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The Office of Bishop in the Thought of Pope Francis

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The adoption of the synodal pathway, if confirmed by the bishops meeting in Synod in the autumn of 2023 and embraced by the worldwide Church, promises to *re-configure* most of the relationships in the hierarchical and juridical pyramid which heretofore defined the Catholic Church. If the voice of parishioners is to dictate the tenor of conversation at the base, then the relationship between people and pastor may be changed as a result, even if only subtly. One can legitimately expect a domino effect on the relationship between parish clergy and their bishops, between individual bishops and their national/regional episcopal conferences, and especially when they are gathered in formal synodal assembly (i.e. Synod of Bishops) between bishops and the Bishop of Rome.

At this early stage in reflection on the synodal pathway across the Church, and without prejudice to the new patterns of hierarchical relationship which are emerging in those local churches which are busy applying synodal arrangements already such as Australia, Germany and Ireland, it is worth considering how Pope Francis views the office of bishop. This is particularly important given that *communion* is central to his synodal vision and that *communion* defines the pope's collegial relationship with the Catholic bishops of the world.

Pope Francis may speak a lot to a wider variety of people – journalists, authors, civic representatives, NGO's and random members of the lay faithful – than any previous Bishop of Rome, but he also enjoys a reputation as a man with a *listening* ear. He listens “to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” Reliable anecdotal evidence suggests that he also listens to the world's bishops. *Ad limina* visits find him highly receptive to what bishops tell him. Whether or not the bishops, individually or collectively, spoke to the pope with clarity and *parrhesia* is kept a secret.

In a remarkable exercise in collegial listening, Pope Francis has taken papal ownership of the teaching documents issued by

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episcopal conferences from various parts of the world, endowing with magisterial authority his fellow bishops by incorporating their voices into his in both his encyclical letters *Laudato 'Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*. Of the 172 footnotes to *Laudato 'Si*, twenty-one acknowledge the teaching documents of national/regional bishops' conferences. No previous papal encyclical has overtly incorporated the views of national or regional bishops' conferences.

The theological understanding of the episcopacy and the ecclesial profile of the bishop stands to be altered by adoption of the synodal pathway. Indeed, there will be many theologians, Vaticanologists, observers of Church matters, and bishops themselves unsure as to how their role may be re-defined once the deliberations of the 2023 Synod draw to a close and its conclusions are assimilated across the Church. For that reason it is instructive to see how Pope Francis, who will have consecrated bishops during his time in Buenos Aires, who was for years pro-active in CELAM (Episcopal Conference of Latin America), who will have attended synods in Rome when himself an archbishop, understands the office of bishop since he himself became Bishop of Rome.

In examining the homilies he preached at episcopal consecrations,¹ in considering his addresses to the bishops of Italy over which he, as Bishop of Rome, is technically primate, in looking at his address to the bishops of Europe – the continental grouping to which, again technically, he himself belongs² – and in taking cognisance of his own reflections on his own episcopate on the occasion of his silver jubilee of episcopal ordination, we can get considerable insight into Pope Francis' understanding of episcopal office.

HOMILIES AT EPISCOPAL ORDINATIONS

In his seven-year pontificate Pope Francis celebrated eight episcopal ordinations. Sixteen men in total were ordained to the episcopate: eleven to be nuncios, three to senior positions in the Roman Curia

1 On 17 October 2021 Pope Francis ordained as bishops Guido Marini, Bishop of Tortona & Andrés Gabriel Ferrada Moreira, Curia; 4 October 2019 Michael Czerney SJ, Curia, Paolo Borgia, Antoine Cavilleri & Paolo Rudelli, Papal Diplomatic Service; 19 March 2018 Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, Alfred Xuereb & José Avelino Bettencourt, Papal Diplomatic Service; 19 March 2016 Peter Brian Wells & Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, Papal Diplomatic Service, Curia; 9 November 2015 Angelo De Donatis, Vicar-General Diocese of Rome; 30 May 2014 Fabio Fabene, Curia; 15 November 2013 Fernando Vérgez Alzaga, Curia; 24 October 2013 Jean-Marie Spiech & Giampiero Gloder, Papal Diplomatic Service. All homilies are available on the Vatican website: *Omilie del Papa Francesco*.

2 Homily to the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) 23 May 2013; Homily to the Participants at the Plenary Assembly of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) 23 September 2021

and only two to be pastors in a diocese. Mgr. Guido Marini, papal MC since the outset of Francis' pontificate and ordained on 17 October 2021, was assigned to be Bishop of Tortona, was the only one ordained as a diocesan bishop outright. Angelo De Donatis, ordained bishop in S. John Lateran on 9 November 2015, was only ordained as an auxiliary bishop, albeit vicar-general of the pope's own diocese, Rome. In the homily he delivered at all eight of the episcopal ordinations, Pope Francis maintained the fiction that each new bishop would be pastor of a diocese.

It might be worth noting in passing that Pope Francis has very decided views on the content and length of homilies. In his first apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* the Holy Father devotes twenty four paragraphs to the ideal homily.³ On his visit to Slovakia in September 2021 he urged priests not to allow their homilies to be more than ten minutes, one of the recurring themes of his own preaching. It comes as no surprise that, even at episcopal ordinations, the pope's homilies are short and, with the occasional off-the-cuff addition to make each ordination personal, he sticks to the prescribed text of the homily given in the Roman Pontifical.

Pope Francis gives every impression of "owning" the words and sentiments of the Pontifical. Becoming a bishop, he insists, involves accepting a great responsibility: with the Spirit empowering him, a bishop proclaims the Gospel, sanctifies and guides the people of God, keeping them gathered under the one unique Shepherd who is the Lord. Acknowledging the unbroken apostolic succession which bishops today enjoy, as have their predecessors going back to apostolic times, the Lord makes himself present to today's world as supreme High Priest in the person of the local bishop, surrounded by his priests and in the midst of his people.

The triptych of episcopal identity outlined in *Lumen Gentium*, the iconic image of the priest, prophet and king, is referred to obliquely by the pope. The bishop is a father who instructs in preaching the Gospel, who sanctifies in celebrating the sacraments and who, through his wisdom and prudence, makes Christ present to his people as their guide. Pope Francis insists that the bishop is a servant, elected from among the people to serve them when it comes to the things of God. He labours this point. It is only in being of service that the episcopal vocation is realized. The episcopacy is not an honour, it is an empowerment to serve.

The Council of Trent cast the bishop primarily as a teacher. This primacy of his teaching function is again highlighted in both *Lumen Gentium* and in the 2003 synodal exhortation *Pastores Gregis*. Pope Francis, while not giving the same priority to this dimension of episcopal identity, insists nonetheless on the bishop being a

3 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, paras. 135 - 159

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teacher of faith. He encourages the new bishop to proclaim the Word on every possible occasion and to do so with magnanimity and a sound knowledge of the Church's doctrine. Bishops are, after all, custodians of the (orthodox) faith.

Pope Francis in his first interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, famously declared that good bishops, if they are to be good shepherds, should smell of their sheep. Closeness to the people in their episcopal ambit is a quality the Holy Father insists upon. There are *four* modes of closeness which must characterise the bishop's life. He must be close to God in prayer, there is no acceptable excuse for not devoting himself to prayer (Acts 6, 4). He must be close to his brother bishops. He must be particularly close to his priests. And he must be close to his people, to his flock. After all, Pope Francis points out, the candidate for episcopal ordination was not chosen from an educated élite, he was himself chosen from among the sheep, from the flock.

VARIATIONS ON THE CENTRAL THEME

In the ordination homily of Angelo De Donatis, destined to be one of his auxiliaries in the diocese of Rome and his Vicar General, Pope Francis stresses the pastoral outreach of the new bishop. Having exhorted him, following the text of the Pontifical, to announce the word at every opportunity, the Holy Father returns to one of his favourite themes, i.e. the *homily*. When preaching his words should be simple, comprehensible to all, and short. He reminded him to remember his own father (was this a tale from childhood De Donatis had shared with the pope?) who was always delirious to have found a neighbouring parish where the Sunday congregation were spared a homily!

It is Pope Francis' view that the bishop should be a man dedicated to *prayer*. He does not specify whether this should be meditation in the Ignatian tradition, the liturgy of the hours or the prayerful celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy. He does insist however that if he does not pray, if he does not take a leaf out of the book of the first apostles who designated the first deacons so that they would have the time for prayer, the bishop can do nothing. In addressing those bishops who were due to receive their pallia on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul in 2016, Pope Francis insisted that it was only through prayer that the individual bishop or the church community could escape the prison of self-preoccupation and go out and meet the world with missionary courage. Prayer and the service of the Word are what define the Catholic bishop.

Pope Francis has sometimes been reproved for being hard on priests. On at least one occasion he owned up to this criticism.

Yet in all his homilies at the episcopal ordinations at which he has presided and preached, the Holy Father returns to the duty the bishop has to not only be close to his priests but to care for them like a father. The bishop must always be ready to see a priest immediately and not postpone until tomorrow a meeting which his pastoral solicitude and his duty as a father make imperative today. In his address to the plenary assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) in 2014 Pope Francis insisted that first among equals in their flocks were the priests: "*Let us love them! Let us love them with our hearts! They are our sons and our brothers.*"

Pope Francis shows awareness that through ordination to the episcopate the new bishops were entering the worldwide college of bishops. He urged the newly ordained to be close to their brother bishops, to enter into the collegial *communio* and to extend their charitable concern to all the churches, with a particular solicitude for churches overseas and the bishops who ministered there as shepherds. In his homilies on 29 June, the day on which new metropolitan bishops receive the pallium, Pope Francis returned frequently to the model of the unique Good Shepherd and to the total self-giving expected of a bishop in taking care of his flock. Perhaps sensitive to the fact that most of those whom he ordained to the episcopate, with the exception of Angelo De Donatis (2016) and Guido Marini (2021), were not destined for immediate pastoral ministry, Pope Francis does not use the shepherd imagery with as much emphasis as he does when blessing the pallia for the residential metropolitan archbishops.

POPE FRANCIS' SILVER JUBILEE OF EPISCOPAL ORDINATION

Pope Francis used the occasion of his twenty-fifth anniversary of episcopal ordination to reflect with the cardinals gathered in Rome on the *three* imperatives which he felt defined his ministry as bishop. The Pope deliberately casts himself as an elderly man. The imperatives, it was to be understood by the assembled cardinals who themselves were bishops, applied also to them. The imperatives were those given to the elderly Abraham (Gen 12, 1): *Stand up, Look, Hope*. That command to get a move on, there was a mission yet to be accomplished, was addressed to them. That command to look, to keep our eyes open, to look up and forward, so that the journey and the mission could continue uninterrupted. That command to hope, to continue hoping, to persist with moving forward Francis suggested kept him going.

Francis dismissed categorically the idea, frequently advanced by those ill-disposed to the Church, that the Church was a gerontocracy. He conceded, with a certain pleasure, that bishops

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can be qualified as grandfathers. But grandparents inspire the next generation, their energy and their love, they share their love for life and their hope. And, Francis adds, they can dream. He refers to Anna and Simeon who nurtured a dream only to see it fulfilled. Most bishops are old or elderly (except for the president of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference!) but the vitality of their vocation is undiminished by their advanced years.

THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

The *synodal pathway* as it evolves will demand ownership of the project and commitment to the process not only by individual diocesan bishops but by national, regional and continental bishops' conferences. Pope Francis realizes that it is the collective identity of bishops that matters and that, because his relationship with his brother-bishops is defined by *collegiality* and *communion*, it is important to see how he addresses himself to the continental agglomeration of bishops' conferences to which, as Bishop of Rome, he himself geographically belongs. He received the bishops of Europe at their general assembly held in Rome to mark the 50th anniversary of the foundation of CCEE (Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe) on 23 September 2021.

Bishops need to reflect on their behaviour, on how their attitudes are dictated by the complacency of the people to whom they minister and on how they may be out of touch with their people and failing to respond to the deep desire so many manifest to see and encounter God. Pope Francis challenges his brother bishops from Europe on whether they love their people enough. Are they too self-preoccupied? Are they too concerned about the internal Church discussions and arguments, or too busy planning strategies, at the cost of the only worthwhile programme, i.e. that of the Gospel?

Pope Francis, who visited Strasbourg to address the European Parliament in the second year of his pontificate, will be aware that the European project is one of *re-construction*. He had no inhibition in qualifying the vision of the EU founding fathers as "prophetic." He encouraged the bishops to commit themselves to the programme of European re-construction, but in the specific and unique way that they, Catholic bishops, can. They must draw on the tradition of the Church to share the Good News, to be close to the citizens and to give witness to them.

The Holy Father closed his address to the bishops of CCEE that reconstruction of Europe was a communal endeavour. The Church too was a *communion* and it was the bishops who gathered the scattered flock into one family. It was their task to see to it that the

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Gospel and its values be the cement of the peoples' unity. There are those in Europe who think that faith is *passé*, that it belongs to another age. That is simply because they have not encountered Jesus. The bishop's calling is to make Jesus present to the world of today. Pope Francis had shocked the European Parliament when he said Europe had become old, frail and feeble. The bishops were challenged by him now in 2021 to help the elderly, tired Europe to find the ever youthful face of Jesus and of his bride the Church.

CONCLUSION

Given the important role that the world's bishops are destined to play as the Catholic Church explores the challenges of synodal governance and a potentially new way of being Church, the understanding the pope has of the episcopal identity and mission is of some significance. This review of the homilies he preached at episcopal ordinations since he became pope and of his addresses to the bishops' conferences to which (theoretically) he belongs as Bishop of Rome aimed to demonstrate a nuanced, theologically informed, yet highly pastoral, understanding of the office of bishop. The pope's understanding of the bishop's calling may evolve as the synodal pathway is explored, but what is clear is that as of now it is consistent with the great tradition of the Latin Church and consonant with how most bishops understand themselves.