide Ignatian family even today. There is a direct line from the eliciting of inner spiritual freedom to the desire for deeper discipleship, which in turn issues forth in activism for justice and steady support for social reform. This spiritual vision affects not only what we do and promote, but ultimately who we are and how we understand ourselves. In the words of Ignatius, we are “*simul in actione et contemplativus*” or “contemplatives in action.” The activist spirituality that follows from these commitments is not optional for the disciple, who intervenes in the social order with a style of engagement that blends boldness with prudence—embracing whatever is needed to remain faithful to a vocation to help souls, to forge a better world and to serve as a catalyst for constructive change. There surely remains some allowance for quiet time permitting rest and meditation, but without tolerance for complacency, as Ignatius calls his followers to the *magis*, to render ever greater service to church and world.

It is very easy to find resonance with all these spiritual and practical commitments in the words and actions of Pope Francis. His calls to overcome indifference to the suffering of others, and especially the plight of such hard-pressed people as refugees, is inescapable. In his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis seems especially eager to establish a convincing case that religion cannot be reduced to a private affair of the heart, but rather that disciples must tread the path of public action. One of the sizzling soundbites produced

by Archbishop Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, and occasionally repeated in his papal lexicon as well, is the declaration: “A good Catholic meddles in politics.”⁶ To do otherwise would be to truncate the faith, and to settle for less than the fullness of the gospel and the spiritual heritage of radical humility and committed Christian service to neighbor that comes to Francis (and to each of us) from Saint Ignatius.

5. Careful spiritual discernment

The treatment of discernment in the *Spiritual Exercises* is perhaps the element of Ignatian spirituality most easily identifiable as providing guidance for moral theology. Lest Ignatian discernment be misinterpreted as a rigid point-by-point program for analytical decision making, analogous to a computer algorithm where inputs and settled procedures mechanistically determine outcomes, it is helpful to recognize explicitly that all four of the elements of Ignatian spirituality treated above contribute to authentic discernment. The role of the emotions deserves special mention when treating the process of discernment, whose full description must include such Ignatian motifs as “testing the spirits” and “*discreta caritas*” (or “discerning love”) and even “a pilgrimage of discovery” on the way to sound decisions.

Francis’s own practice of papal discernment was perhaps most publicly on display in the way he conducted two worldwide synods of bishops (2014 and 2015) on the topic of challenges to contemporary family life, and then in the way he synthesized the findings of those two contentious deliberations into his inspiring 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Though the open-endedness of this papal document provoked considerable backlash from traditionalist voices who feared that Francis, in extending a hand of mercy to couples in irregular second unions without benefit of an annulment, was watering down the principle of the indissolubility of marriage and compromising doctrinal clarity, the overall process represents an extended ecclesial discernment on a global scale. Even putting aside the controversy over the conclusions and their promulgation, the commitment of Francis to deep and empathetic listening to those affected by ruptured marriages and exclusion from the sacraments models all the principles of Ignatian spirituality we have seen and others as well. Though no church doctrines were actually changed, merely sending these signals of renewed openness to pastoral flexibility and the embrace of prudent strategies characterized by gradualism rather than curt judgmentalism toward families in crisis represents a breakthrough. Ignatius

6. For example, a homily delivered by Francis on 16 Sept. 2013 features this phrase prominently.

would readily recognize Francis's gestures toward mercy as the fruit of *discreta caritas* in its application of pastoral flexibility.

Genuine Ignatian discernment is always open to discovering the finger of the divine in surprising places, indeed to "finding God in all things"—another popular soundbite associated with Jesuit spiritual practices. Listening to the expressions of pain and the yearning to be readmitted to communion as articulated by members of sundered families is just one example of how Francis has prioritized hearing the voices of the marginalized and meeting people where they are—a stance that contains a world of ethical implications. When Francis lauds the "culture of encounter" and the "culture of inclusion," as he so often does, he communicates his eager embrace of an ethical program that includes reaching out to those on the peripheries of human society, hard-pressed people rejected for perceived faults of various types. He has indeed made a hallmark of his papacy the creation of spaces where such encounters are possible, exhorting us to evangelical renewal and encouraging ecclesial reforms that will foster a church that goes out to the peripheries, pastors with the smell of the sheep and parish communities that resemble field hospitals after battle, tending to the wounds of the hurting. The Ignatian discerner in Francis is always on the lookout for creative ways to enact the principle of mercy, which is a far better guide to pastoral decisions than the desire merely to perpetuate inherited patterns and impose rigid one-size-fits-all solutions to pastoral quandaries.

PART TWO: JESUIT PRIORITIES

Having examined these five Ignatian roots, we next ask: How has Pope Francis also incorporated distinctive Jesuit priorities into the ethical commitments evident in his papal ministry? How has his papal agenda been shaped by the actual Society of Jesus beyond its early Ignatian inspiration? Because the overlap is so extensive, as both Francis and the Jesuit community from which he emerged share a large core of ethical concerns, this section may remain quite brief. Indeed, the sole item that requires coverage here may be summarized in a single word: structuralism. The next few paragraphs explain this term, trace how it originated in church and Jesuit circles, and describe how Francis employs a structural analysis of many ethical issues.

When the future Pope Francis entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1958, nobody could have predicted the series of stunning changes in the church that would soon unfold. On the universal level, the Second Vatican Council would commit the Catholic Church to reading far more analytically "the signs of the times" that included the deep poverty and massive oppression of much of the world's population, even as the old colonial empires were breaking up. On the regional level, Bergoglio's native Latin America was waking up to the

moral imperative of urgent social reform to address deep social injustices baked into the economies of every country on the continent. Bold religious leaders issued appeals to gospel values like freedom and justice in movements like Liberation Theology and at important recurring regional meetings such as CELAM, the Conference of Latin American Bishops. Simultaneously, the Society of Jesus was rededicating itself to “the service of faith and the promotion of justice,” insisting that all Jesuit ministries focus their energies on this dyad. In stirring documents produced at a series of General Congregations, Jesuit leaders (and especially its longtime Superior General Pedro Arrupe, a particular personal hero of Bergoglio’s) committed tens of thousands of Jesuits worldwide to an agenda of conducting learned social analysis aimed at the reform of structures that systematically hinder the attainment of justice. Ministers of the Gospel need to probe the causes of injustices, beyond recognizing the consequences and binding the wounds of victims. In all these renewed social commitments of the Society of Jesus as well as of the worldwide Catholic Church, action for justice was understood as an authentic and constitutive component of our decisions for Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God—on the level of personal discipleship and of the community of faith.

Pope Francis treads fully consciously upon these paths of faith-inspired advocacy for social justice as pioneered by Vatican II, by the Latin American bishops, and Jesuit leaders as well. He displays a particularly astute structural eye to detect the distortions of proper social order that cause and perpetuate so many global injustices. Almost instinctively, his vision penetrates the symptoms of social problems to reveal the deepest causes behind the maladies that plague the most vulnerable in our turbulent world. The following paragraphs offer five brief sketches of areas where Francis has focused his structural eye on egregious examples of injustices.

First, Francis identifies many offenses against the basic principles of economic justice, including violations of workers’ rights, escalating income inequality, and distortions within the financial sectors of national and global economies. Each is caused by hidden mechanisms—Francis is not afraid to join earlier popes who label them “structures of sin”—that contribute to the poverty, misery and exploitation of billions of people. He frequently and vehemently denounces the “idolatry of money” which seems to drive inordinately most economic relations these days. While religious leaders like popes enjoy limited ability to actually solve these massive problems, Francis is eager to expose the distorted incentives and warped values behind unethical, unscrupulous practices of those who take advantage of the billions of souls desperate for subsistence in our globalized economy.

Second, Francis has become the most prominent global leader advocating for an end of the environmental degradation that contributes to the existential threat of climate change. Although Greta Thunberg may rival the pope for

sheer global exposure, she has yet to publish a book-length treatment of the deep causes of disregard for our common home, the earth, that is quite as insightful as the brilliant encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Francis is eager to delve beneath the surface of such realities as atmospheric carbon levels and cap-and-trade policy proposals, as important as those are, to diagnose the root causes of our ecological abuses—attitudes such as tyrannical anthropocentrism and technocratic rationality. We urgently need to change our policies, practices and above all our culture, to adopt the “culture of care” that Francis proposes, an overarching stance that embraces the earth itself as well as the poor who suffer disproportionately from the short-sighted wastefulness and selfish callousness of our consumer society. This is structural analysis at the most universal level and most urgent expression.

Third, when Francis turns his structural eyes to the crisis of contemporary family life, many interrelated phenomena come under his microscope. Already considered above are some of the ecclesial implications of his discernments related to families in crisis. Francis identifies an alarming range of threats to healthy families in our world—some of them economic or sociological in nature, others relating to deformities in our culture such as our uncritical embrace of technology and its corrosive effects on relationships within the family. Because it is his longest document to date, the aforementioned apostolic letter *Amoris Laetitia* receives most of the attention in this regard. But Vatican watchers note how frequently Francis leverages every opportunity to speak and preach on the topic of family life. He truly relishes the chance to offer diagnosis (that is, on the roots of the profound challenges to family life today) and prescriptions (ranging from appeals to neglected virtues to homespun practical advice on good communication habits) that will address family dysfunction.

Fourth, when Francis trains his structural eye on the unprecedented refugee crisis, he again comes up with insightful diagnoses and challenging prescriptions for improvement. His constant advocacy for more humane migration and resettlement policies on the part of affluent nations should not eclipse the underlying analysis he offers identifying the many distressing root causes of the crisis of “people on the move.” Tragically, he notes, tens of millions of refugees and asylum seekers are displaced by a confluence of factors that include gang violence, civil strife, diminishing economic opportunities in many places and increasingly inhospitable climate. Climate change refugees fleeing flooded low-lying terrain, deforested tropical regions and farmland ruined by rapid desertification present global challenges that can only be met through ethical leadership like that modeled by Francis.

Fifth and finally, Francis has certainly earned the accolades he regularly receives as a foremost peacemaker. While his diplomatic initiatives in pursuit of peace are numerous and impressive, his most distinctive contribution in this area may be the way he employs structural analysis to identify the root

causes of violence—not just traditional large-scale armed warfare but also low-intensity conflict, insurrections, terrorism, and simmering resentments that flare up with deadly consequences. His most high-profile advocacy of all consists of his repeated pleas for an end to the global arms bazaar, as he identifies the indiscriminate sale of weapons as the catalyst for horrific bloodshed we witness each year. A halt to the international arms trade was the urgent agenda item he brought before the United Nations and the US Congress during his visit to the United States in 2015. Because he focuses so insightfully on the need to address the full range of underlying conditions that threaten peace, his approach is best captured with the relatively new term “peacebuilding,” with its emphasis on changing the entire equation of social relations, not just applying temporary patches to uneasy tinderboxes on the verge of exploding.⁷

Though hardly exhaustive, this list constitutes an impressive collection of five areas where Francis has demonstrated his structural eye in social justice issues during his papacy. Equally remarkable is how the Society of Jesus has worked in remarkably parallel ways to identify and address ethical problems in our world today. The Jesuit Curia General in Rome maintains an office (the Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat) that produces occasional reports, position papers and other resources that provide directions for Jesuits and their works worldwide.⁸ While not quite identical in scope and focus to the documents of Pope Francis and his own social justice dicastery, also located in Rome, the overlaps of social concerns and structural-minded approaches are striking. This is hardly surprising, since Francis comes out of the world of Jesuit institutions and Ignatian spirituality and so shares abundantly in these same social concerns and methods such as structural analysis. His hero Pedro Arrupe was the founder, in 1980, of the Jesuit Refugee Service that surely inspires much of Francis’s own advocacy for refugee rights. Other Jesuits openly admired by the Pope over the years have been active in related initiatives in interreligious dialogue, peacemaking and social justice work of all sorts. The features of these overlapping concerns and approaches to global problems should be attributed to anything but mere coincidence, since the Society of Jesus has been a beacon for putting faith into action for social justice just as surely as Francis, and contemporaneously with his own personal efforts.

7. For one especially perceptive assessment of the peace advocacy of Francis, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), esp. 317–22. Cahill, a highly respected ethicist active in the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, registers a few reservations about certain of the positions of Francis regarding international peace.

8. See the website <https://www.sjesjesuits.global/>. The Secretariat’s Task Force on Ecology and Task Force on the Economy have produced important reports in the past decade that closely mirror the social analysis of Francis.

Two final words about the Society of Jesus and its social justice priorities are in order. First, the Society of Jesus often signals the priority it places on inculcating in the rising generations knowledge of and commitment to social justice issues. Not to be overlooked are the efforts the Society of Jesus makes to train its own newest members thoroughly in the ways of peace and justice advocacy. The legacy of leadership in social justice thought, scholarship and ministry must be perpetuated, as the church absolutely depends on the Jesuits to maintain excellence in this area. Indeed, the next generations of Jesuits have a heavy torch of social justice priorities to carry forward.

Second, the most recent and highly encouraging sign of the perduring Jesuit commitment to many of these values that shaped Pope Francis is a Jesuit document that was promulgated by Father General Arturo Sosa on February 19, 2019. Called the Universal Apostolic Preferences, it is intended neither to be exhaustive in nature nor to be interpreted as excluding any particular Jesuit works from its ambit of concern. The document identifies four areas of special focus and commitment for the subsequent ten years. The numbered list of items in its briefest version runs as follows:

1. To show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment;
2. To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice;
3. To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; and
4. To collaborate in the care of our Common Home.⁹

Jesuits working in all sectors and their colleagues collaborating in the full range of Jesuit-sponsored institutions are encouraged to join these corporate efforts and, not coincidentally, to follow Pope Francis in advancing each of these four areas. It goes without saying that each priority not only holds momentous importance for the spiritual and practical health of the world today, but that they collectively amplify the moral messages of Pope Francis himself.

PART THREE: CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Having already noted so many of the major ethical challenges addressed by Pope Francis, we complete our consideration of the ethical contributions

9. From the text of the original letter promulgating the Universal Apostolic Preferences, which may be found at https://www.jesuits.global/sj_files/2020/05/2019-06_19feb19_eng.pdf. Fuller coverage of this initiative can be found at <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/>.

of this spiritual leader by acknowledging several obvious things. Our world is hurting. Fortunately, we have a pope who refuses to turn a blind eye to human suffering of any sort. He is that rare religious authority who never seems to miss an opportunity to leverage his worldwide notoriety and high media profile to call attention to dire human needs of any sort. Deliberate or not, Francis presents as an ethical prophet, speaking out for causes of justice and peace even when it may not be popular to do so. Maximizing the value of the bully pulpit that every pope possesses, he exhibits particular skills for publicizing the plight of people in desperate need and engaging in rich symbolic gestures to communicate his support and solidarity with them.

We have already glimpsed the pope's advocacy for a variety of hard-pressed groups—most notably refugees, exploited workers and trafficked persons. We have also observed the ways he responds to systemic crises which threaten the well-being of every person: the environmental crisis that includes accelerating climate change, and the endemic scourge of violent conflict on a global scale, which Francis seeks to address through his advocacy for conflict transformation through diplomacy, his stiff opposition to nuclear proliferation and his championing of efforts to halt arms sales. Watching the pope grapple with these grave topics around the clock every day, it is a marvel that Francis fends off burnout, compassion fatigue and utter despair. His perseverance may perhaps be attributed to his appropriation of elements of Ignatian spirituality, a selection of which received treatment above. Imbuing this spiritual tradition is a kind of wager on the active presence of God, a confidence that the Lord of History remains at work in the world, according meaning and lending hope to active human efforts at social transformation. Ignatius certainly promoted an image of God as One Who beckons people forward to improve the world through efforts that depend on God's grace. In particular, the Jesuit founder intently encouraged members of the Society of Jesus to dedicate themselves to ministries of reconciliation, a biblical theme with rich resonances in subsequent Jesuit practice and in the papacy of Francis—a son of Ignatius who has organized his entire ethical leadership around the healing of social relationships through the promotion of ever-broader dialogue aimed at social harmony.

Having treated Pope Francis at such length, this essay owes a final debt of some further attention to the other half of its title: the discipline of ethics and moral theology itself. It may be somewhat surprising that so much of the foregoing treatment of Pope Francis and his ethical leadership proceeded on the level of spirituality, emotions and attitudes, rather than pivoting upon patterns of moral reasoning, systematic propositions and precise ethical distinctions featuring analytical rigor and even logical syllogisms—qualities traditionally associated with Roman Catholic moral theology at its best. It is not that Francis discards such categories of rational and theoretical matters

entirely, although he may at times frustrate some observers expecting these items to dominate his moral leadership. What seems beyond doubt is that we have a pope whose agenda is more oriented toward what may be called the softer side of moral theology—prioritizing items such as empathy, dialogue and social concern for the vulnerable, and less engaged with categories and abstractions.

In short, much like Jesus in his technique of teaching through parables, Francis is after our hearts, not just our cerebrums. While he encourages us to think clearly, his priority is on urging us to care more, to open our hearts to a renewed conversion, to respond to the summons to overcome every form of apathy and exclusion. This refreshing challenge is indeed the theme of many of his writings, notably in his message for the 2020 World Day of Peace, which hinges on his call for developing the “culture of care” that will be required if we are ever to establish a more peaceful world. This is his all-encompassing ethical program and his prescription for positive social change. The momentous and urgent adoption of a “culture of care” is a precondition for resolving all the social crises mentioned above, as well as addressing pressing ethical issues not treated here, such as the prevalence of procured abortion, capital punishment and other life issues.

In Francis, the church has a Universal Pastor who so evidently maintains the heart of a local pastor, walking the precincts of his neighborhood to seek out the needy and the hurting. His care for souls proceeds according to Ignatian rhythms and with the full set of ethical priorities affirmed in recent decades by the Society of Jesus. In sum, one need not look far at all to locate what makes Pope Francis tick. The elements of his moral compass are “hidden in plain sight” for those familiar with his Jesuit background and perduring Ignatian spiritual commitments.

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