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The radical ecclesiology of mercy

Francis' Jubilee is re-focusing the Church

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International

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Pope Francis greets pilgrims in St. Peter's Square, Dec. 17, 2014.
(Photo: Bohumil Petrik/CNA)

There is the concept that change in the Church and Christianity means, 'progress', whereby believers – both individually and as a community – increasingly behave more like followers of Jesus Christ and less like subjects of an empire or a firm.

And, according to this notion, one could say the Church has made noticeable progress during this past century.

Whether we like it or not (or even know it or not), all Christians are now 'modernists'; that is, if we define "modernism" by the famous *dictum* attributed to the French Catholic theologian, Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), who said: "Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and

what arrived was the Church".

(Of course, the furiously anti-modernist Pope Pius X excommunicated Loisy in 1908.)

We are all aware that there is a gap between the model offered by Jesus and the Kingdom he preached, on the one hand, and the Church's own witness to Jesus, on the other hand.

Catholic theology during the 20th Century and especially at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) acknowledged the gap between the Gospel and the Church, and Pope Francis is continuing that tradition of re-evangelization – re-evangelization of the Church even before the secular world.

The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy is part of that.

Loosely wrapped in medieval symbolism and language tied to the doctrine of the indulgences, Francis' Jubilee is re-focusing the Church on mercy. This has the potential of beginning a new age in the way the Church relates to its members.

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Italian theologian Stella Morra offers an insightful analysis of this in a little, but remarkable book she recently published – *Dio non si stanca. La misericordia come forma ecclesiale*, (*God never tires. Mercy as ecclesial form*) published by Edizione Dehoniane, Bologna.

Morra speaks of the “symbolic overabundance of the sacrament of reconciliation” – something she says the Church needs badly. But she notes that academic Catholic theology has given up on symbolism, leaving it to music and the arts, which are now largely estranged from religion and the Church.

Mercy can only be relational; it is not an object or an idea; it changes both subjects involved; it is not subject to doctrinal definition; is practical and experiential; it is always transcendent, in the sense that every act of mercy has to do with the divine; it is by definition inclusive and cannot be used to shape an exclusive, identity-obsessed form of the Christian faith.

One of the most important facts is that there is no particular minister of mercy; rather, we are all ministers of mercy.

For example, a person does not need to be a priest to “perform” the seven works of corporal mercy (feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead) or the seven works of spiritual mercy (share knowledge, give advice to those who need it, comfort the suffering, be patient with others, forgive those who hurt you, give correction to those who need it, pray for the living and the dead). In all these works the ‘matter’ of the sacrament of mercy is life itself, and the ministers are each one of us.

There are great ecclesiological consequences to this.

One of them is that the Jubilee becomes an opportunity, not to earn an indulgence, but to put an end to a certain way of being Church that has only partially received Vatican II and has augmented what the Council did and did not say.

Vatican Council II walked largely in the footsteps of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which put doctrine and the control of consciences at the center. But his interplay between truth as orthodoxy and the role of conscience puts an unbearable burden on a person.

A society like ours, which has become both more secularized and more individualistic, no longer helps the individual share faith with others or the experience of sin and reconciliation. The Jubilee is a way for Francis to address our unbalanced understanding of sin as a moral category, rather than the theological category that it really is; to address sin as something that has to do with charity, not orthodoxy.

The focus on mercy resets the balance between the importance of orthodoxy and the value of orthopraxy; that is, seeing ‘correct practices’ in light of mercy and not out of a moral sense disconnected from interpersonal relations. The focus on mercy also resets the balance that has been lost balance between the individual/personal dimension and the community.

Overall, the emphasis on mercy answers the question of whether Christianity is an abstract intellectual truth or a form of life. Mercy can change the way the Church deals with reality, not only on the linguistic level (how we talk about things), but also on the practical level (how we deal with things) and especially on the ritual level (how we make of the act of mercy a sacramental act that gives grace).

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The Jubilee has only just started and it is impossible to tell what kind of impact it will have on the future of the Church. Yet it is clear through the way he is living out his pontificate and shaping this Holy Year, Pope Francis is bringing about a further *aggiornamento* of the Church along the lines of Vatican II.

It is an up-dating of the Constantinian-imperial Church of the first millennium with its emphasis of dogma over *kerygma*, that is, over proclamation; the Church of the “Gregorian revolution” (from Pope Gregory VII) of the eleventh century that reshaped the Church as a the papal empire; the Scholastic Church of the philosophers-theologians with their metaphysical vocabulary; the Tridentine Church of the confessional boundaries clearly separating Catholics and Christians of other Churches; the overly Romanized Church of 19th Century ultramontaniam that said “there is no hope without the Pope”.

Despite an alternative narrative pushed by advocates of a ‘law and order’ Church (such as George Weigel offered in a recent article in *First Things*), there is substantial evidence that the Synod assembly in Rome two months ago has marked a new beginning for the Church. Antonio Spadaro SJ – editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, the most important semi-official source of information on this pontificate – summed it up best.

“Pope Francis’ theological subtlety is expressed in such a way that it appears as a candid pastoral sensitivity,” he said in [an article posted](#) (also in English) on the venerable journal’s website.

“This is not a case of dissimulation, but of the form of theological discourse that is most appropriate to mission and to reform. It is therefore above all necessary to recognize that the pastoral principle is the criterion of one’s understanding of the Gospel,” he pointed out.

“And the intense theological debate must be understood as a gain for the ‘organic development’ of the doctrine of the Church and of the truth of the Gospel,” Spadaro claimed.

Catholic culture proceeds, not by replacement or substitution of previous theological models, but by adding layer upon layer. There will always be some visible traces of the Constantinian period, the Gregorian revolution, Scholasticism and Tridentinism, and even ultramontaniam.

But there is no question that Francis is working towards radically reorienting the Church around the Gospel for the world in our day.

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