

## What's New in... The Papacy

*Lent Address*

*St Mary's Collegiate Parish Church, Warwick*

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***Luke 18:9-14***

### ***The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector***

*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*<sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

*<sup>14</sup> "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

I was going to begin with the texts from tonight's readings to reflect on Pope Francis and What's New in the Papacy. "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," has been this Pope's most repeated theme since his election, and indeed long before. Another line from tonight's Gospel might almost be this Pope's motto: "All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The key story told in the early part of my book is of how he was a strict authoritarian figure who came across an ultra-conservative when he was a leader of the Jesuits in Argentina. But then at the age of 54 he underwent a transformation which turned him into the icon of simplicity and humility inclusion and listening we see today. Humility was the technique he adopted – audacious and even ostentatious humility – as the way of curbing the own proud authoritarianism of his youth.

But then I thought No, to learn "What's new in the Papacy", you just have to turn on the television or look in the newspaper. Three key things have happened this week which tell you all you need to know.

First Pope Francis has managed to engineer the first meeting in history between a Pope and the Patriarch of Moscow, one of the key figures in the Orthodox Church which split from Rome almost 1000 years ago – a meeting which has so eluded his predecessors for decades and even for centuries.

Second is the fact that one of the world's most outspoken campaigners on sex abuse was this week sacked from Pope Francis's commission for the protection of children and vulnerable adults within the Church.

And third is his visit to Mexico where this first pope from the global South is, even as I speak, continuing his particular ministry to the world's poor, oppressed and marginalised.

In Havana on Friday Pope Francis met Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and greeted him with the word "Finally". It was characteristic of the directness, the humour and the informality of Francis. The two men signed a joint declaration which, if not deep, was extraordinarily broad. It dealt with the world, society and the Church.

On the world it focussed on:

- the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa,
- terrorism,
- the war in Syria
- and the plight of refugees and migrants.

On society it affirmed the common position of both churches on:

- consumerism,
- religious freedom,
- aggressive secularism,
- the family,
- marriage as between a man and a woman,

- abortion,
- euthanasia,
- and ethical dilemmas raised by biotechnology

On the church it declared a common commitment on:

- unity,
- interreligious dialogue
- and eliminating the tensions between Greek Catholics and the Orthodox in Ukraine and elsewhere.

“We spoke like brothers...,” Pope Francis said afterwards of the trip. But for all his warmth, directness and simplicity Francis is no Holy Fool. He is a sophisticated and shrewd political operator.

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To understand how the meeting between Pope and Patriarch came about you need to cast your mind back to the moment on 13 March 2013 when Jorge Mario Bergoglio stepped out onto the balcony in St Peter’s Square having been elected – and become the first pope ever to dare to take the name of Francis, the great saint of the poor.

The new Pope stood there, arms straight by his sides, and made a simple blessing with his right hand towards the crowds in the piazza below. He was in plain white. He was not wearing the traditional scarlet and ermine cape which is the symbol of pontifical authority. On his chest was a simple old metal cross where his predecessors had worn bejewelled gold.

Everything this new man did, this first pope from the global South, everything, was deeply understated. He did not call himself Pope but Bishop of Rome. And then came this. He said:

“Now let’s begin this journey, bishop and people, this journey of the church of Rome, which is the one that presides in charity over all the churches – a journey of brotherhood, love and trust among us.’

“The church of Rome, which is the one that presides in charity over all the churches”. Only the church scholars listening realised that the phrase ‘presides in charity’ was a quotation from the first-century saint, Ignatius of Antioch. Decoded this amounted to a call to restore collegiality inside and between the churches. Francis was declaring the Pope not to be the boss, rather he was demoting himself to the position of first among equals.

The Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, saw immediately what it meant – which was why he became the first head of the Orthodox Church to accept an invitation to attend a papal installation since the Great Schism in 1054.

Tradition has it that a new pope offers a blessing, *urbi et orbi*, to the city and the world. But before he did that this new Pope asked that, before he blessed the people, they should first pray for him. And he bowed his head before the crowd to receive their prayer.

It was a gesture of personal humility. But of institutional humility too. The Great Schism had come about because a Pope insisted to Patriarchs that he was their superior and that they must defer to Rome. Now, almost a whole millennium later, here was a Pope saying something different.

That is how, on Friday, in Havana, Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow, the other great leader on the Orthodox Church, became the first Russian Orthodox primate to agree to meet a Pope.

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But there was more to it than theology or ecclesiology. Francis is a Pope who works subtly on many levels at once. He knew that Kirill is much closer to the Kremlin than previous patriarchs. It is said the Russian was once a covert KGB agent. It would be unlikely he would agree to meet a Pope without the tacit approval of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. Francis had sent out warm signals to Putin, inviting him to the Vatican twice, once not long after he was elected Pope, the second time in June last year. Putin likes to style himself as defender of Christianity. He has presented his bombing campaign in Syria as, among other things, a defence of Syrian Christians. For Putin Orthodox Christianity is a useful buttress to his ultra-nationalistic vision of Russian identity. Putin, who feels diplomatically isolated internationally, and he needs a foreign policy success. He sees a rapprochement between the Catholics and Orthodox as politically useful.

Pope Francis is no fool. He knows that. But he also sees mutual advantage in the defence of Christians in the region where, in the words of the joint declaration signed by Francis and Kirill, “whole families, villages and cities of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being completely exterminated. Their churches ... barbarously ravaged and looted, their sacred objects profaned, their monuments destroyed.”

Operating on several levels at once is deeply characteristic of Francis’s approach and style. Cuba was settled upon as the place for Pope and Patriarch to meet because, in part, of Francis’s recent role in restoring relations between the United States in Cuba. Francis was personally key to this last thawing of the Cold War.

After the deal Francis talked about *piccoli passi* – Italian for baby steps – which is how he sees that progress must be made carefully and often laboriously. We saw another example of that when, after his visit to the Holy Land, he invited the presidents of Israel and Palestine to a prayer summit in the Vatican. Nothing came of it, disappointed political commentators swiftly pronounced afterwards. But that is not how progress is made in Francis’s book. When he first made overtures to the Jewish and Muslim community in Argentina, long before he was Pope, he did it by inviting their leaders to his flat for “a cup of coffee” where they talked about football. *Piccoli passi*. Who knows what fruit the meeting with the Patriarch of Moscow will bring – on Christian unity or in geo-politics, eventually.

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There is much I could talk about tonight. There are nine extra chapters in the second edition of my book. They range across a wide variety of what Pope Francis has done in these first three years as Pope.

They examine his powerful teachings on mercy and compassion which insist on putting people before dogma. There a chapter on his words and actions on the global economy's disregard of the poor and the planet. There's one on his far-reaching reforms in the Vatican Bank – his most successful area of reform to date, where he's closed 3,300 of the bank's 19,000 accounts and ruthlessly swept aside all individuals he saw as obstacles to change. There's his attempts to reform the Vatican bureaucracy – harder, but making real progress with bold and courageous actions. He has set up an inner circle of Cardinal advisors from all around the world – tough men, all previous critics of the Vatican, who are contributing to Francis's new style of leadership and making room for new voices. The 39 new Cardinals he has appointed are mainly from poorer countries. Only a few are from Europe and none are from the United States. Almost half of the body of men who will let Pope are now from the Port world.

There's his ambivalence in his attitude to the place of women in the Church; he proclaims that the Church needs a “new theology of Women” but then when he appointed just five women to the 30 strong International Theological Commission he described them as “the strawberries on the cake”! (One woman theologian said if we're the strawberries the men are the nuts). At the heart of the second



edition of the book is an account of how the battlelines are being drawn between Francis and the conservatives in a *Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*.

There are behind-the-scenes stories on all of these topics in the book which they cast interesting light upon this pope of paradoxes. But tonight I have time only to look at one of those areas – the one which is in the news this week: sex abuse.

It's an area in which Pope Francis appears to be faltering. The sex abuse crisis has deeply shamed the Catholic Church in the closing decades of the twentieth century. The book lays bare why it is that progress here has been much more slow, and much more patchy. It is because a hidden civil war is taking place inside the Vatican over sex abuse. On one side are reformers who want public accountability for paedophile priests and the bishops who oversee them. On the other side are members of the Roman old guard whose instinct for cover-up continues. This second group is surreptitiously doing everything it can to undermine the Pope's reform agenda. And opposition is at the highest levels.

Let me tell you the story. Two years ago Francis set up a new body to advise him on how the Church should deal with sex abuse. Called the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. It is made up of clerics, theologians, psychiatrists, therapists and – most significantly – two people, a man and a woman who are survivors of priestly sex abuse. The most vocal of them was Peter Saunders, who founded the National Association for People Abused in Childhood. He is one of the world's most forthright anti-abuse campaigners. When Francis chose

him to join the papal panel it seemed that real change was in the air in Rome.

That is, until Saunders was sacked last weekend in a signal that, behind the scenes, the Catholic Church is reverting to its old bad habits. But let me backtrack.

At its first meeting in May 2014, the commission's president Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the Archbishop of Boston startled its members by revealing that establishing the group had run into more opposition inside the Vatican than any other papal reforms apart from the overhaul of Vatican finances. And that was despite the fact that O'Malley was the man who cleaned up the sex abuse scandal in Boston, which is the subject of the new movie *Spotlight* which is up for six Oscars at the end of the month.

Opponents apparently argued that a public Commission would only further damage the Church's reputation by washing dirty linen in public. Others argued it wasn't a universal issue but a peculiarly Irish problem – found only in countries to which Irish priests had emigrated, like England, the United States and Australia. (The reports flooding into Commission members show how ludicrous this idea is; they are from all over the world). Others opponent dismissed sex abuse as “just an historical problem”; they said “now that better controls on the selection of candidates for the priesthood have been put in place, the problem should not reoccur”.

Over the last two years the anti-abuse commission has seen attempt after attempt to undermine it. Key Vatican departments vied to take

control of the body. Its decision to set up offices outside the Vatican was countermanded. Bureaucrats tried to subvert its attempt to write its own statutes. The lay members staged a revolt but one said afterwards to me: “There is an influential camp who are doing their best to block change on this, and on a range of other issues on which Pope Francis wants movement. Some of these people have absolutely no scruples about getting their own way”.

The Commission was starved of finance. Its press releases were doctored and diluted; the most recent example of that was just last week with the Vatican announcement on Saunders departure was presented as a *fait accompli* – despite Saunders’ insistence he had merely been asked to consider whether his outspoken public pronouncements were compatible with his role as a papal advisor

Why has Pope Francis been such an effective changemaker in some areas and yet has failed to bring about change in areas like sex abuse? It is because several of those close to Francis have told me that, though he has a detestation of abuse, he is also wary of false accusations being made against priests.

That explains why it took him over two years to sack Bishop Robert Finn in Kansas City. Finn was actually convicted in court in the US in 2012. He was found guilty of failing to report a paedophile priest to the police. Commission members have called for Finn’s removal at every one of their meetings since they first met. But it was almost three years after Finn’s criminal conviction before Francis authorised action.

Then, even more controversially, Pope Francis promoted a bishop in Chile, Juan Barros, who was enmeshed in a cover-up scandal. The Pope met Barros privately. Barros insisted that he was guiltless. And the Pope accepted the assurances and appointed Barros a bishop.

All of that sits uneasily with the policy of zero tolerance that Pope Francis announced in 2014 – after his commissioners had repeatedly pressed him to endorse such an approach. They also repeatedly expressed anxieties about Barros which the head of the abuse commission, Cardinal O'Malley, said he passed on to the Pope. But Francis did not change his mind even when Barros's installation as a bishop was violently disrupted by protestors. Pope Francis has stood by him. In the polls trust in the hierarchy has fallen in the polls from 98% to 25%.

Saunders was publicly critical of the Pope's refusal to ask Barros to stand down. So the decision to close ranks to exclude Saunders will look to many outsiders like a return to the Church's instincts to put the protection of the institution above the protection of individuals and the pastoral care of victims.

The irony is that Pope Francis has sought to send out the opposite message in every other respect.

The first pope from the global South is, even as I speak, continuing his ministry to the world's marginalised. In Mexico he is about his usual business – visiting prisoners, migrants, indigenous people and the families of victims of the violence of drug traffickers this time in

Mexico. The trip will end on Wednesday afternoon on Mexico's border with southern Texas, where the Pope will show solidarity with migrants by celebrating a Mass for a congregation from Mexico and the US who will attend together but be divided by the border fence.

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I want to conclude by bringing all this together with a reflection on the readings with which we began. If there is one word that has characterized the ministry of Pope Francis, it is mercy. It has been the repeated theme of his preaching as pope and before that as archbishop. The motto he chose when he became a bishop was *Miserando atque eligendo*, which translates loosely as "chosen through the eyes of mercy."

Those of you who have heard me speak before will be familiar with the story of how Jorge Mario Bergoglio is a man who has, throughout his life, changed. He made, by his own admission "hundreds of errors" when he was in charge of Argentina's Jesuits. He was so divisive that his order eventually sent him into exile in the far-off regional city of Cordoba.

But one of his great characteristics is that he is a man who has learned from his mistakes.

- He changed after Cordoba.
- And then he changed again when he lived among the poor in the shanty towns of Buenos Aires where he learned something of the messy realities of the lives of ordinary people.

- He changed his economic and politics views when as Archbishop he lived through the terrible economic crisis in Argentina. It was the biggest debt default in world history and half the population was plunged below the poverty level. After it Bergoglio began to talk like a Liberation theologian – a development which has continued as Pope.
- And the man who was so dour and dutiful as a Cardinal that he was known in Buenos Aires as Horseface has blossomed into our warm and smiling Pope Francis.

And in learning all these lessons he has felt himself to have been smiled upon and forgiven by a merciful God.

Just before he left for Rome, and the conclave which elected him Pope, Bergoglio wrote what turned out to be his last Lenten message to the people of Buenos Aires.

Morality, he said, is not a ‘never falling down’ but an ‘always getting up again’ - and that is a response to God’s mercy.

Mercy has been the greatest of his themes as Pope. At the first Angelus message after his election, Francis told the crowds in St Peter’s Square: “The word mercy changes everything. It is the best thing that we can hear: it changes the world. A bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.”

And he continued: “The story of the adulterous woman whom Jesus saves from being condemned to death... captures Jesus’ attitude: we do not hear words of contempt, we do not hear words of

condemnation, but only words of love, of mercy, that invite us to conversion: 'Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more!' God's face is that of a merciful father who is always patient."

In his first Sunday homily as pope, he said that "in my opinion, the strongest message of the Lord is mercy."

After World Youth Day in Brazil a few months after his election he said: "I believe this time is a *kairos* of mercy," using a Greek term from the New Testament meaning a privileged moment in God's plan for salvation.

In his Lenten Message last year he said: "How greatly I desire that all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of indifference!"

And he has declared an **Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy** which began on December 8 last year – the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second Vatican Council. Announcing it he wrote: "Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope".

What we see in Francis is a holy man, a man who puts the pastoral care of people before the upholding of dogma. My intuition is that all this is not abstract, or theological. It is, in my view – having talked to dozens of people who know him well, including several he still rings every week back in Buenos Aires – autobiographical.

When a man is elected Pope he is asked if he accepts the job. The normal response is, in Latin: *Akepto* – I accept. But Bergoglio replied: ‘I am a great sinner, trusting in the **mercy** and patience of God in suffering, I accept’.

The story of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, of Pope Francis, is the story of a man who sinned. But who changed.

Profoundly. Radically. Now he has come to a Church which has sinned. And is changing that too.

What’s New in the Vatican? A lot – though not perhaps as much as there needs to be.