

Pope Francis and His Incredible Ways of Touching Hearts

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Introduction:

Pope Francis, one of the most powerful and influential leaders of the world and also of the Catholic Church, was born and named Jose Mario Bergoglio in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In his academic pursuit, he also attended a technical school and obtained a diploma in chemical technic. Being youthful and wanting also to be productive, he took up employment as a bouncer at a night club to support his education. His love for music which started as a youth at the night club employment led to the flair he employed in dancing the tango: a given that was known and celebrated in St. Peter's Square at his birthday, and the celebration of his music gift was cemented by the presentation of his musical album at the Vatican. Pope Francis enjoyed the youthful desire of nursing the marital vocation by entertaining some romantic relationship with two separate girls, one at his school and the other; a crush he had as a seminarian, which really made him then to question his choice of vocation. As a further testament to his well-mannered upbringing, even though being a boy, was able to cook and continues to cook for himself when time allows him (web).

Pope Francis is being celebrated as a man of influence, dedication and passion in the things he does. His acts of charity are well known and celebrated. Recently he offered his bike and Lamborghini to charity at a cost of about \$1million dollars. Pope Francis is celebrated as one who has broken the more conservative stances of the Catholic Church with his celebrated, "who am I to judge statement." His humility is legendary, being the very first Pope to refuse to stay at the Papal palace preferring rather to stay at the Papal guest house. He is dedicated to the poor and stands with them in his staunch advocacy against modern- day slavery and true to his Patron Saint's guidance of, "preaching but not with words." Pope Francis is not only aware of humanity's dire need for evangelization but also speaks for created nature, which is daily being depleted by human activity and materialism. He is a recognized and celebrated advocate for climate change and has also documented his thoughts for the world to hear, in his encyclical letter *Laudato si*.

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Pope Francis' influence, dedication and passion have not gone without acknowledgment and recognition. He was appointed the Archbishop of Buenos Aires 1998. His passion for God and the universal Church got recognized by the universal Church and got him created as a Cardinal in the year 2001. The adage, "a Prophet is not without honour except in his home" was not to come and pass with Pope Francis, because in the year 2003, his brothers of the episcopate of Argentina honoured him at home by making him the president of the episcopal conference of Argentina. He was one of the darlings of the consistory of 2005 after the death of Pope John Paul II to become Pope but God had other plans for him and made Benedict XVI Pope (web).

His fame was celebrated not only by his peers and the Church but is being celebrated by humanity. Very early in his Papacy in the Vatican, Pope Francis, to the surprise of many and without any warning to his teeming admirers, was elected the "Time" person of year in 2013. Hot on the heels of the election by Times magazine, the Pope was declared the second most followed world leader to Donald Trump. The Pope endeared himself to the world and propelled by his passion to preach the gospel to the world, he could not resist the modernist trend of internet communication and created an Instagram page which became an instant hit and gave him a world acclaim; making him break the record of being the most followed person on Instagram with 1 million followers one hour after his page was launched; a record held by the footballer David Beckham of England who gained it after 24 hours. It goes without saying that a personality of such pedigree is a special gift to the Church and humanity and whose mission must be attended to with particular attention and reviews so that it is properly understood and utilized, in our time and its fullest benefits are savoured and impacted on the Church and on humanity in general (web).

Definition of Compassion

Permit me in this section, to clarify the perspective of compassion which this work seeks to implore by employing some ideas from certain dictionaries which will eventually lead to my informed understanding and perception of the meaning of compassion and its application to the activities, teachings and opinions of Pope Francis. The Merriam Webster's learner's Dictionary defines compassion as, "sympathetic consciousness of others distress, together with a desire to alleviate it" (web). The New Oxford learner's Dictionary of America defines compassion as a sympathetic duty and concern for the suffering or misfortune of others, Taking its definition via an old French from an ecclesiastical Latin – "compati" suffer with com - meaning "with" a prefix, an originating "com" "pati" is to "suffer with" meaning more than to sympathise. Another definition of the word compassion is "to recognize the suffering of others and to take action to help in a tangible expression of love for those who are suffering (web).

Fredrick Buechner defines it as, “compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else’s skin, it is the knowledge that there can never be really any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you” (*Wishful Thinking*).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says thus in describing compassion that, “we must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do and more in the light of what they suffer” (*Letters*).

From all that has preceded, one can then deduce that, “compassion,” more than sympathy kindness or mercy is a deeper sentiment for the situation of the other person, requiring more than a passive gesture of empathy or sympathy but an active involvement in the lived situation. For me therefore, compassion must be understood to mean, that sympathetic, conscious recognition of the suffering of other persons propelled by a tangible desire, expressed in love to alleviate the distress being suffered by the other person. Working with this understanding of compassion, we would therefore engage in this task of an examination of the teaching and practices of Pope Francis and highlight his compassionate stance.

Inspirations for Pope Francis

Mercy as Attribute of God:

Pope Francis has not been oblivious of the source of his inspiration to do and act the way he does. He has been quite out-spoken about it and sets it forth as an agenda for his pontificate and pursues it with dedication as a goal to which he must aspire and a mandate which he has received. This, he states clearly when he used the illustration of the fidelity of St. Joseph the protector of Mary and Jesus at his inaugural homily at St Peter’s Basilica in Rome where he said; “St. Joseph appears as a strong and courageous man, a working man, yet in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love. We must not be afraid of openness, of tenderness” (Pope Francis, *Pontificate Inaugural Homily*).

The Pope’s disposition is not without basis of conviction to strength, a strength that expresses itself in eminent weakness; a weakness that is seemingly gullible to the liberalism of our time. Continuing his thought on Joseph, he expresses his complete appreciation of the person of Joseph a good listener, who listened to the promptings of God to act as God would love him to act and did the will of God. The Pope here presents Joseph as a model of constant attentiveness to God’s plan and he too must also have aspired in the direction of Joseph to be one who is attentive to God’s plan as he states; “How does Joseph respond to his calling to be the protector of Mary and Jesus and the Church? By being constantly attentive to God, open to the sign of God’s

The model of Joseph's faithfulness to God's plan and to his word continues to motivate and inspire Pope Francis as he stirs the Church by "constant attentiveness to God." This attentiveness motivates him to form the conviction that God is compassion and that compassion is the all-encompassing attribute of God. He captures it thus: "God is Merciful. Mercy is at the heart of every story about God and Jesus, and God put Jesus on earth to serve as a human manifestation of the righteousness of mercy... punishment, anger and revenge don't make the world a better place: mercy and compassion do: mercy is the ultimate test for humanity" (Pope Francis, *Pontificate*).

The Pope admits that compassion is an attribute of man who is incapable naturally of mercy and that compassion is one attribute of man that can be difficult to give in times of hurt, but would rather seek revenge and punishment. He said: "God tells us that, he will answer us when we ask, which stops people from trying to take matters into their hands. Imperfect humans are naturally less merciful than God, so important matters should not be entrusted to them alone" (Pope Francis, *Pontificate*). He continued to say that, "Humans are not divine beings like God. We can never be as merciful, patient or loving as he is. We can be compassionate however, if we follow the example of Jesus" (Pope Francis, *Pontificate*).

Pope Francis' ability and motivation to compassion is generated from the conviction that compassion and mercy are attributes of strength and power which God Himself inbuilt in humans made in His likeness, and that God's ability to show mercy is a sign of God' power over the world and humanity. He said, "God's ability to show mercy rather than cause destruction is also a sign of his power. The same goes to human kind," (Pope Francis, *Pontificate*) and that in governance, love must guide our judgment to tame sin, "Governing with love is just as important as governing with the law. Jesus' actions were always guided by love... it means we should try to tame sin with love instead of punishment (Pope Francis, *Pontificate*).

The Pope sees humanity in a state of suffering which for him is a consequence of sin. Creation too is in a state of destruction and in need of a cure; a cure that can only be gotten from God alone that is merciful and from a humanity who must awaken in itself that spirit of compassion that is attained from a softened heart. He say: "sin is the wound of humanity and God's mercy is the cure. We can show each other compassion, we can encourage our fellow men to soften their heart instead of sinning... The ability to show compassion is the test of our Christianity" (Pope Francis, *Pontificate*)

Mercy of God Manifested In Christ

For Pope Francis, the commitment of God to humanity was made very verifiable to us in the gospels by the very conspicuous activities, teaching and practices of Jesus by His restoring of hope, giving dignity to the poor and deprived, to the captives and sinners. He said; “How is God’s commitment to us made manifest? It is very easy to verify it in the gospels. In Jesus, God completely committed himself in order to restore hope to the poor, to those who were deprived of dignity, to strangers, to the sick, to captives and to sinners, whom he welcomes with kindness” (Pope Francis, *Year of Mercy*).

The Pope argues further that Jesus was fully aware of His vocation of compassion and mercy and He expressed it, realised it and communicated it in His ministry on earth. He said; “It was a mercy he (Jesus) expressed, realised and communicated throughout his life. Encouraging the multitude, proclaiming the gospel, healing the sick, being close to the least, forgiving sinners, Jesus made visible the love that is made open to us all; none excluded” (Pope Francis, *Year of Mercy*).

He was certain that all that Jesus accomplished was through the realization of the design of love and mercy that God had for his people. In His words, “everything that Jesus accomplished after his baptism was the realization of that initial design: to bring to all people the saving love of God.” (Pope Francis, *Year of Mercy*) He illustrated: “When Jesus saw that a crowd had followed him and his apostles to a meeting that was supposed to be private, he cancelled the meeting and offered counsel to the people. He realized they were lost sheep in need of a shepherd. Tending to their well being was more important to him than keeping to his agenda” (Pope Francis, *Pontificate*).

Confirming his conviction that Jesus was the true manifestation of the compassion of the father, the Pope cites Jesus when He said that He had come for sinners not for the righteous, “God is merciful. Mercy is at the heart of every story about God and Jesus, and God put Jesus on earth to serve as a human manifestation of the righteousness of mercy...” (Pope Francis, *Year of Mercy*). The Pope continues: “Jesus said that he did not come on earth for the righteous, but for the sinner. He didn’t come for the healthy but for the sick. He showed mercy by focusing his effort on people who had been cast out of society, such as lepers” (Pope Francis, *Year of Mercy*).

The Pope affirms his conviction in the pursuit of mercy and compassion by highlighting that Jesus was a man of lowliness and communicated that to His neighbours and starts the time of mercy for all humanity, stating that; “ he made himself neighbor to the lowliest, communicating to them God’s mercy: that is forgiveness, joy, and new life. Jesus the Son sent by the father, is truly the start of the time of mercy for all humanity” (Pope Francis, *Year of Mercy*). Having highlighted the fundamental conviction of the Pope based on his belief that God is the author

of mercy and compassion and Jesus is God's manifestation of his mercy and compassion, we would now dare to explore the compassionate leadership stance of Pope Francis as he leads the Church in the way of mercy and compassion.

Compassionate Leadership of Pope Francis

Pope Francis was very sure of the direction his papacy was going to take and was not deluded to its consequence on the church; little wonder then that he asked a congregation at Mass in the Vatican to start a meeting of bishops to pray that God should take from the meeting of bishops what may be seemingly impure, scandalous and threatening and turn it into a miracle. He said to them; I "ask you to pray fervently for this intention, so that Christ can take even what might seem to us impure, scandalous or threatening and turn it... into a miracle. Families today need miracles"(Pope Francis, *Address to Bishops*).

His tenure so far has been notable for adopting a more conciliatory tone towards the divorced and remarried and the LGBTQ community than of his predecessors. True to his expectation however, this has propelled significant controversies in the Church; parishes and dioceses on their equality and has set the pace and the approach for talking about the issues outside of the liberal conservative arena.

On Divorce and Remarriage

The Pope, true to his pontificate's outlook, calls for a true spirit of discernment in the handling of the issue of divorce and remarriage calling on priests to show more compassion in their judgment and consideration in the confessional. He said, "I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy." (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 305). In his most anticipated encyclical which became one of the most anticipated documents of the church on marriage and family life: which is the product of two synods in 2014 and 2015, the Pope bares the compassionate stance of his pontificate particularly in chapter 8 of the encyclical which is titled *Amoris Laetitia*.

Herein, the Pope became the advocate of the divorced and remarried by stating that these couples suffer in various situations in life that the Church has placed them by a right classification and not leaving room for discernment. He said: "the divorced who have entered a new union can find themselves in a variety of situations which should not be pigeon-holed or fit into an overly rigid classification leaving no room for a suitable, personal and pastoral discernment" (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 298).

The Pope clarifies that he is not oblivious of the concerns of those who will still prefer a Church that is more rigorous in its pastoral approach to issues and one that allows for no ambiguity and confession, yet, he still

proposes that Church that is attentive to the goodness that the Holy spirit sows in the midst of human weakness stating that; I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a church attentive to the goodness which the Holy spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, as a mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, always does what good she can, even if in the process she gets soiled by the mud of the street (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 308).

The Pope distances himself from any attempt to affirm or institute the negative tendency that may allow for or lead to a radical relativism which plays into an extreme liberalism, by stating clearly that: “To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failure is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 307).

Drawing from Thomas Aquinas, the Pope upholds the sacredness of the general rule for setting forth; that which is good and may not be disregarded or neglected but also acknowledge that these rules by their formulations do not provide for all situations and circumstances. Citing Aquinas, the Pope says: “it is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all the particular situation. But precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 304).

The stance of the Pope in his logic of mercy spans from the fact that we find it hard to allow for God’s unconditional love to flow freely to those who need it and want to place a price on the compassionate mercy of God and thereby emptying it of its significance. He states that; “At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the gospel” (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 311).

He states further that; “it is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community, and thus to experience being touched by an unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 297). Time magazine in appreciating the Pope’s work as they made him “Person of the Year” said, “What makes the Pope so important is the speed with which he has captured the imaginations of millions who had given up on hoping for the Church at all” (Dilt, *Times Magazine*).

On the LGBTQ Community

Pope Francis took the Church away from its conservative disposition toward the LGBTQ community to a whole new reality by his famous response to a question on the “gays” in which he declared; “who am I to judge.” This disposition has led journalists to admitting that, “Pope Francis’ tenure as Pope has been notable to lesbian gay community for his adoption of a more conciliatory tone towards LGBTQ people than that of his predecessors” (Dilt, *Times Magazine*). In that interview, he states thus; “the key is for the Church to welcome not exclude and show mercy not condemnation. If a person is gay and seeks God and has God and has good will who am I to judge? The problem is not having the orientation. We must be brothers” (Pope Francis, *Maiden Interview*).

The Pope explains his compassionate disposition to the gay community by emphasizing that the Church condemns the sin and not the sinner and also embraces the sinner who shows repentance and shows such persons the mercy of God, as he states; “the Church condemns sin because it has to relay the truth. This is sin, but at the same time it embraces the sinner who recognizes himself as such... it speaks to him of the infinite mercy of God” (Pope Francis, *Maiden Interview*). He also draws his conviction from the catechism of the Church to explain that the Church has always been on the side of respect for each and individual sexual orientation of persons, and admonishes against any form of discrimination and marginalization; “no one should marginalize these people for this, they must be integrated into society” (Pope Francis, *Maiden Interview*).

The Pope particularly upholds the dignity of the human person above the sexual orientation of the person. He encourages that we all must see the human person with dignity and it must matter how we treat them. He condemns an attitude where people select and discard people based on their sexual orientation as heartless. He states that: “Giving more importance to the adjective gay rather than the noun man, is not good. We are all human beings and have dignity. It does not matter who you are or how you live your life, you do not lose your dignity. There are people that prefer to select or discard people because of the adjective. These people don’t have human heart” (Pope Francis, *Maiden Interview*).

On Modern - Day Slavery

Pope Francis has also taken his compassionate gospel out of his comfort zone and has dared to confront humanity to look in the direction of compassion. He teaches the world that all people are equal and must be treated with same dignity and freedom and any relationship that does not respect such an arrangement must be seen and treated as a crime. He states that: “Every person and all people are equal and must be accorded the same freedom and the same dignity. Any discriminatory relationship that does not respect that

fundamental conviction that others are equal is a crime and frequently an aberrant crime” (Pope Francis, *World Day of Peace*).

He insists that this is not a battle he has initiated and intends to carry alone, but points to the fact that many creeds of our declarations carry this fact that modern slavery; a practice that disrespects human dignity and freedom is a crime against humanity. Reliant on this fact, he sees his compassionate gospel for human dignity as a task for all humanity to embrace and promote because its victims are found in all walks of life. He also states “we declare on each and every one of our creeds that modern slavery in terms of human trafficking; forced labour and prostitution, organ trafficking is a crime against humanity, its victims are found in all walks of life, but are most frequently among the poorest and most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters.”

The Pope also sees various forms of complicity of society in the perpetuation of the various forms of human trafficking, sex trade and exploitation of the vulnerable and insists that society must not only dismantle structures but must also be seen to be dismantling the environment that allows it to flourish. Such environments he outlines as the use of technology, communication methods and economic models:

The society must not only work to dismantle criminal structures that make human trafficking but must also address the larger issues that create the environment in which human trafficking is allowed to flourish, like the irresponsible use of technology and communication methods and question economic models that tend to privilege profit over people (Pope Francis, *Address to Church Leaders*).

The Pope’s work on trafficking has not gone unnoticed by John McCarthy the Australian Ambassador to the Holy See as represented in this statement; “I witness the “Francis effect” on many issues, none more than his constant demand that modern slavery and human trafficking be eradicated immediately and everywhere. His leadership and strong words have made this affront to human dignity press heavily on the conscience of contemporary world” (McCarthy, *Pope Francis*).

On the Environment

The Pope is not the Pope to categorically educate the society that it is a duty and a responsibility of all Christians to care for the environment, but, he is the forceful of them all and does not mince any words even when it seems often harsh as he calls for urgent action on the environment. He says:

God is not a wizard with a magic wand. Christianity and scientific theories about the origin of the world are compatible. I accept the theory of evolution and the big bang theory. People in their hearts mock God, for they don’t understand that God is nothing else than love (Pope Francis, *Address to Scientists*).

The Pope globalizes his compassionate call for climate change by his admonition that climate change is a global phenomenon, with great

ramifications in the areas of social, economic and political challenges of our time. These ramifications he particularly sums up in two crises, which to him, are erroneously classified separately as social and environmental, but insists that the two are actually demanding an integrated solution to combat them all. He states: “We are faced not with two separated crises one environmental and the other social but rather complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and at the same time protecting nature” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 139).

The Pope lays the source of these problems at the feet of those who are obsessed with the intent of maximizing profit and are carried away by profiteering and materialism, without a thought for the dignity of creation, its rhythm and the complexity of the ecosystem, which has led to the agony of the earth that, “cries out to us” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 2):

Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profit will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profit alone counts, there can be no thinking about the rhythm of nature, its phase of decay and regeneration or the complexity of the eco-system, which may be gravely upset by human intervention (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 190).

The Pope admonishes us on our abuse of the environment by reminding all that we are a part of the environment we destroy and that by destroying the environment, we destroy ourselves because we are totally dependent on the environment for our body, air and water; the basic necessities of life. “We forget that we ourselves are dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7) our very bodies are made up of her element, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 2). For a solution to climate change, the pontiff emphatically calls for and urges a relationship between man and nature not to be one driven by greed but an immediate and imperative urge to make the world a beautiful garden for the human family. He states: “Humanity is called to recognize the need for change of life style, production and consumption in order to combat the warming or at least the human cause which produces or aggravates it” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 23).

Christiana Figueres acknowledged that, “Pope Francis’ encyclical underscores the moral imperative for urgent action on climate change to lift the planet’s most vulnerable population, protect development and spur responsible growth” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*).

Conclusion

When we say that the Pope is known as the Pope of the people, we risk an understatement. His passion and teaching on compassion have however been praised by the faithful and non – religious people alike, as he pays attention to this gospel mission. As Megan asserts: “The leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, is known as the pope of the people. His teachings have been praised by the faithful and non-religious alike because of his attention to kindness and compassion. He has made a tremendous effort to change the way people interact with each other, and calls on us to make changes for the better”(Megan, *Incredible Ways*).

Through his work with all manner of creeds and professed ethics, he is shaping the world and how the Church must think, taking her beyond the boundaries of her comfort zone and to showing that the Church must love everyone. By outlining the vision of the Church to be that of a compassionate Church and encouraging her to enhance the lives of those who are suffering, he calls the Church to reach out more to people on the margin of society, as a compelling way to present “God’s love.”

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