

Pope Francis and the Church of St. Francis  
The Post-Western Age of Catholic Rediscovery  
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Contemporary Catholicism has gone through at least two major revolutions within the last half century. Vatican II instituted changes whose repercussions are still being felt today, however uneven the impact. By general consent, the modernization of Catholic theology and corresponding changes in church and the religious life have altered the face of the church for good. That revolution coincided with the unprecedented expansion of the Catholic Church in Africa and elsewhere in the post-Western world where modernization was overtaken by the forces of inculturation.

The second revolution stems directly from the long and complex personal legacy of John Paul II (1979-2005), and it has much to do with the way John Paul II positioned himself between the waning strength of European Catholicism and the rising tide of the worldwide Catholic resurgence. More Europeans left the church during his pontificate than in that of any of his predecessors, while millions more entered the church in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere than at other time in the history of the church. The pace seems to have picked up in the rest of the world while Europe has been going through a decline. In 1900 Europe (including Russia) and North America had a total Christian population of 427.779 million compared to 93.7 million for the rest of the world combined. In 2005 the figure for Europe and North America is 757.765 million combined, compared with 1.378 billion for the rest of the world. In 1900, 82% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America; in 2005 the number declined to 35%. It means 65% of the world's Christians live in the southern hemisphere, which is now the new center of gravity of the religion.

It is not just the sheer scale of the Catholic resurgence that is striking to us who live in the twilight mood of the West's retreat, but the nature of the resurgence. For one thing, Christianity has become the most pluralist and diverse of the religions of the world. More

people pray and worship and read the scriptures in more languages in Christianity than in any other religion in the world. Another feature of the worldwide Christian resurgence is that most Catholics entered the Church since Vatican II, with the vast majority under 35. There are 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide.

One way of describing this Catholic resurgence is to speak of it as the indigenous discovery of Christianity. In the old school view, mission was about the European discovery of indigenous societies, with missionaries, explorers, and adventurers penetrating the heart of darkness to bring light and order to the under-developed parts of the world. The goal was to remake the native in the image of Europe, with conversion the prescribed starting point. It was an elegant model of change based on a logical, coherent system of life. The only trouble was that it envisaged building a bridge that would bypass local cultures and customs, replacing them with imported ideas and values. The indigenous discovery of Christianity was shaped and guided by local initiative and agency to open new vistas of spirituality and liturgical renewal. Catholic conversion in Africa entered an accelerated period: from about 28 million in 1960 to over 175 million in 2015. This post-Western resurgence was proof that the process of indigenous discovery has a built-in momentum that is independent of developments in the old European heartlands. The energy and concentration of the Easter Vigil in Lagos or Kampala seem altogether incomprehensible compared to similar scenes elsewhere in Europe.

John Paul II responded to these momentous changes by affirming Catholicism in the present tense as the church of the frontiers, not just as the church of the European heartlands. In his travels in Africa the pope saw evidence of this change first hand, and, according to the late Cardinal Malula of Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Bishop Peter Sarpong of Ghana, he was impressed. A spell was broken, and the peoples of the world arose to claim the heritage as their own. Few people in Europe or North America were prepared for this cultural shift, so common was the assumption that Europe is the faith, in the famous words of Hilaire Belloc (*Europe and the Faith*, New York: Paulist Press, 1920, 191). But Pope John Paul stepped into that new role with the natural flair of a brilliant pioneer, affirming the changes and giving them fresh impetus and new direction. It is to be hoped that in any assessment of his

legacy, his role in transforming Catholicism into a world religion will be recognized. Little of that has been reflected so far in accounts of his accomplishments, and yet it is unquestionably the case that, with remarkable stamina and unflagging purpose, John Paul II presided over contemporary Catholicism as a world religion, as a world church – and that way of describing the Catholic church is not an oxymoron. The way to understand the changes is to think of a *heartland Catholicism* with its great cathedrals, its great heritage and legacy in art and literature, philosophy, theology, great music, buildings and architecture, and a *frontier Catholicism* where the greatest monuments of the church are living men and women, often children, the vast majority of whom are poor, and where the greatest buildings of the church remain will become visible and real in binding wounds, mending broken lives, and erecting dykes against the tide of suffering and neglect. They have not been built yet because the church is too busy receiving new members and establishing them in the faith.

In these new circumstances, papal statesmanship requires mediating between frontier Catholicism and heartland Catholicism, that is to say, between the Catholicism of the European discovery where the concern is with regulations and conformity and rules and definitions and boundaries, and frontier Catholicism of the indigenous discovery with its teeming masses, lively liturgy, poignant prayers, and dynamic spirituality.

One of the legacies of John Paul II is to challenge Catholics to recognize that Catholicism is a world church of tremendous vibrancy and diversity, with numerous cultural streams running through it, and that the most dynamic, the most vibrant parts of the Catholic church are not in the old medieval cathedrals and the great heritage that Europe once was, but in the new emerging frontiers beyond the West. There are profound implications in this for all sorts of things, one of the most striking being the extent to which Catholic ritual and liturgical life is able to conserve much in the old dispensation. This is the case with sacred vernacular hymns, songs, prayers, art, and music, for example, as the work of the late Cameroonian Jesuit, Fr. Mveng, demonstrated. We catch glimpses of the enormous potential of what is possible from the well-known Missa Luba where sacred music is fused with sacred dance and choral art to make a vivid, lively impact. The Missa Luba continues to be updated.

While it is natural to ask what the election of Pope Francis means for the future of the Church and for faith in the twenty-first century, it is also natural to inquire about the unique circumstances that led to his appointment. The palpable excitement and surprise that greeted his election suggests in the minds of many Catholics and non-Catholics alike that change is in the offing, and that a new direction is needed for recovery, witness, and service. His predecessor, Benedict XVI, at a sun-drenched farewell audience at St. Peter's Square on a crisp Thursday morning, February 28, 2013, had spoken about the storm that buffeted the boat on the sea of Galilee as the disciples scrambled while Jesus went to sleep on them, saying he also felt like the Lord was sleeping as the storm of current scandals beset the Church. Benedict's address was remarkable for its plain-spoken nature without the slightest hint of emotional strain given the historic nature of the occasion: a reigning pope abdicating for the first time in six hundred years. The mood at St Peter's was equally remarkably receptive and leavened with anticipation, with the faithful embracing Benedict with the same fervor with which they embraced gladly the hope he held out before them without flinching from the challenge he indicated, saying "there have been times when the seas were rough and the wind against us, as in the whole history of the Church it has ever been - and the Lord seemed to sleep. Nevertheless, I always knew that the Lord is in the barque, that the barque of the Church is not mine, not ours, but His - and He shall not let her sink. It is He, who steers her." The response was attentive and reverential, with young people comprising a large part of the huge crowds that morning. It gave the proceedings the intimate gravitas of a pilgrimage. Whatever nostalgia there was, it was suffused with hope.

When Pope Francis, a Jesuit, was elected within a matter of days of the conclave convening, it was vindication of the spirit of calm serenity and trust that was present on the occasion of the farewell audience. In so many ways Pope Francis' succession seems an apt fulfillment of Pope Benedict XVI's prayer of the Spirit's guidance for the Church. As Cardinal Bergoglio, Pope Francis was known for his simple and approachable style and for his support of social justice programs and commitment to the poor in his native Argentina. The pastoral office was for him a call to serve the people and to draw near to them – in fact, to be one of them. He was active in the cause of ecumenical unity and action, affirming his solidarity with Jews, Christian evangelicals, and Muslims. He took a very strong position condemning the bombing in 1994 in Buenos Aires of a seven-story building housing the Argentine Jewish Mutual

Association and the Delegation of the Argentine Jewish Association. In 2005 Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz of the Center for Christian Jewish Understanding at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, praised Cardinal Bergoglio's leadership.

Given his distinctive style of leadership, we can expect reforms in the Church to be centered on consensus-building and attentiveness to the life and concerns of the faithful and of their neighbors. Issues and events of the world beyond the West will receive particular attention, as will the work of social justice, and with it, presumably, the heroic service of the extraordinary sisters who have borne the brunt of care for the needy and who are pillars of the educational mission of the Church. As a self-declared patron of the poor, the pope is unlikely to be sequestered as nothing more than defender-in-chief of ecclesiastical power, and given his involvement in political and social issues in Argentina, human rights should receive great prominence in his pontificate. It remains to be seen, however, what reforms now under consideration he will institute of the encrusted Vatican bureaucratic machinery, including financial management, and if he will tackle prevailing thorny matters of celibacy, divorce, marriage, women's role in the Church, gay rights, and the continuing restrictions on contraception and abortion. Once upon a time doctrine and theology were the driving force of the Church's reliable if lumbering superstructure; today social and cultural matters fill that role, threatening a polarity between the Church and faithful communicants who dissent from its social prescriptions.

As a hint of his desire to abandon the image of the Church as a musty anachronism, Pope Francis has spoken before of the need to avoid "the spiritual sickness of a self-referential church." He has criticized the over-clerical character of the Church, saying "the priests clericalize the laity and the laity beg us to be clericalized." He calls that "sinful abetment," saying baptism should suffice for the life of discipleship. If he adheres to that strip-down, unpretentious view of the Church, he would likely advance the promise of lay enablement that Vatican II encouraged but left unfulfilled. That impulse has been lodged like a dormant supplement in the body of the Church, waiting for the day when it can be released for the good of all believers.

Perhaps the new statesmanship of the papacy can mediate between a Europe bewitched by wealth and power and a post-Western Christianity undeterred by poverty, persecution, and suffering. In his Apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* of November, 2013,

Pope Francis declares: “The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.”

As for his impact on the wider ecumenical front, Pope Francis heralds a new age for the Church as a bridge-builder between Catholics and non-Catholics, between liberals and conservatives, priest and laity, and between the Church and the world. The pope will be mindful of what St. Bonaventura, St. Francis' biographer, wrote affirming the nature of God as that of a circle of which the center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere, which suggests a spirit of genuine openness to the world. By virtue of the one God and Creator we are all of one kin.

On the Muslim front it is not too early to see the pope’s election and his adoption of the name of Francis of Assisi as one of tantalizing symbolic significance. St. Francis lived in the midst of the upheaval of the Crusades in the course of which he was taken prisoner at Damietta in 1219 when he found himself before the sultan. Francis preached before the sultan who treated him courteously, but, apart from obtaining a promise of lenient treatment of Christian captives, it is presumed that Francis had only minimal effect on his Muslim captor. St. Bonaventura perhaps wrote the epitaph of the age when, abandoning all hope of an interfaith breakthrough, he said that the only way to do mission in the Muslim world is to offer our lives in sacrifice. Despite greater risks today, the stalemate with the Muslim world has not much changed since then.

Still, the figure of St. Francis has staged a comeback now in the official nomenclature of the new pope. St. Francis was a picturesque character who combined earthiness with towering supernatural faith, and who made the passion of Christ so plausible and so palpable an outflow of faith and obedience that all whom he touched felt a gut affinity with him. His rule of gathering around low and mean tables so that a beggar would feel at home in that company raised the bar of Christian charity and hospitality to the level of common, unadorned humanity. He tamed the propensity for position, power, and privilege into one of deference and courtesy for the poor and the sick. In the presence of St. Francis we could claim our humanity only by acknowledging that of the poor. When we are in the sight of God, to recall St. Francis, we are only so much and no

more. For him the love of God was the supreme passion and rule of his life, and in consequence moral and ethical matters came before matters of doctrine and theology. As the “minstrel of the Lord,” he took the presence of God into the converging worlds of the personal, social, spiritual, natural, and the sacramental. In following in the saint’s footsteps, Pope Francis intends to bring his Jesuit credentials into the crucible of serving the poor, making peace, and defending the dignity of the downtrodden and the forgotten. Pope Francis seems resolved to launch the Church into a new age of evangelism guided by the spirit of St. Francis. In Africa, Asia and elsewhere, the prospects cannot be more encouraging, if also more challenging. In an ironic way, nothing could be more appropriate for the mood of the contemporary world as was so well expressed in *The Singer*, Calvin Miller’s poetic allegory of the life of Christ inspired by Catholic mystics:

A healthy child is  
somehow very much like God.  
A hurting child, His son.