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## ***Pope Francis: Modelling the Ministry of Saint Peter***

The overall topic of today's conference, "*Pope Francis - modelling the Ministry of Saint Peter*", invites us, among other things, to turn our gaze on Simon Peter as he emerges from the pages of the New Testament, and perhaps particularly from the pages of the gospels, and see what we might discover there which can help us enter a little more deeply into the way in which Pope Francis, with a freshness and a freedom that we were not perhaps expecting, is going about the Petrine ministry. It is a ministry, I suspect, that he never expected to experience and one, I feel quite confident in saying, he would never have chosen for himself. He accepted the decision of the conclave, I presume, in a spirit of obedience because he believed that this was not just the wish of the cardinals but an expression, through them, of the will of God for the Church. For those of us who are Catholics, this is probably our conviction too, just as it was with the election of Pope Benedict, of Pope John Paul II, and of his predecessors. It is certainly a part of our faith that the papacy is an essential dimension of the life of the Church as God wishes the Church to be. While, at a minimum, we can be sure that the Pope, whoever he might be at any given time in history, cannot destroy the Church or lead the Church into fundamental doctrinal error, we can also hope that the Holy Spirit is at work in the unfolding of the Church's journey through history and that, to the extent that those who choose the Pope are men of God and open to God's Spirit, the man chosen to be the Bishop of Rome will be a man chosen and sent by God. He must then of course be open himself to the work of God's guiding Spirit if he is to be the man and the Pope the Lord and his Church needs him to be.

As a general rule this conviction invites us to avoid the temptation of playing one pope off against another. Rather we are challenged I believe to see how the very different popes we have had in our own lifetimes unveil different and necessary aspects of the mystery of Christ and his Church for us, in their teaching, but also in the way they go about their ministry. In saying this, we must of course avoid the danger of what is sometimes referred to as "pope-olatry". It is important and vital to remember that the Pope is not, in the most fundamental sense, the head of the Church. Jesus Christ is the head of the Church and we are all the members of his body. All of us, including the Pope, must be measured against the fundamental criterion of the gospel and against the call - we might even say the demand - of Paul in the letter to the Philippians where he tells us that we must have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. This is the vocation of every Christian, no matter what place he or she might hold in the community of faith. Within this community of faith, the ordained ministers have received the call to be the living and effective signs of the ongoing presence of the Good Shepherd among his people. For priests and bishops in particular the call to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus is a call to have the mind, and the heart, of the Good Shepherd. This applies no less to the Bishop of Rome who, in our Catholic tradition, continues the ministry of Saint Peter in the Church. It is that ministry, of course, which is expressed so clearly in John's gospel, where in chapter twenty-one Jesus commissions Peter to feed his lambs and look after his sheep. This ministry is clearly not exclusive to the Bishop of Rome. He exercises it in communion with all the bishops and through them with all who share in the ordained ministry. And indeed, in a very real sense, the ordained ministers exercise their ministry for the sake of the whole Church so that the Church itself, in all its members, can be a living image of the presence of the Good Shepherd to all God's people, to all who are made in the image and likeness of God. The Church is called to be a gift of life for all the world.



In reflecting on the way in which Pope Francis is going about this task of allowing the Good Shepherd to work in and through him in his unique role as Bishop of Rome, and in thinking about the way in which he is putting a quite unique stamp on the contemporary exercise of the Petrine ministry, I was interested to go back to the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, "Ut unum Sint", on the Catholic Church's commitment to ecumenism. The letter was issued in 1995. While this encyclical covers a wide range of topics related to ecumenism it is perhaps best remembered for what many saw as the rather startling acknowledgment by the Pope that he was being asked, and wished to respond to the request, to "find a way to exercise the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation" (no 95). To this end the Pope asked "Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church" (no 96). While this appeal was directed firstly to the Orthodox Churches, it can be seen as being made to all our brothers and sisters in the Christian faith.

In his recent encyclical "Evangelii gaudium" Pope Francis also returns to this theme and remarks that little progress has been made in the matter since John Paul issued this plea in 1995. I can't help wondering if perhaps, as the relatively new papacy of Francis continues to unfold in the life of the Church, it may be the case that we are indeed seeing a way of exercising the primacy which is open to a new situation, as both John Paul II and Francis have asked.

When John Paul raised this issue of a new way of exercising the primacy of the Bishop of Rome he did so within the context of a section of the encyclical which reflects on the figure of Peter in the New Testament and in particular in the gospels of Matthew and John. The Pope does not present an extensive or exhaustive exegesis. Rather he turns his attention briefly to Peter's confession of faith in chapter sixteen of Matthew's gospel and links it to the saying in Luke's gospel where Jesus assures Peter that he, Jesus, has prayed for Peter that his faith might not fail and that when Peter has recovered from his denial of Jesus he must strengthen his brothers. John Paul then draws a parallel between this insight into both Peter's weakness and need for conversion and his role in relationship to the community of faith in Matthew's gospel and a similar theme in John's gospel. There, on the shore of the lake when Peter encounters the risen Jesus, the Lord offers Peter three opportunities to affirm his love for Jesus and in doing so offers Peter three opportunities to redeem his three cowardly acts of denial and betrayal.

John Paul then offers us a reflection which, I believe, can lead us directly into the engaging and challenging way in which Pope Francis exercises his Petrine ministry. "How can we fail to see" asks John Paul, "that the mercy which Peter needs is related to the ministry of that mercy which he is the first to experience?" And then the Pope remarks that "as heir to the mission of Peter in the Church, which has been made fruitful by the blood of the Princes of the Apostles, the Bishop of Rome exercises a ministry originating in the manifold mercy of God" (92). That which causes Jesus to describe Peter as a stumbling block, as an obstacle in the Lord's way, is the very thing which also becomes the catalyst for the profound mercy, compassion and understanding with which Jesus reaches out to Peter, even as he commissions him to feed his lambs and look after his sheep. The rock of Peter's faith is solidified through his experience of the Lord's mercy.

Thus the ministry of Peter in the Church, realised in the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, must be, says John Paul, "a sign of mercy" for the ministry of the Bishop of Rome is "a ministry of mercy, born of an act of Christ's own mercy" (93).

If Pope, now Saint, John Paul II wrote about this, then Francis, in a powerful and captivating way, is enfleshing this insight in his own way of exercising his primacy as Pope. This is particularly the case in terms of the insistence of Pope Francis on the centrality of God's mercy at the heart of his own life and ministry and at the heart of the Church's vocation as he understands it.



Pope Francis very regularly remarks that he is himself a sinner. This of course is the case for all of us, and a similar expression might be often found on our lips as well. The danger is, unfortunately, that this might be little more than a ritual statement with little conviction behind it. It seems to me that we cannot accuse Pope Francis of this. We are told for example that when Cardinal Borgoglio was asked if he accepted election as pope he replied in this way: "I am a sinner but I trust in the infinite patience and mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ". He returned to this theme in the famous interview he gave to the Italian journalist Antonio Spadaro. In that interview he reflected on Caravaggio's painting of Jesus calling Matthew, the tax collector. "That's me," he said, "I feel like him ..... This is me, a sinner, on whom the Lord has turned his gaze". Pope Francis gave visible witness to this deep awareness of his sinfulness when recently he went to confession in St Peter's basilica to one of the priests who was rostered on to hear the confessions of the faithful during a penitential service. Having made his own confession the Pope then went on to hear the confessions of others.

We can be sure that all this is not empty words or theatrical gestures on the part of Francis. He is deeply conscious of his own sinfulness, as Simon Peter was. The pope is also deeply conscious of having received the mercy of God, or as he himself puts it, of having the gaze of the Lord turned on him. Peter too knew what it was to have the Lord gaze upon him. In Luke's gospel it is when Jesus looks straight at Peter after Peter's denials that Peter remembers the Lord's prophecy that Peter would deny him - and he weeps bitterly. But in John's gospel, on the shore of the Lake, the Lord turns his gaze on Peter again - and his eyes convey compassion, mercy, forgiveness and the promise of a new beginning: feed my lambs, look after my sheep.

To be a Christian is to be someone who sees with the eyes of Jesus. To put it another way to be a Christian is to be someone in whose eyes people experience the loving and merciful gaze of Christ. But it is only when we have allowed Jesus to gaze on us that we can begin to see as he sees, and people will see him in us. This it seems to me is what Francis is reminding us of and modelling for us as he lives each day, in all its variety, his ministry as Bishop of Rome. It is certainly what he is saying to the bishops and priests. During his trip to Brazil for World Youth Day he told the Brazilian bishops that "we need a Church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of entering the world of wounded persons in need of understanding, forgiveness and love".

Sometimes people worry about this stress on mercy, as if it could somehow devalue or even betray the idea of God's justice, or because it might lead the Church to betray its own teaching because of a fear of challenging people with a painful truth. In this regard we might remember the words of Cardinal Kasper in a book which Pope Francis has said "has done me so much good", particularly because of its call for the Church to develop a deeper theology of "the mercy of God, this merciful Father who is so patient". In the book Cardinal Kasper wrote that "mercy without truth would be consolation lacking honesty" and would be simply "empty chatter". But on the other hand, he wrote, "truth without mercy would be cold, off-putting and ready to wound". And perhaps here there is an insight the Pope also is asking us to consider. In all our pastoral and evangelizing activity, in all our outreach to others, we must keep the goal in mind - and the goal must surely be to lead people to God rather than to drive them away. We must, in one of Francis's most striking images, make the Church ever more like a field hospital where the primary aim is to heal the wounds, and warm the hearts, of those who have been so badly hurt by life - and by the ravages of sin. What will help? What will heal? What will open up a pathway to a new encounter with God?

This in fact is the question Pope Francis poses when he reflects on the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. In *Evangelii Gaudium* 44 the Pope reminds priests that the confessional "must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy which spurs us on to do our best". Francis then goes on to say that "a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but which moves through the day without confronting great difficulties". In saying this Pope Francis is really directing our gaze to Jesus, as the Year of Grace invited us to do here in Australia not so long ago.



Francis makes this invitation quite specific in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he reminds us that *“Jesus’ whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity, and finally his complete self-giving, is precious and reveals the mystery of his divine life”* (265). Furthermore, Francis tells us, *“Whenever we encounter this anew, we become convinced that it is exactly what others need, even though they may not recognize it”*.

Francis, of course is convinced that *“We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach. Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love”* (265).

But Francis is also convinced, as Benedict was before him and as John Paul 11 was before Benedict, that *“it is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to”* (266). Francis sums this up by reminding us that *“in union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves”* (267). And he further reminds us that *“a person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody”* (266)

In saying all this we can I believe be quite confident that this is the conviction on which Francis is building his pontificate. Realistically and genuinely conscious of his sinfulness, as Peter also was, Francis is aware of his own need for mercy and aware, too, that as the recipient of God’s mercy he must be a bearer of God’s mercy to others. But Francis, it seems to me, is also conscious that this mercy is experienced in his intimacy with the Lord and in his encounters with him, just as it was for Peter. Peter knew, when he was sinking beneath the waves as he was overwhelmed by the storm, that there was only one place to go: *“Save me Lord, I am going under.”* Francis is telling us the same thing. *“How good it is”,* he writes, *“to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in his presence! How much good it does us when he once more touches our lives and impels us to share his new life! What then happens is that “we speak of what we have seen and heard” (1 Jn 1:3). The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others (EG264).*

Of course, Francis is right. If Jesus really is to be the model for each individual Christian and for each Christian community, we must spend more time reflecting on how Jesus relates to people, especially to those who are in great need. It is good to remind ourselves, as Francis does, that because of the mystery of the incarnation in Jesus we see, expressed in a human way, God’s way of encountering sinners. When Jesus found himself confronted by the woman caught in adultery who had been forcibly dragged before him, what was his first word to her? *“I don’t condemn you”*. Only then did he tell her to *“go, and sin no more”*. Could it be that she could only hear the second word because of the first word she heard from Jesus’ lips? And when Jesus saw the hated and rejected tax-collector Zacchaeus sitting up in the tree, what was the first thing Zacchaeus heard from Jesus? A word of welcome, of honour, of acceptance - and it was this that led Zacchaeus to a new way of life. Perhaps this is what mercy, misericordia, (that heart for the poor, and those who are suffering, excluded and in distress) looks like in practice. It is what Peter experienced when the gaze of Jesus fell upon him on the shore of the lake after the resurrection, and which changed him from a stumbling block to a rock of faith. It is what Francis is asking of the Church today. It is what Francis is showing us as he models the ministry of St Peter in our contemporary Church.