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MISSION IN COVID/POST-COVID TIMES: DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM POPE FRANCIS

1. INTRODUCTION – POPE FRANCIS’ UNQUESTIONED LEADERSHIP IN MISSION

In November 2020, in the midst of the so-called pandemic second wave which swept across Europe creating renewed panic and social tensions, a survey confirmed that Pope Francis was firmly topping the list showing world leaders’ popularity. The world crisis created by corona virus has shown a constantly growing appreciation of the Argentinean pope at the international level. He is not only the Catholic pope, but a widely acknowledged reference figure. Since the time of his election some of his gestures or statements had a tremendous impact on world public opinion.¹ All this has become even more evident during the pandemic. The present global and secularized world had put aside words like pain, suffering and death. All of a sudden, people in different parts of the globe – in

¹ It is enough to think of his visits to Lampedusa and Lesbos in order to draw the world’s attention to the migrants issue or the publication of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Sii* on the care of the common home which is the natural environment, and the co-signing, with a Muslim leader, of the *Declaration on Human Fraternity*. These happenings and documents have made Bergoglio a global moral and religious reference point, well beyond the Catholic and Christian context.

countries which are considered to be among the richest and most developed – were once again confronted by a feeling of fragility and powerlessness. No one was able to find a safe shelter away from an invisible enemy. Anxiety, fear, uncertainty paved the way to desperation. Many questions, which for millennia accompanied human beings and today are almost forgotten due to progress and affluence, emerged once again. Faced with this scenario, people expected valid answers helping to accept what is happening. Never as in 2020 and 2021 a good portion of our human race suddenly needed someone capable of opening horizons of hope, shedding rays of light in the darkness which has descended upon the human community.² Pope Francis showed his great capability of reading people's plea, listening to their anguish and offering a feeling of closeness and consolation. Above all, he captured the great danger presented by another subtle virus: the one which creates division among people who are requested to distance themselves from one another while suspicion is growing to divide single human beings and communities.³ In this new context Pope Francis proved to be a reference point for many, not only Christians and not only Catholics.

Also people involved in mission work cannot ignore the many proposal for a new style of mission which came from Pope Francis in the last two years. The present paper wishes to explore what inspiration we can draw from the present pope's experience, initiatives, gestures and witness. I suggest a few points on which we can reflect in order to find new and creative ways to live and implement mission in a world which will never be the same.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF GESTURES

Since March 2013, when he was elected to seat of Peter, we have learnt that Pope Francis speaks not only with his words, written in

² D. Libanori, *La fede al tempo di covid-19. Riflessioni ecclesiali e pastorali*, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/la-fede-al-tempo-di-covid-19> (2020-11-14).

³ Ibid.

documents or pronounced in homilies and messages, but more effectively with his gestures.⁴ A few examples: washing the feet of migrants, even Muslims, for the Maundy Thursday service in *Coena Domine*; his trips to visit countries where Christianity is a small, often persecuted, minority; having meals with poor and dejected people; co-signing a document like the one of *Human Fraternity* along with a Muslim leader etc. Even during the pandemic Bergoglio showed meaningful gestures which can be taken as reference points for a new mission spirit. The image of an absolutely empty St. Peter's Square, battered by a constant rain, where a lonely man in white – Pope Francis – walked the steps up to the Basilica to offer prayers for the world to be cured from the pandemic is destined to remain among the images symbol of 2020 world. On the same occasion, Bergoglio spoke words which captured the feelings of all men and women across the world, in a season of fear and despair:

For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's

⁴ For instance, he decided to leave the papal apartments empty while opting for living at Santa Marta. He often directly phones people, especially those who are in distress. He appoints cardinals with a different parameter, which was unknown to his predecessors. He misses no opportunity to dine with poor people and migrants and he has direct aids who can care for those who live on the footpaths around Vatican City. Regarding his trips it is enough to think of his visits to Lampedusa and Lesbos in order to draw the world's attention to the migrants issue. In the field of his Magisterium, the publication of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Sii* on the care of the common home which is the natural environment, and the co-signing, with a Muslim leader, of the *Declaration on Human Fraternity* are eloquent examples of his new approach towards priorities. All these happenings and documents have made Bergoglio a global moral and religious reference point, well beyond the Catholic and Christian context.

gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost.⁵

All this may inspire us to express our mission spirit and action through gestures which are prophetic and meaningful to people we live with. Obviously, each of us is called to creatively find actions and words which can truly appear credible and imitable to people around us. There will be, therefore, a great variety of potential signs which our lives can offer. For instance, in a context where people live in ever more economic stringent conditions we are called to revise our life style and, above all, to show our proximity to those who are lonely and abandoned because of the pandemics.

3. OBEYING AND COOPERATING WITH CIVIL AUTHORITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

A second attitude which stood out in Pope Francis' image, during the pandemic, is his commitment to comply with all anti-covid norms to ensure his own health and that of the people around him. He immediately accepted all restrictions reinforced by Italian and Vatican health authorities and, after going through the procedure to make sure that he was not positive to the virus, lived secluded in his room for quite some time. For months, all weekly audiences, usually held in St. Peter's Square, were cancelled. Still, the pope kept on having online speeches every Wednesday when he addressed all faithful who wanted to be connected or watch the virtual audience on the Vatican website. On Sundays, he followed the same procedure and appeared from one of the libraries in the Apostolic Palace for a short meditation on the readings of the day. He concluded the traditional *Angelus* with a blessing significantly imparted while overlooking a completely empty St. Peter's Square. Also the traditional daily morning Mass, celebrated in the chapel of his residence at Santa Marta, continued for several months, though with no congregation apart from the few

⁵ Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, Vatican City, 27th March 2020.

needed to help the celebrant during the religious service. He resumed services and audiences when authorities relaxed restrictions. All these attitudes conveyed a clear message to believers. In matters of public security it is up to the administrators and not the religious authorities to decide. Even religious manifestations are not exempted from all measures in favour of the common good of the community at large.⁶ At the same time, he missed no chance to remind political leaders of the need to ensure medical care and vaccines availability to everyone in the world not only to the richest countries. Above all he was ready to receive the required shots and encouraged people to do the same.

Arguably these have been important attitudes which can be useful for mission activities. In fact, as we all know, in many contexts people experienced moments of confusion due to different guide-lines issued by political and administrative authorities which often used covid emergency for political agenda and games much to the detriment of people's health and safety. As the pandemic is far from being over, strictly following the precautionary measures issued by civil authorities and encouraging people to receive the required inoculations can be a very important sign useful to the Catholic community and to its presence in society. This can be a basic attitude in mission activities. Moreover in contexts where local authorities are slow to act or where corruption prevents from taking care of people, mission spirit, addressed especially towards underprivileged and downtrodden, is called to inspire administrators towards a pro-active and just commitment. Church institutions have taken initiative to offer infrastructures to carry out vaccination. This can be encouraged and promoted.

⁶ This firm stand helped also Italian bishops to accept, after a first reaction, the decision of the Italian government which, for two months, did not allow religious ceremonies and services.

4. NEW WAYS TO REACH OUT TO PEOPLE – THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF MEDIA

In the context we have just described, the pope immediately wanted the daily Mass celebrated at Santa Marta to be broadcasted in order to reach out to people in moments of loneliness and distress. For the first time in Italy, RAI (*Italian Broadcasting Corporation*) offered its channels for the daily mass to be shown live. The audience was surprisingly much higher than expected. When the Italian government restrictions closed all places of worship and complaints arouse from several corners of the Catholic world, Pope Francis underlined how, in time of pandemic, it is acceptable to be part of a virtual liturgical celebration through TV, social media etc. He authoritatively stated that the situation created by the pandemic made him reflect on the danger that all people were living through.⁷ This example was immediately taken up by dioceses and parishes in the world and prayer and religious services have become again part of the media world and socials at large. As we all know, this dimension of reaching out people through media and social media has to be one of the pillars of a new understanding of mission without overlooking the personal dimension of rapport with individuals and communities which remains the privileged way to live mission in action. In time of emergency and in order to recovery from pandemics also pastoral care can take new forms through media and social media in order to reach out to people in effective and concrete ways.

5. MAKING USE OF SPACES – THE VALUE OF EMPTY SPACES

Reference has been already made to the evening of March 27, 2020 when, in St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis had called for a common Christian prayer for the end of the pandemic and decided to hold

⁷ See, Francis, "Familiarity with the Lord", *Homily at Santa Martha Daily Mass*, 17th April 2020.

it physically alone but in union of spirit with millions of Christians of any denomination all over the world. The square, symbol of the Catholic Church, on official occasions, is usually thronged with thousands of people. That evening it was absolutely empty. Only the pope could be seen along with the master of ceremonies to assist him. At the edge of the square, from quite a distance next to the Bernini pillars, one could spot some policemen with their cars. Only two sounds could be heard: the one of the sirens of the ambulances and the one of the battering rain, which continued for the whole hour during the prayer service. The pope offered a reflection drawing inspiration from the Scripture passage where the apostles, while on a boat, are afraid that a storm will have tragic consequences for them, while Jesus is asleep.⁸ By analogy, he explained how the pandemic like “*the storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities*”.⁹ And he underlined the real truth of the story and the lesson of the corona virus. “*Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?*”. This is the sentence addressed by Jesus to the apostles who woke him up as they could not see a way out of the storm. Those were the two questions which resounded in the emptiness of St. Peter’s Square.

In that context a powerful message conveyed to all people irrespective of their ethnicity, culture and religion was the use of empty spaces made by Pope Francis. In fact, recent decades have nailed in our minds opposite images: huge crowds following religious leaders, not only Catholic. It is enough to think of some images of the Muslim world. As Catholics, we can compare the powerful impact of a fully packed St. Peter’s Square or other esplanades in the world, like Luneta Park in Manila, when hundreds of thousands of people joined to see John Paul II and, years later, Pope Francis. By contrast, we cannot

⁸ Cfr. Mk 4,35-40.

⁹ Francis, *Homily during the Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, Vatican City, 27th March, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html (2020-11-14).

deny that vacuum and emptiness can carry an equally powerful message in order to announce the Good News. We are called to discern which one is more relevant in the geographical and temporal context we find ourselves. On both these mentioned occasions, Pope Francis chose to be alone in a large, at times immense, space. Most probably, in the last two thousand years, none of his predecessors had such an experience. Those empty spaces were the right place where the whole of humanity could be contained. Pope Francis appeared to represent not only the Catholic population of the world. He was an icon of the human race struck by a calamity and elevating his prayer to God in whatever way people can call Him or experience Him according to their cultures and religions.

We can reflect and discern on making use of spaces – full or empty – in the right moment and in real context.

6. JOINING HANDS WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER CHURCHES AND RELIGIONS

Thanks to the proposal extended to all world religious leaders by the *Higher Committee for Human Fraternity*, 14th May 2020 was announced as the ‘International Day of Prayer and Fasting’ in order “*to ask the merciful God for an end to this tragic moment of the pandemic*”.¹⁰ Pope Francis, without officially appearing in any of the many initiatives, welcomed the proposal encouraging all believers of different traditions to come together in spirit in order to celebrate that day while fasting and praying.¹¹ Moreover, being aware of certain criticism inside the Catholic Church for accepting this invitation, while delivering the homily during the morning Mass celebrated in Santa Marta, he made a point to clarify possible misunderstandings.

¹⁰ Francis, “*Day of fraternity, day of penance and prayer*”, *Homily at Santa Martha Daily Mass*, 14th May 2020.

¹¹ Francis, *Angelus*, Vatican City, 3rd May, 2020.

Someone will say:

This is religious relativism and you cannot do that”. But how can we not pray to the Father of all? [...] We are all united as human beings, as *brothers and sisters*, praying to God according to each one’s culture, according to each one’s own tradition, according to each one’s own beliefs, but brothers and sisters praying to God, this is what is important! [...] Today is a day of fraternity, looking to the one Father. [...].¹²

That day witnessed an amazing number of initiatives in every corner of the world, most of them via webinar and socials. It was the occasion not so much for praying together but to offer space for insights drawn from the Scriptures or from saintly people of different religions on the theme of suffering and distress. Also youth were involved and often were the coordinators of the different moments of reflection engaging people of all ages and faiths. Pope Francis’ acceptance of celebrating a day of prayers and fasting along with all believers in the world may offer a meaningful insight in our witnessing in mission. In fact, in order to be credible in our mission work, we have now more than ever to be with people irrespective of their faith tradition.

Today, people who engage in mission are invited to experience more and more the dimension *with gentibus*, along with the traditional one *ad gentes*, without forgetting the witness of constantly being *inter gentes*. In fact, in this effort to make mission commitment valuable and understandable to people around us, it is absolutely necessary to cooperate with everyone.

7. PROMOTING EXPRESSION OF POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

From the time of the first wave of corona pandemic, Pope Francis showed a great concern about being close to the people, whom he

¹² Francis, “*Day of fraternity, day of penance and prayer*”.

could not meet anymore in person. “*My major concern – says the pope in an interview – is how to accompany and be closer to the people of God. [...] I’m living this as a time of great uncertainty. It’s a time for inventing, for creativity*”.¹³ Italy experienced the general lockdown from March 9, 2020, and from that day onward we can very well say that there was no message, no Sunday Angelus and no daily homilies at Mass where he did not mention the pandemic or aspects and people connected with it. Two main platforms were used by the head of the Catholic Church to reflect on the pandemic and its effects and to pray for all categories of people who, in different ways, were affected or engaged in assisting: his daily reflections during the Mass at Santa Marta and the catechesis offered during the weekly audiences. Through this Bergoglio was able to reach out to people to make them feel his presence at their side. But all this was not enough. Faithful to the much inspiring people’s theology, the Argentinian Pope repeatedly promoted moments of prayer and expression of devotion according to what we define as ‘popular religiosity’.

A couple of examples may help to shed light on the relevance of this aspect. On 15th of March 2020, the first Sunday of the general lockdown in Italy, he left the Vatican for a symbolic pilgrimage. First, he went to the Basilica of St. Mary’s Major where he prayed in front of the statue of Mary, whom the Romans traditionally venerate as *salus populi Romani* (Roman people’s health). Immediately after, he asked to be taken to via del Corso, in the very heart of the capital city of Italy. The road, which is usually synonymous with shopping, coffee and evening aperitif, was completely empty, almost frighteningly deserted. Pope Francis walked with his characteristic limping style for some distance, before entering the church of San Marcello al Corso, where he prayed again in front of a sacred crucifix carrying

¹³ A. Ivereigh, *A Time of Great Uncertainty*, an Interview with Pope Francis, *Commonweal*, 8th April 2020, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/time-great-uncertainty>, (2020-11-15).

great meaning.¹⁴ Later he invited people to pray the rosary and he promoted a sort of a relay among shrines in the world dedicated to Mary. Every day the rosary for the cessation of covid was recited in one of them till the conclusion, which came in front of the grotto of our Lady of Lourdes located in the Vatican Gardens.

In moments like the pandemic and, especially, in the aftermath of the disaster it becomes extremely significant to pray with people in front of holy images or in the way common people do. Mission after-covid has to propose once again these modalities in order to engage people of all types. Throughout the centuries, pandemics have always stirred similar feelings in people's mind and heart and this has a deep theological and pastoral significance which cannot be downplayed or, even worst, ignored in our missionary endeavours.

8. FRATERNITY AS THE LEADING SPIRIT OF MISSION WITH PEOPLE

In the already mentioned lonely hour of prayer in St. Peter's Square, in March 2020, Pope Francis underlined the real truth of the story and the lesson of the corona virus.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.¹⁵

We find here the fundamental key to understand Pope Francis' inspiration to a new prospect of mission: fraternity. From the very beginning of the pandemic, Bergoglio has pointed out that this is

¹⁴ In fact, in 1522, the same crucifix was taken around the city of Rome so that people could ask for the end of the terrible plague which had affected the whole of Europe.

¹⁵ Ibid.

the great lesson the virus teaches all of us: we are all the same and we are all in the same boat as we all belong to the same family. It is therefore of great significance the fact that, in October 2020 in the midst of corona traumatic experience, the pope decided to publish his new encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, where he powerfully underlines that we are called to live mission in true spirit of fraternity. ‘Fraternity’, in fact, in his perception stands out as the key category, which will enable men and women, communities and states to overcome the emergency created by the pandemic and will make it possible for the world to emerge from the many existing problems, further amplified by covid-19. The fact that “*we are all on the same boat*” does not mean only that we are all exposed to the virus regardless of gender, age, culture, religion and ethnicity. It also implies that all our acts and behaviours have, now more than ever before, consequences for others: we can protect them or else we can put them in danger.

Pope Francis is never abstract and this letter is no exception to this, as he does not propose a doctrine of ‘fraternity’ at the theoretical level. Its crucial role can be fully grasped by listening to the cry of those who suffer because of the lack of fraternity.¹⁶ The document offers a reference-example of fraternity in the parable of the Good Samaritan, probably one of the best known Gospels pages.¹⁷ From this Bergoglio draws inspiration for proposing a comprehensive vision for how the world should change after the pandemic is over.¹⁸ It is of fundamental importance to free ourselves from the pervasive individualistic mentality which characterizes the present globalized world preventing people from ‘being close to the other’.

¹⁶ Ibid., n. 285.

¹⁷ Ibid., n. 56.

¹⁸ J.J. McElwee, *Pope’s post-COVID encyclical envisions a less populist, less capitalist world*, National Catholic Reporter, 4th October 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/theology/popes-post-covid-encyclical-envisions-less-populist-less-capitalist-world> (2020-11-17).

Individualism does not make us more free, more equal, more fraternal. The mere sum of individual interests is not capable of generating a better world for the whole human family. [...] Radical individualism is a virus that is extremely difficult to eliminate, for it is clever. (FT 105)

This individualistic mentality narrows down people's and communities' mentality paving the way to loneliness.¹⁹ Closely connected with this is the invitation to go beyond obstacles, walls and frontiers. The icon chosen for this 'going beyond' is the image of Francis of Assisi meeting with the Great Sultan Malik al-Kamil. It was a venture which went against the spirit current at that time, powerfully marked by the crusades. In order to achieve his plan Francis had to attempt "*approaching [Malik and] making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers*". (FT 81) In this effort, he "*demonstrated the breadth and grandeur of his love, which sought to embrace everyone*". (FT 3) All this offers evidence of the fact that true fraternity is capable of not limiting itself to its own people but reaches out to everyone, beyond walls and barriers. In today's world this perspective and spirit can be easily connected to the issue of migrants, which has been very much the core of the present pope's concern since the time of his election. Even more now after the pandemic exploded provoking endless sufferings in people who are displaced, as they cannot find any medical assistance or preventive help. Moreover, migrants have been often at the center of the political agenda of many parties, especially the so-called populists which claim the pressing urgency of erecting barriers and walls against migrants in order to defend local identities and traditions. On the other hand, globalization has often equated local values and necessities in the name of a neo-liberal economic and financial agenda capable of transforming peoples and communities into indistinguishable masses.

¹⁹ G. Costa, P. Foglizzo, *Fratelli tutti: un appello ad «andare oltre»*, *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, Novembre 2020, p. 709-718, 711.

The category of fraternity proposed by *Fratelli tutti* “calls for the ability to recognize other people’s right to be themselves and to be different”. (FT 218) In fact, this makes it possible to create a ‘culture of encounter’, which Pope Francis has been preaching all over the world and all the times. It is a culture which counteracts culture of rejection and discrimination which seems to prevail today and that the pandemic has further exposed and aggravated. In order to achieve this culture of encounter, every human being and every community “*should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life*”. (FT 216) This effort becomes possible when at the center of all interests – economic, educational, political etc. – are men and women and not vested interests. In short, the pope’s message through *Fratelli tutti* wishes to be a comprehensive vision for how the world should change after the coronavirus pandemic. Bergoglio looks forward to societies which are more caring and more focused on helping those who are in need. This calls for distancing from the capitalistic financial market obsession which has characterized globalization and, as a consequence, it requires a complete rethinking of our style of life.²⁰

9. CONCLUSIONS: “WHAT SAVES US IS NOT AN IDEA BUT AN ENCOUNTER”

In the last two years, marked by an sudden world-wide unexpected storm (and, recently, much more with Ukraine-Russia war and economic and international instability) Pope Francis gave a testimony of openness to reality, trying to read the signs of times by what he calls a “*robust set of criteria*”.²¹ They are the awareness of being “*loved by God and being called to be a people in service and solidarity*”.²²

²⁰ J.J. McElwee, *Pope’s post-COVID encyclical envisions a less populist, less capitalist world*.

²¹ Francis, *Let us Dream. The Path to a Better Future*, London 2020, p. 51.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

In his messages, statements, gestures and signs he clearly showed people how “*coronavirus has accelerated a change of era which was already underway*”.²³ In his perspectives there is a deep conviction that categories and assumptions which were commonly used before, even in the recent past, are no longer effective in order to understand the world and look at the future. Covid 19, amidst immense sufferings, is offering the world a propitious moment for reflecting, questioning and dialoguing about the future with new recipes and solutions.²⁴ Here the category of fraternity becomes crucial.

To dream of a different future we need to choose fraternity over individualism as our organizing principle. Fraternity, the sense of belonging to each other and to the whole of humanity, is the capacity to come together and work together against a shared horizon of possibility.²⁵

In Bergoglio’s thinking, to build on fraternity in order to create a culture of encounter and justice means to move together towards unity, which helps to be committed “*to allow people to serve as a body despite differences of viewpoint, physical separation and human ego*”.²⁶ This attitude and these commitments will prevent us from falling into uniformity while respecting the values and richness of plurality. In fact, in today’s world, while we are more and more interconnected we experience a deep sense of division, especially at the social and economic level. Our societies and communities are more and more fragmented and this creates dangerous polarizations, as it is seen in politics and social life. Fraternity will help to foster dialogue at all levels and this will enable people “*to generate a shared horizon toward which we can all move forward together*”.²⁷ This

²³ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 59-60.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

does not mean, in Pope Francis' understanding, denying tensions and differences. It rather calls for the engagement of everyone and all communities to work for a wider unity where all differences remain and coexist while working together. This reading of the present reality can help us react to the pandemic as a people, as a whole humanity with its differences and riches. But we need the courage “*to restore an ethics of fraternity and solidarity, regenerating the bonds of trust and belonging. For what it saves is not an idea but an encounter.*”²⁸

Key words: pandemic, COVID, Church, mission

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²⁸ Ibid., p. 107.