

# The Pontificate of Pope Francis – a Lasting Challenge for Lutherans

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It began with a balcony scene

*“Fratelli e sorelle, buonasera!”* – With these friendly but quite surprising words, Pope Francis took up his papacy on March 13, 2013. His election as Pope was a first in the history of the papacy in several respects. Francis is the first Latin American and the first Jesuit to sit on the chair of Peter. He is also the first to choose the founder of the mendicant order of Franciscans and church reformer Francis of Assisi as his patron saint. With his first appearance, Pope Francis immediately set a new tone and style that would become characteristic of his pontificate. He appeared in the Benediction Loggia of St. Peter's on the election evening in a simple white papal cassock and introduced himself as the Bishop of Rome - not as the head of the Roman Catholic world church. His speech was short but well thought out. Pope Francis thanked the people in St. Peter's Square for their warm welcome and announced:

And now we begin this journey – bishops and people – the journey of the Church of Rome, presiding in love over all the churches; a journey of fraternity, of love, of mutual trust. Let us always pray for one another. Let us pray for the whole world, so that a great togetherness may reign. I wish you that this journey as a church, which we are beginning today [...] may be fruitful for the evangelization of this beautiful city.<sup>1</sup>

With this speech, Pope Francis initially named a number of keywords that would become programmatic for his pontificate. These included his self-image as Bishop of Rome, fraternity as a guiding principle for relationships between people and the fundamental task of evangelization. From the very beginning, ecumenism was also particularly close to Pope Francis' heart. When he spoke in his speech of the “presidency in love” (Ignatius of Antioch) to describe the special position of honor of the Roman Church, he was sending a highly significant ecumenical signal. Finally, it became clear that Pope Francis wanted to give his pontificate a basic tone of piety. He did not begin by announcing reforms, but started with prayer. It was first the prayer for his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, then the request to the people gathered in St. Peter's Square to pray for him and his ministry, before he himself gave the blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pope's texts, which are shown in brackets (e.g. “EG 27”), are the official English texts of the Vatican. All other texts of the Pope are translated from the German manuscript.

It was actually an unspectacular appearance. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, it was already clear on this election evening that something new had begun. The first impressions were quickly confirmed and it became clear: Pope Francis was different to what we were used to from the popes. The apartment in the Santa Marta guest house. The small cars. The simple clothes. Just as his personal style was different, Pope Francis also focused on different people and different issues: Eating with the homeless at Casa Marta, washing the feet of prisoners on Maundy Thursday, masses with cleaners, gardeners and employees in the chapel at the Santa Marta guest house. Time and again it became clear that this Pope was accessible and enjoyed meeting people directly – at the general audiences in St. Peter's Square as well as during parish visits in Rome or on his many apostolic journeys.

In the first interview that Jesuit Antonio Spadaro conducted with him in the summer of 2013, Pope Francis mentioned an important aspect that is fundamental to his self-image and his behavior. In response to the question “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?”, he described himself as a “sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.”<sup>[1]</sup> For Pope Francis, this was not a figure of speech or a topos of modesty, but a confession rooted in the trust that God would deal mercifully with him. This faith was the center that guided Pope Francis in his personal style as well as in his preaching and in his dealings with other people. Jorge Mario Bergoglio's episcopal motto was: “*Miserando atque eligendo*.” It comes from the homilies of Beda Venerabilis, who describes the calling of Matthew. “Jesus saw a tax collector, and when he looked at him with love and chose him, he said to him: Follow me!” Pope Francis explained: “The Latin gerund *miserando* seems to me to be untranslatable into both Italian and Spanish. I would prefer to translate it with another gerund that does not even exist: *misericiordiando*.”<sup>[2]</sup> This was linked to the idea, characteristic of Pope Francis, that mercy must be shown above all in action and behavior.

This basic attitude was concretized in a certain way of conducting ministry, which Pope Francis summed up in a meeting with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Rome in the Christuskirche on 15 November 2015. When asked by nine-year-old Julius what he would particularly enjoy about his office as Pope, Pope Francis replied:

The thing I like, to be honest, is being a pastor, being a shepherd. I don't like doing the office work. I don't like those jobs. [...] I like being a pope in the style of a pastor. The ministry. I like it, in the sense that I feel good when I visit the sick, when I talk to people who are a little desperate, sad. [...] And when I go to prison, I am happy. Being pope means being a bishop, being a pastor, being a shepherd. If a pope is not a bishop, if a pope is not

a pastor, is not a shepherd, then he may be a very intelligent person, very important, have great influence in society, but I think – I think so! – he is not happy in his heart.

Pope Francis has set out his faith, his fundamental convictions and his ideas for reform in a large number of sermons, speeches and teaching letters, meetings, journeys and documents. Looking at them can help us to understand the path that Pope Francis has led the Roman Catholic Church on over the past 12 years. This is also particularly worthwhile because Pope Francis' theology is of such an intellectually appealing quality that it also provides great inspiration for Christians from other churches. In the past 12 years, Pope Francis has provided more publicly perceptible guidance on matters of faith and ethical issues at a global level than probably anyone else. This also has to do with the fact that Pope Francis had the ability to perceive current developments, to interpret them theologically and to point out possibilities for action by meditating on biblical texts. Finally, knowledge of Pope Francis' theology is also necessary because the Christian churches can only find answers to the challenges of our time if they are ecumenically united.

The following is neither an appraisal of the twelve-year pontificate nor a systematic theological presentation of Pope Francis' theology or reform projects. Rather, it is an attempt to approach a small selection of basic themes that have been decisive for Pope Francis' pontificate. This approach is made from a Lutheran perspective and in the conviction that Pope Francis' texts contain a rich treasure of theological and spiritual insights. For this reason, Pope Francis himself will have his say as much as possible.

## I. The joy of the Gospel

"The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and the lives of those who encountered Jesus." (*Evangelii Gaudium* = G 1). This is how Pope Francis began his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, which he published in November 2013. The decisive keyword of faith that underpins everything for Pope Francis and motivates us to live a life of awakening is: the joy of the Gospel. According to Pope Francis, it is not so much about the joy of the Gospel, but rather the joy that emanates from the Gospel. This is not a joy that people can generate themselves. Rather, it arises from the encounter with Jesus Christ, who frees us from sin, from sadness, from inner emptiness and from loneliness. To be a Christian means to be touched by the life, work and destiny of Jesus and to allow it to determine your life plan. "With Christ joy is constantly born anew" (EG 1), says Pope

Francis. For him, it is the decisive characteristic of a Christian. This is a statement that is as programmatic as it is provocative. In contrast to the paralyzing pessimism of the “prophets of doom” both outside and inside the churches, the Pope reminded us that it is not worries about the future, pessimism or self-sufficiency that are the characteristics by which a Christian existence can be recognized. Rather, it is the joy of faith that has its foundation in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. “Christ’s resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power that has permeated the world.” (EG 276) It is therefore no coincidence that the word “joy” was not only used in the title of this first programmatic document of Pope Francis, but also recurred in the titles of other important texts of his pontificate: *Amoris laetitia*, *Laudato si’*, *Gaudete et exsultate*, *Veritatis gaudium*.

The joy of faith is determined by the fact that it is communicated. Those who have found in the gospel of Jesus the foundation of their lives cannot help but bear witness to the joy that arises from the encounter with Jesus (Acts 4:20) and invite others to also engage with Jesus so that they too can live a life of following him. This joy is therefore a “missionary joy.” A joy that always has the “drive to go forth and give” (EG 21). It is the spiritual strength for every new awakening of the churches and motivates them to go out and reach out to people, to tell them about the Gospel and to shape their lives out of faith. And precisely “to encourage the Christian faithful to embark on a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy” (EG 1) was the aim of Pope Francis’ letter. “An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast.” (EG 24) For Pope Francis, this is the basic mission of the Church. And in his view, the situation is dramatic: the Church only has one sheep and the 99 others are missing. That is why shepherds with the scent of sheep are needed, who have the courage to go out and look for the other 99 sheep and show them the love and mercy of God.

Already in his first general audience in St. Peter's Square on March 27, 2013, Pope Francis described his conviction of the basic task of the Church with the following words:

Following Christ, accompanying him, remaining with him requires “going out,” going forth. Going out of oneself, out of a tired and habitual way of living the faith, out of the temptation to close oneself off in one’s own ideas, which in the end close off the horizon of God’s creative action. God has gone out of himself to come to us, he has pitched his tent among us to bring us his mercy, which saves and gives hope. [...] Remember well: to come

out of ourselves, like Jesus, like God came out of himself in Jesus and Jesus came out of himself for all of us.

The Pope knows that this going out to the peripheries of existence is not without its dangers. But, as he explained in his teaching letter *Evangelii gaudium*, he prefers “a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” EG 49) This is why the Pope repeatedly called on his Church to “Go out, go!” As he did in a sermon in Lisbon on August 2, 2023:

Casting out the nets again and embracing the world with the hope of the Gospel: This is what we are called to do! It is not the time to stop, it is not the time to give up, it is not the time to tie the boat to the shore or to look back; we must not flee from this time because it frightens us and take refuge in the forms and styles of the past. No, this is the time of grace that the Lord gives us so that we can set sail on the sea of evangelization and mission.” (Homily, 2.8.2023)

## II. The Pope: proclaimer of the Gospel

And he did the same himself, putting himself at the service of proclaiming the Gospel in a variety of contexts – services on high feast days in St. Peter's Basilica or on trips abroad, during parish visits and Angelus prayers. Pope Francis particularly valued the homily as a form of preaching because it “can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God's word, a constant source of renewal and growth.” (EG 135) For this reason, the preparation of the sermon is of particular importance and must take a back seat to other activities. “A preacher who does not prepare is not ‘spiritual’; he is dishonest and irresponsible towards the gifts he has received.” (EG 145) In the eyes of the Pope, it is crucial that the preacher develops a spiritual approach to the Word of God. For Pope Francis, a renewed way of preaching in this sense was an important prerequisite for a church that wants to go beyond the church walls and reach people with the message of the Gospel.

The morning homilies, which Pope Francis held every weekday at seven o'clock in the masses in the chapel of the Santa Marta guest house, were a special feature. Not only did he always invite other people to these services – be they Vatican employees, bishops or guests – but he also interpreted the biblical texts of the day himself. His sermons were short and meditative, with many references to everyday life and often vivid linguistic images. So every day began with listening to and interpreting the word of God. This

expressed the Pope's basic spiritual attitude. The Word of God is the starting point for all church activity. While only summaries of the morning homilies were published at Pope Francis' request in the first years of his pontificate, these speeches took on a special significance during the coronavirus pandemic because they were broadcast live and thus became a source of comfort for countless people when it was not possible to attend church services.

### III. Mercy - the Content of the Gospel

“And the message of Jesus is this: mercy. For me – I say this in all modesty – this is the strongest message of the Lord: mercy,” said Pope Francis at the first Mass in the parish of Sant’Anna in the Vatican on March 17, 2013. And in the Angelus prayer that day, he expanded on this thought:

In these days I had the opportunity to read the book of a cardinal – Cardinal Kaspers, a theologian who is very capable, a good theologian – on mercy. And that book did me a lot of good, but don't think now that I'm advertising my cardinals' books! That is not the case! But it did me so much good, so much good ... Cardinal Kasper said that hearing about mercy changes everything. It is the best thing we can hear: it changes the world. A little mercy makes the world less cold and much more just. We need to understand this mercy of God well, this merciful Father who has so much patience ... We remember the prophet Isaiah, who says: “Though our sins be as scarlet, the love of God will make them white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). That's nice about mercy!”

From the very beginning, God's mercy has been a cornerstone of Pope Francis' pontificate, shaping both his preaching and his behavior as well as his image of the Church.

With his choice of name, his new style and his preaching, Pope Francis aroused great expectations and hopes for reform within the Roman Catholic Church right from the start. In his speeches and sermons, Pope Francis repeatedly described how he envisioned the future shape of the Church and how the laity, priests and bishops should carry out their ministry. The poor were an important point of reference for Pope Francis. In advocating a poor church for the poor, Pope Francis was not primarily concerned with a material question, even if money, assets, wealth and how to deal with them play a role. Rather, the formulation is aimed at the attitude. It is about the awareness that humans cannot earn the kingdom of heaven by themselves, but they are completely dependent on the grace of God. The opposite would be an attitude of arrogance, pride and self-satisfaction. Pope Francis radically rejects this. When he spoke of a “poor church for the poor,” he meant a church that does not look down on people from above, but is at eye level, that is prepared

to listen to people in a humble attitude, to learn from them and to serve them, i.e. to help them lead a life in dignity. At a Pentecost vigil with ecclesial movements in St. Peter's Square on Saturday, May 18, 2013, Pope Francis said:

Poverty for us Christians is not a sociological or philosophical or cultural category – no, it is a theological category. I would say perhaps: the first category, because that God, the Son of God, humbled himself, became poor in order to walk the path with us. And that is our poverty: the poverty of the body of Christ, the poverty that the Son of God brought us with his incarnation. A poor church for the poor takes its first step by walking towards the body of Christ. When we approach the body of Christ, we begin to understand something – to understand what this poverty is: the poverty of the Lord. And that is not easy. But there is a problem that is not good for Christians: the spirit of the world, the worldly-oriented spirit, spiritual worldliness. This leads us into a complacency of living according to the spirit of the world and not according to the spirit of Christ.

And at a pastoral meeting of the Diocese of Rome on June 17, 2013, he expanded on this thought as follows:

Going to the poor does not mean that we must become advocates of poverty or a kind of 'spiritual beggar' [...] It means that we must go towards the flesh of Jesus, which suffers. But the flesh of those who do not recognize him also suffers, with their studies, their intelligence, their education. That is where we must go! That is why I like to use the expression 'go to the peripheries,' the existential peripheries. (Address, 17.6.2013)

Pope Francis noted self-critically: "Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the church is not a toll-house, it is the house of the Father where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems." (EG 47) In contrast, the essence of the Gospel must once again define the Church, and for Pope Francis the essence was the mercy of God. Pope Francis developed his understanding of the shape and tasks of the Church in a programmatic way in an interview with Antonio Spadaro in the summer of 2013. "The servants of the Church must above all be servants of mercy,"<sup>[3]</sup> Pope Francis stated. The servant of the Gospel is above all a servant who "washes, cleanses, raises up." "I see very clearly," said the Pope, "that what the Church needs today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm people's hearts – closeness and solidarity."<sup>[4]</sup> And he summarized his idea of the Church in an image that has become characteristic of his pontificate: "I see the Church like a field hospital after a battle. You don't have to ask a seriously wounded man about cholesterol or high sugar. You have to heal the wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds... You have to start at the bottom."<sup>[5]</sup> Pope Francis was convinced that "organizational and structural reforms [...] are secondary. The first reform must be that of attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be able to warm people's

hearts, to walk with them in the night. They must be able to hold a conversation and descend into the night, into its darkness, without losing themselves. The people of God want shepherds, not functionaries or state clerics.”<sup>[6]</sup> And in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis said: “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.” (EG 114)

To be church in this way, Pope Francis was convinced that an inner attitude determined by God's mercy was necessary. In one of the most fundamental sermons of his pontificate, which he gave at Mass with new cardinals on February 15, 2015, he addressed two possible logics of thought and faith. He described them with the following words:

the fear of losing the saved and the desire to save the lost. Even today, we sometimes find ourselves at the crossroads of these two types of logic: the logic of the teachers of the law, which is to banish the danger by removing the infected person, and the logic of God, who embraces and welcomes people with his mercy, reintegrates them and thus transforms evil into good, condemnation into salvation and exclusion into proclamation. These two types of logic run through the entire history of the Church: *exclusion* and *reintegration*. [...] The Church's way is to condemn no one forever, to pour out God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart. The way of the Church is precisely to go out of its own enclosure to seek out those far away in the fundamental peripheries of existence; the way to fully embrace the logic of God and follow the Master who said: ‘It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I have come to call the sinners ... not the righteous’ (Luke 5:31-32).

Pope Francis' predecessors had also spoken a lot about mercy, especially Pope John Paul II. Pope Francis has continued this with great emphasis and has taken many initiatives of his own. The extraordinary Jubilee Year 2015/2016, which focused on the mercy of God, was of particular importance. Surprisingly, Pope Francis did not open this Year of Mercy in Rome, but in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, where he opened the first Holy Door on November 29. In his address, Pope Francis said:

Workers for evangelization, then, must above all be ‘artisans’ of forgiveness, specialists in reconciliation and experts in mercy. This is the way we can help our brothers and sisters to ‘cross over to the other shore’ by revealing to them the mystery of our strength, our hope and our joy, which have their source in God, because they are founded on the certainty that he is in the boat with us.

#### IV. The Horizon of Mercy: On the Way to the peripheries of the Earth

Immigrants perished at sea, on boats that became a path of death instead of a path of hope. These are the headlines in the newspapers. When I heard this news a few weeks ago, which unfortunately was repeated very often, the thoughts kept penetrating my heart like a stab of suffering. And then I felt that I had to come here today to pray, to



make a gesture of closeness, but also to awaken our consciences so that what has happened does not happen again.

Pope Francis began his sermon on July 8, 2013 on the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa with these impressive words. This first trip of his pontificate sent a strong signal. Instead of speaking to government representatives, Pope Francis spoke to young migrants who had just arrived and celebrated mass with 10,000 islanders and refugees on a sports field at the harbor. The Pope wanted to express his closeness and gratitude to the people of Lampedusa and, at the same time, the media attention meant that the sermon, which Pope Francis gave from a lectern made from the wood of a capsized boat, was addressed to the global community. Pope Francis interpreted the world's failure in the face of the plight of refugees as the result of a widespread lack of orientation:

No one in the world today feels responsible for this; we have lost the sense of fraternal responsibility [...] The culture of affluence that makes us think of ourselves makes us insensitive to the cries of others; it makes us live in bubbles that are beautiful but nothing, that are an illusion of the void, of the ephemeral, that lead to indifference towards others, indeed to the globalization of indifference. In this world of globalization, we have fallen into the globalization of indifference. We have become accustomed to the suffering of others, it does not concern us, it does not interest us, it is none of our business!

From a boat, the Pope threw a wreath of flowers onto the surface of the water in memory of drowned migrants and remained in prayer for several minutes. In all of this, a Pope became visible to the world public who intervened and who not only spoke of the love of Jesus and his option for the poor, but also lived it himself in gestures and deeds.

Pope Francis' first trip to Lampedusa showed what was to become characteristic of his 47 international trips to 66 countries over the next twelve years. Instead of going to the political and economic power centers of the world, Pope Francis repeatedly made his way to the "peripheries" to be close to people suffering from poverty, hunger, war, displacement and natural disasters. This can be seen in just a small selection of the European countries he visited: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Malta, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden.

Advocating for understanding, reconciliation and peace was particularly close to Pope Francis' heart and repeatedly shaped his travel diplomacy. A particularly impressive example of this is his trip to South Sudan in February 2023, which he undertook together with the Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby and the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Reverend Iain Greenshields. It was an ecumenical pilgrimage of peace, the

like of which had never been seen before: “I did not come here alone,” said Pope Francis on their arrival in South Sudan, “because in peace, as in life, we walk together.” And Justin Welby added: “Pope Francis, Moderator Iain and I are here as part of your family, your community, to be with you and to share your suffering. We have made this pilgrimage of peace like there has never been before, never. We cannot and will not be divided.” What can three church leaders do against war, poverty and injustice? One answer lies in the joint journey. It is an impressive testimony to the fact that borders and differences between Christians can be overcome and that reconciliation and peace are possible. The three church leaders used their speeches and addresses to remind Christians of their responsibility for reconciliation across the boundaries of religions, tribes and cultures. For example, in his address at the ecumenical prayer in Juba on February 4, 2023, Pope Francis pointed to the choice Christians must make. The Pope said:

Those who call themselves Christians must choose sides. Those who follow Christ always choose peace; those who unleash war and violence betray the Lord and deny his Gospel. The attitude that Jesus teaches us is clear: to love all people because all are loved by our common Father in heaven as his children. The love of Christians is not only for our neighbor, but for all, because in Jesus everyone is our neighbor, our brother and sister, even our enemy (cf. Mt 5:38-48); even more so those who belong to our own people, even if they belong to a different ethnic group. “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12) is Jesus’ commandment, which contradicts any tribal view of religion. ‘Let all be one’ (John 17:21). This is Jesus’ fervent prayer to the Father for us believers. Let us strive, brothers and sisters, for this fraternal unity among us Christians, and let us help each other to carry the message of peace into society, to spread Jesus’ attitude of non-violence, so that in those who profess faith there is no more room for a culture based on the spirit of revenge; so that the Gospel is not just a beautiful religious speech, but a prophecy that becomes a reality in history.

With their joint pilgrimage of peace, the three Christian church leaders have set a courageous ecumenical example of reconciliation in a world marked by division and conflict. What was said and lived in Juba, far from the spotlight of world publicity, has significance far beyond South Sudan and gives impetus to counter war, violence and destruction with the hope that reconciliation, justice and peace among peoples are possible.

## V. Looking at all people: Fraternity

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Pope Francis presented his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* at the beginning of October 2020 – as he writes in the foreword – as a “a modest contribution to continued reflection, in the hope that in the face of present-day attempts

to eliminate or ignore others, we may prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words.” (FT 6) “Fraternity” – this word is used in the Christian tradition to express a form of living together that is guided by the conviction that God has indeed endowed all people with the same dignity and that people are therefore taken seriously not only in their strengths but also in their weaknesses. It may sound like a reminder of a strange, bygone world when Pope Francis sets out to measure the political and economic conditions of our time against the yardstick of “fraternity” or “brotherhood.” Looking at the general situation of the world in the 21st century, we can say that a deep chasm separates us from the traditional norms of humanity, which are summarized in the idea of fraternity. At the heart of our high-tech global world is the autonomy of the spheres of life, not the “brother” or “sister.” However, it is precisely this idea of the autonomy of the spheres of life whose inadequacy – in Pope Francis’ view – has become clearly evident in the current crisis. We are experiencing an epochal change, a time of transition with multiple crises and accelerated change in a multipolar world, in which previous patterns of order in politics, the economy and society are losing their validity, without it currently being clear what future orders could look like. This is not just a crisis of control, but a crisis of purpose. From Pope Francis’ point of view, it was therefore necessary to reflect on the fundamental question of what mindset should underlie people’s behavior and what value system should guide coexistence in society. Pope Francis wanted to contribute to this discussion with the concept of fraternity. His statements in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* were aimed at an awakening that made fraternity the standard of behavior at all relevant levels, from the personal attitudes and attitudes of the individual to the level of national and international institutions.

Pope Francis used the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) as a biblical narrative to illustrate the options facing us today. This parable not only has its own chapter dedicated to it in this teaching letter, but can also be understood as the theological key to the entire encyclical. For Pope Francis, the Samaritan represents a type of humanity that illustrates Jesus’ understanding of the universal reach of Christian charity. The Good Samaritan becomes a symbol of the “neighbor(s) without borders” (FT 80–83). The parable invites us to identify with the role model and thus to take responsibility for people in need. And the parable is aimed at the ability to discern what the order of the day is, what the individual can do in a specific situation to confront

hardship and injustice and to help people to lead a dignified and fulfilling life. Pope Francis:

In the face of so much pain and suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan. Any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the sufferings of the man on the roadside. The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbors, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good. (FT 67)

## VI. *Laudato si'*. On Care for the Common Home

“What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to the children who are growing up?” (LS 160) This was a crucial question that Pope Francis asked when writing the encyclical *Laudato Si'. On Care for the Common Home*. For Pope Francis, this was neither an ideological nor a technical question. Rather, it was about the sustainability of humanity. Pope Francis explained the context in the following way:

This question not only concerns the environment in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal. When we ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave behind, we think in the first place of its general direction, its meaning and its values. Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results. (LS 160)

It is therefore clear that this encyclical cannot be described as “ecological” in the sense that it is limited exclusively to environmental issues such as climate change. For Pope Francis, ecological responsibility and social justice are inextricably linked.

Pope Francis' analysis of the world's crises and the usual patterns of political action led him to the insight that a change of direction and concerted action across the whole of humanity were urgently needed:

The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences. (FT 161)

Against this background, Pope Francis emphasized: “It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with

the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn.” (FT 160) For Pope Francis, the challenge of protecting our common home must include “a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development” (FT 13). This is because the Pope was filled with trust and confidence “that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.” (LS 13)

The timing of the publication of the encyclical in early summer 2015 was deliberately chosen so that it could make a contribution to the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in December 2015, which is important for the future of all humanity. In this encyclical, Pope Francis was equally concerned with a responsible approach to creation and the development of a just global economic order that gives all people in the common home of the earth a fair share of the global goods of the atmosphere and water as well as the regional goods of natural resources, forests, etc. Pope Francis’ analyses – especially with regard to the climate science discourse – were in tune with the times. He had sought the expertise of a large number of scientists and experts in advance. In this way, he was able to use this encyclical to provide a series of impulses for a gentle lifestyle and political change that would mitigate the consequences of the crisis and that would place all levels of social, political and economic action under obligation, both locally and globally. At the same time, Pope Francis made it clear through this encyclical that his words on the ecological crisis were deeply rooted in theology and faith. Pope Francis was convinced that everything in creation was connected to everything else:

Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationship. This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity. (LS 240)

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*, which Pope Francis published on October 4, 2023, he renewed his statements on an “integral ecology” with a view to the UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai in December 2023 and urgently called for more environmental and climate protection:

Once and for all, let us put an end to the irresponsible derision that would present this issue as something purely ecological, “green”, romantic, frequently subject to ridicule by economic interests. Let us finally admit that it is a human and social problem on any number of levels. For this reason, it calls for involvement on the part of all. In Conferences on the climate, the actions of groups negatively portrayed as “radicalized” tend to attract attention. But in reality they are filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy “pressure”, since every family ought to realize that the future of their children is at stake. (LD 58)

Pope Francis called for binding forms of energy transition to finally be agreed. These would have to have three characteristics:

that they be efficient, obligatory and readily monitored. This, in order to achieve the beginning of a new process marked by three requirements: that it be drastic, intense and count on the commitment of all. That is not what has happened so far, and only a process of this sort can enable international politics to recover its credibility, since only in this concrete manner will it be possible to reduce significantly carbon dioxide levels and to prevent even greater evils over time. (LD 59)

## VII. New Impetus for Ecumenism

“For me, ecumenism is a priority,” Pope Francis declared in an interview with the Italian newspaper ‘La Stampa’ in December 2013. At first glance, this commitment to ecumenism may seem surprising, but for Pope Francis, the search for the unity of Christianity was an “essential aspect of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome,” “so that today the Petrine ministry would not be fully realized without including this openness to dialogue with all believers in Christ.” (Address, 25.1.2024) Ecumenism was therefore a fundamental dimension of Pope Francis’ ministry. The consequences of this self-understanding for ecumenism were sensational. In the midst of a situation in which relations between the Christian churches had been characterized by exhaustion, helplessness and stagnation for years, the election of Cardinal Bergoglio as Pope saw the emergence of an actor who saw himself much more strongly than his predecessors as an active initiator and shaper of ecumenism. From the first day of his pontificate, Pope Francis promoted ecumenism with his own initiatives and facilitated qualitatively new experiences.

Pope Francis’ basic ecumenical attitude was based on a deep trust in the work of the Holy Spirit, who for him is “the great protagonist of the Church” (Address, 18.9.2021). And the same applies to ecumenism, which Pope Francis believes cannot exist without the presence and active action of the Holy Spirit. Listening to the Holy Spirit and the willingness to be led by him on new paths are therefore just as much a part of the basic attitudes of ecumenism as prayer and the request for the coming of the Spirit.

The speeches that Pope Francis gave every year on the feast of Pentecost were of particular importance for the content of his ecumenical concept. Reflecting on the biblical story of Pentecost, he gained fundamental insights into the work of the Holy Spirit. He was convinced that the transforming, revitalizing and renewing coming of the Holy Spirit was not limited to the event of the first Pentecost, but could be expected and prayed for in every present. For the Holy Spirit is – as Pope Francis impressively put it – “a specialist in bridging distances; he knows how to overcome distances. He teaches us how to overcome them.” (Regina Coeli, 5.6.2022) This applies both to the temporal differences between Pentecost and our present day, as well as to the divisions within Christianity. At first glance, however, it might seem as if the Holy Spirit creates disorder because he brings forth a diversity of charisms among believers and churches. But under the action of the Holy Spirit, “all this is a great richness, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, which does not mean uniformity, but a return of everything to harmony. Harmony in the Church is brought about by the Holy Spirit. [...] Only he can awaken diversity, plurality, variety and at the same time bring about unity.” (Address, 19.5.2013) The trust that the Holy Spirit works through all churches in history and overcomes divisions does not serve to avoid ecumenism, but to make it possible. Pope Francis was convinced that human action – as important and indispensable as it is – cannot bring about the unity of Christianity. Anyone who really wants to make progress on this path can only do so from God, from an encounter with Jesus Christ. However, this encounter, as made possible by the Holy Spirit, has an inherent power that no one can control. Pope Francis therefore demanded: “The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking.” (EG 22) Trust in the work of the Spirit therefore corresponds to an openness to the “surprises of God” and, in response, a willingness to be guided by the Holy Spirit in ecumenism and to courageously “tread the new paths that the newness of the Holy Spirit offers us” (address, May 19, 2013).

Pope Francis set out his understanding of the goal of the ecumenical journey at the first ecumenical service he celebrated in Rome on January 25, 2014 at the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity:

We have all been harmed by divisions. We all do not want to become a nuisance. Let us therefore all walk together fraternally on the path to unity, also by creating unity along the way, the unity that comes from the Holy Spirit and that brings us a very special feature that only the Holy Spirit can realize: reconciled diversity.

This statement is of great importance for ecumenism, because Pope Francis is referring to ideas of unity that emphasize diversity in unity and are shared by other Christian churches, such as the idea developed by the Protestant theologian Oscar Cullmann (1902-1999) in his book “Unity through Diversity” (1986). The Lutheran World Federation has made this concern its ecumenical guiding perspective under the title “Unity in Reconciled Diversity”. The idea of unity in diversity created by the Holy Spirit was a fundamental constant in Pope Francis' ecumenical reflections, which guided him in shaping relations with other churches. It was absolutely clear to Pope Francis that the search for unity could neither mean

“subjugating nor incorporating one another, but rather accepting all the gifts that God has given to each of us in order to make known to the whole world the great mystery of the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. I wish to assure each of you that, in order to achieve the longed-for goal of full unity, the Catholic Church does not intend to impose any requirement other than that of professing the common faith, and that we are ready to seek together, in the light of the teaching of Scripture and the experience of the first millennium, the conditions to ensure with these the necessary unity of the Church in the present circumstances.” (Address, 30.11.2014)

Pope Francis saw his understanding of unity expressed in the geometric body of a polyhedron, which forms a unity, “but its parts are all different, each has its particularity, its charism. This is unity in diversity.” (Address, 28.7.2014) With the metaphor of the polyhedron, Pope Francis introduced a new and innovative proposal into the ecumenical dialog, which opens up the possibility of imagining a unity of Christianity that can value the distinctiveness of the respective churches and at the same time express the identity of the whole. Pope Francis was convinced that the unity of Christianity would not only come miraculously at the end of time. “Unity comes along the way. The Holy Spirit brings it about on the way.” (Address, 25.1.2024) This is why the churches must walk together and continue to develop a culture of encounter, dialog and cooperation.

The walls that divide us can only be overcome if we are prepared to listen to and learn from one another. We must resolve differences through forms of dialog that allow us to grow in understanding and respect. The culture of encounter requires us to be ready not only to give, but also to receive from others. (Message for World Social Communications Day, June 1, 2014)

Pope Francis' deep trust in the possibilities of dialog and his advocacy of a “culture of dialog and encounter” as the way to shape conditions in this world ran like a “common thread” through his ministry. Pope Francis was not naive or unworldly. He knew that



dialog is not just a superficial exchange of opinions, but an event through which positions can change and new insights can emerge. “Authentic social dialogue” – as the Pope said in the letter *Fratelli tutti* – “involves the ability to respect the other’s point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns.” (FT 203) However, as Pope Francis explained in his letter *Amoris laetitia*, this requires:

Don’t get bogged down in your own limited ideas and opinions, but be prepared to change or expand them. The combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both. The unity that we seek is not uniformity, but a “unity in diversity”, or “reconciled diversity”. Fraternal communion is enriched by respect and appreciation for differences within an overall perspective that advances the common good.” (AL 139)

For Pope Francis, the traditions of the individual churches were “a richness and not a threat to the unity of the Church” (Address, 10.11.2016). He therefore called for “reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us” (EG 246). He repeatedly reminded the churches not to let up in their commitment to ecumenism. “In spiritual as well as in ecclesial life, one always goes backwards when one stands still: to be content out of fear, laziness, tiredness or convenience, to stop while one approaches the Lord together with the brothers and sisters, means to refuse his invitation. And to approach him together, good ideas are not enough, but it is necessary to take concrete steps and reach out.” (Address, 7.12.2017) This is exactly what Pope Francis did. He lived ecumenism as creatively as he did tirelessly. He received ecumenical guests in the Vatican almost daily. Time and again, he set off himself to visit other Christian churches. None of his numerous trips abroad went by without ecumenical encounters, and Pope Francis repeatedly created opportunities to deepen relations with other churches and raise the profile of ecumenical issues.

The series of ecumenical encounters and visits that Pope Francis has undertaken in twelve years of his pontificate is like a necklace made up of many pearls, each of which is precious in its own right and which together are of outstanding importance for the entire ecumenical movement. It began at the end of May 2014 with a trip to the Holy Land, where Pope Francis celebrated a service in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre together with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I.

It is an extraordinary grace to be united here in prayer – said Pope Francis in his address, inviting us to – rediscover the greatness of our Christian vocation in this place: We are

men and women of the resurrection, not of death. Let us learn from this place to live our lives, the concerns of our churches and the whole world in the light of Easter morning. (Address, 25.5.2014)

Ecumenism, as represented by Pope Francis, has to take its starting point from the place of origin of the Christian faith and gains its shape and strength in terms of content.

With his ecumenical visits, journeys and encounters, Pope Francis has repeatedly succeeded in removing obstacles between the churches, facilitating understanding and promoting fellowship. Be it the visit to an Evangelical congregation in Caserta on July 28, 2014, where he made a moving gesture asking for forgiveness for the attacks and persecution by Catholics during the fascist era in Italy. Or the meeting with the Evangelical Lutheran parish in Rome in mid-November 2015, where Pope Francis, in a dialog with the parish, pointed out the possibility of couples of different denominations taking communion together and encouraged them to move forward. Because Pope Francis was convinced – as he said in the Christuskirche – “It is time for reconciled diversity.”

In this spirit, Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, President of the Lutheran World Federation, jointly opened a Reformation commemoration year for the first time in the history of Christianity with a service in Lund on October 31, 2016. The ecumenical significance of this extraordinary event can hardly be overestimated. While the commemoration and interpretation of the Reformation had been controversial between the churches for centuries, Pope Francis now acknowledged Luther's doctrine of justification in his sermon as an appropriate way of expressing “the essence of human existence before God.”

On February 12, 2016, Pope Francis traveled to Cuba especially to take the opportunity to meet the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Cyril I for the first time in the airport building in Havana. Pope Francis has repeatedly given new impetus to ecumenism. For example, through the “ecumenism of love”, which he made a central theme in April 2016 by visiting a refugee shelter on the island of Lesbos together with Patriarch Bartholomew I. Another topic that was particularly close to Pope Francis’ heart with regard to Christian unity was the “ecumenism of the martyrs.” During his visit to Cairo at the end of April 2017, he expressed his solidarity with the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, in the face of terrorist attacks that had taken place just a few days earlier. Together, they declared that “the ecumenism of the martyrs unites us and encourages us on the path to peace and reconciliation.” (Address, 28.4.2017) Pope Francis recalled the task of mission

and evangelization associated with ecumenism during his visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva in mid-June 2018. In his address, he thanked everyone for their commitment to Christian unity and expressed his hope that “if the missionary impulse grows, unity among us will also grow. Just as at the origins the proclamation marked the springtime of the Church, so evangelization will mark the flowering of a new ecumenical springtime.” (Address, 21.6.2018)

For Pope Francis, ecumenism was a matter close to his heart and at the same time the way in which he exercised his office and ministry as Pope. The certainty that the Holy Spirit will bring about the unity of Christianity led him to already venture more communion in anticipation of the unity that is to come but has not yet been achieved. With this bold action, which anticipates further steps of rapprochement, Pope Francis succeeded in setting in motion future-oriented processes that bring movement into deadlocked relations between the churches. Especially in these times of crisis, when the ecumenical momentum has almost died out due to current challenges (people leaving the church, coronavirus pandemic, Ukraine war) and the long-standing credibility crisis of the churches, it has proven to be extremely helpful for all Christians that Pope Francis is an ecumenical actor at world level who has been able to repeatedly set further ecumenical accents and - like a pilot in a storm - persistently keep the churches on the path of ecumenism.

Let us – Pope Francis encouraged – put aside the hesitations we have inherited from the past and open our hearts to the action of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love (Romans 5:5), so that together we can take swift steps towards the blessed day of our rediscovered full communion. (Address, 25.5.2014)

## VIII. Interreligious Fraternity

In February 2019, Francis was the first Pope to visit the Arabian Peninsula. The reason for this trip was an invitation from the Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, for Pope Francis to give a speech at an interreligious conference on “Fraternity Between Religions” in Abu Dhabi. The pictures alone were very impressive. Hand in hand, Pope Francis, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid and the Grand Imam Ahmad Mohammad Al-Tayyeb, head of al-Azhar University in Cairo and one of the most important voices in Sunni Islam, entered the conference venue in Abu Dhabi. In a world full of discord between religions, this joint appearance alone made it clear that understanding,

reconciliation and peaceful coexistence between religions are possible. At the beginning of the event, which was attended by several hundred religious representatives, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayid presented the Pope and the Grand Imam with a newly created award for "Fraternity for Humanity." The Grand Imam then spoke first, followed by Pope Francis.

At the beginning of his speech, the Pope referred to the great historical context in which he saw his visit. The Pope said that he had gladly taken the opportunity to come here on the eight hundredth anniversary of the meeting between St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil (in 1219) as a "believer thirsting for peace" and a "brother." And he emphasized the interreligious character of his journey: "Wanting peace, promoting peace, being instruments of peace: that is what we are here for." All considerations must be based on the insight that "God is the origin of the one human family" and that fraternity is therefore included as a "vocation in God's creation plan:" "It tells us that we all have the same dignity and that no one can be the master or slave of others." The Pope therefore called on religious representatives to take more responsibility in the fight against war and terror. "The time has come for religions to become more active, courageous, bold and sincere in helping the human family to develop its capacity for reconciliation, its vision of hope and concrete paths to peace." This is only possible if the religions meet as brothers and sisters. "There is no alternative," the Pope emphasized urgently in his speech: "Either we build the future together or there is no future. Religions in particular cannot do without the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures." As perhaps never before, they have a task "that can no longer be postponed: to make an active contribution to the demilitarization of the human heart. The arms race, the expansion of our own spheres of influence and aggressive policies to the detriment of others will never bring stability. War creates nothing but misery, weapons nothing but death."

Following the speeches, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb signed a joint declaration *On the brotherhood of all people for peaceful coexistence in the world*. This document not only represents a milestone in relations between Christianity and Islam. It also contains a message that had a strong impact on the international stage. At a time when walls are being erected out of hatred or fear of others, the document invalidates the logic of necessary conflict. The category of "civil rights" is of fundamental importance. All people are brothers and sisters and therefore have the same rights and obligations. The text affirms: "Faith allows the believer to see in the other a brother whom one supports

and loves.” The document was aimed at publicity, reception and institutionalization. All “who carry in their hearts faith in God and faith in the brotherhood of all human beings” are invited to “join together and work on it [...] Al-Azhar and the Catholic Church ask that this document become the object of research and reflection in all schools, universities and educational institutions, in order to help form new generations that bring goodness and peace and defend the rights of the oppressed and the least everywhere.” With these words, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayeb encouraged all to accept and deepen their invitation to fraternity. Pope Francis himself contributed significantly to the interreligious reception of the document with his soon to follow trips to Morocco (March 2019) and Iraq (March 2021), Kazakhstan (September 2022) and Bahrain (November 2022).

## IX. Pastoral Conversion as the Source of Ecclesial Reform

“Brothers and sisters, we no longer have a leading Christian culture – non siamo nella cristianità – there is none! We are no longer the only ones shaping culture, and we are neither the first nor the most listened to. We therefore need a change in pastoral thinking.” Pope Francis’ analysis of the situation of the church and faith in the 21st century, which he presented in his Christmas address to the Curia in December 2019, was clear and honest. He was convinced that “the era in which we live is not only an era of change, but one of epochal change. We are therefore at one of those moments in which changes are no longer linear, but rather epochal; they represent a turning point that is rapidly transforming the way of life, relationships, the formation and communication of thought, the relationship between human generations and the understanding and practice of faith and science.” According to Pope Francis, one of the consequences of this epochal change is that “people to whom the Gospel has not yet been proclaimed [...] do not live only in the non-Western continents, but everywhere, especially in the huge urban centers, which in turn require special pastoral care. In the big cities, we need other ‘maps,’ other paradigms that help us to realign our ways of thinking and our basic attitudes.”

A few months earlier, in a detailed letter to the “pilgrim people of God in Germany” dated June 27, 2019, Pope Francis had already drawn attention to the turning point of the times and pointed out that it was no longer enough to preserve the existence of the churches with all our strength. We are experiencing a turning point in time that makes it necessary to rethink the Church from its origins. In this letter, Pope Francis stated:

Accepting and enduring the current situation does not imply passivity or resignation, still less negligence. On the contrary, it presumes an invitation to identify what in us and in our communities is death-dealing and needs to be evangelised and visited by the Lord. This requires courage, because what we need is much more than a structural, organisational or functional change. (no.5)

In Pope Francis' view, a great temptation in the Church was to believe "that the solutions to current and future problems would come only from purely structural or bureaucratic reforms, but that, at the end of the day, they would not have touched the vital nuclei that need attention" (no.5) It is not about reorganization or "mending" with the church structure so that life can continue as before. According to Pope Francis, the necessary changes in the Church require a "conversione pastorale." He writes:

Therefore the transformation required cannot come only in reaction to data or external needs, such as the sharp drop in births and the aging of the communities, which do not allow us to see generational change. Objective and valid concerns, when seen in isolation, outside the mystery of the Church, would favour and foster a reactive attitude (both positive and negative) in the face of problems. True transformation responds to needs arising from our life of faith and from the evangelizing dynamic of the Church. It requires pastoral conversion. We need an attitude that, by trying to live and reveal the Gospel, breaks with "the grey pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness". Pastoral conversion reminds us that evangelisation must be our guiding criterion *par excellence*, on the basis of which we discern all the steps we are called to take as an ecclesial community. Evangelisation is the essential mission of the Church. (no.6)

## X. Concrete Reforms of the Church: Synodality

Concrete work on reforming the universal church and the Roman curia has accompanied Pope Francis' pontificate from the very beginning. One of his first decisions was to set up a new advisory body on April 13, 2013, following discussions prior to the conclave. This commission of eight cardinals, which began its work in October 2013, prepared a reform of the Curia with Pope Francis over a period of years, which culminated in the publication of the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* in March 2022 and gave the Roman curia a new structure. The title of this document says it all: "Proclaim the Gospel!" The preamble, which precedes the constitutional text and determines the concrete form of the reforms, establishes the ministry of the Roman curia from the spiritual mission of the church. This is an instrument of the Pope for the service of the church in the world, i.e. for the proclamation of the Gospel. The reform is therefore not an end in itself, but a means to support evangelization. The Dicastery for Evangelization now symbolically occupies

first place among the 16 dicasteries. Its special position is also underlined by the fact that it is headed by the Pope himself.

In addition to the Roman Curia, a second reform project concerned the Synods of Bishops. Far-reaching changes have taken place here in the course of Pope Francis' pontificate. Soon after taking office in March 2013, Pope Francis made it clear that he wanted to see a greater emphasis on and further development of synodal elements in the Church, which would also have important ecumenical implications. In an interview with the Jesuit Antonio Spadaro in summer 2013, Pope Francis said:

Perhaps it is time to change the method of the synod, because the current one seems static to me. This can then also have an ecumenical value – especially with our Orthodox brothers. From them we can learn even more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and the tradition of synodality [...] In ecumenical relations this is important: not only to know better what the Spirit has sown in others, but above all to recognize it better as a gift to us too.<sup>[7]</sup>

Pope Francis has not only convened a series of synods of bishops (family, youth, Amazonia), as his predecessors did, but from the beginning of his pontificate he has developed a differentiated and profound theological understanding of synodality in a number of speeches and addresses. Of particular importance are his speech on the 50th anniversary of the introduction of the Synod of Bishops on October 17, 2015 and the address on October 9, 2021 at the opening of the World Synod, which took place from 2021 to 2024 under the heading “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission”.

“This path of synodality is precisely what God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” With this programmatic statement, Pope Francis placed the current efforts towards a synodal style in the context of the project to reform the Church. For him, the topic of synodality was neither a fad nor a new conference format for the world episcopate. Rather, Pope Francis saw synodality as the “constitutive dimension of the Church” (speech, 17.10.2015). “Synodality expresses the essence of the Church, its form, its style, its mission.” (Speech, 18.9.2021) It was not just about the church “making” a synod, but the church “becoming a synod”. This requires an attitude that should be formed and practiced by all believers, in all areas of church life and at all levels of church decision-making.

One of the most important characteristics of synodality as understood by Pope Francis was, firstly: “A synodal church is a church of listening, in the awareness that listening is

more than hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn: the faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome – each listening to the others and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to recognize what he ‘says to the Church’ (cf. Rev 2:7).” (Speech, 17.10.2015). This idea was based on two convictions. Firstly, the firm belief that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in this world and in the Church. And secondly, the view that the truth is not fixed, but must be discovered in dialog with others. According to Pope Francis, in order to reach decisions and results in a synodal church, it is therefore not an intellectual debate that is necessary, but the process of “spiritual discernment.”

In Pope Francis’ view, a second characteristic of a synodal church was that, as a result of baptism, all believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit to use their gifts, ministries and charisms to assume responsibility in the church and for its mission in different ways. Against the background of his view of the priesthood of all the baptized, Pope Francis pointed out that the *sensus fidei*, the faithfuls’ sense of faith, forbids “rigidly distinguishing between *Ecclesia docens* (scil. the teaching Church) and *Ecclesia discens* (scil. the learning Church), because the flock also has its own ‘sense of intuition’ to recognize new paths that the Lord opens up for the Church.” (Address, 17.10.2015) This position led to a series of important changes within the Roman Catholic Church, from which theological and spiritual impulses emanate in many places that are important for the ecumenical partners. This definitely includes the diverse and broad participation process, synchronized and across the entire globe and all levels of church life. Neither the Roman Catholic Church nor other Christian churches have ever practiced the involvement of the faithful to this extent.

In October 2021, Pope Francis opened the World Synod on “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” This was the first time that synodality became the subject of a synod’s deliberations. As a first step, input was collected, believers heard and papers drawn up in a large-scale participation process at various levels of the global church. Following the continental meetings, the Synod secretariat in Rome bundled the reflections into an *Instrumentum Laboris*, which formed the basis for the work of the World Synod. The first part of the World Synod finally took place in Rome in October 2023. The second part of the World Synod took place one year later, in October 2024.

A third characteristic of synodality was based on Pope Francis’ conviction that it represents a decisive opportunity to carry out evangelization and mission as the basic



mission of the Church in the conditions of the 21st century. In Pope Francis' view, only a "synodal church" that fulfills this mission is a church with a future. For Pope Francis, a synodal church was therefore constitutively a church on the move, which focuses on the proclamation of the Gospel under the conditions of the present.

One of the special features of this World Synod was that, as a consequence of the synodal process, Pope Francis decided in spring 2023 to invite not only bishops but also, for the first time, 80 non-ordained persons – including 54 women – to the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops with a seat and voting rights. This was a decisive paradigm shift for the Roman Catholic Church and a highly relevant ecumenical development. This change was also made visible by a new seating arrangement compared to previous synods. The pictures of the groups of tables in the huge audience hall went around the world. Until then, a strict hierarchical seating arrangement had prevailed at the synod: cardinals, archbishops, bishops and auxiliary bishops. Now an alphabetical order based on language groups and topics prevailed, so that bishops from all over the world sat together with religious, priests and lay people in ever-changing constellations. This was not just an external change, but the new seating arrangement also expressed a new awareness that we are the people of God together and that we can learn from each other by listening to each other. This was reflected in the fact that the synodal process was based on the "spiritual conversation" method. It provides for prayer and silence, talking and listening. In this way, the voice of the Holy Spirit was to be heard in the discussions.

What happened at the World Synod has far-reaching ecumenical consequences. From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis had repeatedly pointed out that the commitment to building a synodal church was "rich in implications for ecumenism" (address, 17.10.2015) and that there were many ecumenical learning opportunities here. At the Angelus on January 15, 2023, Pope Francis said with regard to the World Synod: "The path to Christian unity and the path to the synodal conversion of the Church are linked." Accordingly, the World Synod was also characterized by a clear ecumenical dimension. This can be seen in the following accents, among others: On September 30, 2023, an ecumenical evening prayer was held in St. Peter's Square, thus forming the unofficial prelude to the World Synod, so to speak. Pope Francis and heads of various churches took part in this ecumenical prayer – including Patriarch Bartholomew I, the head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ephrem II of Antioch and Primate of the

Anglicans, Archbishop Justin Welby. The prayer vigil entitled “Together” was the idea of the prior of the ecumenical community of Taizé, Frere Alois Löser.

Twelve representatives of the four major Christian traditions (three from the Orthodox Church, three from the Eastern Orthodox Churches, three from the historic Protestant Churches and three from the Evangelical Churches) were also invited to take part in the Synod. These representatives were not just observers, but active participants in the discussions in the working groups. Finally, the significance of the ecumenical experience during the World Synod was also emphasized in the interim document, which stated that “we are in an ecumenical kairos” and affirmed that “what unites us is greater than what divides us. For together we have ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all’ (Eph 4:5-6).” (Synthesis document no. 7.a)

In contrast to previous synods, Pope Francis immediately put the final document, which was adopted by a large majority in October 2024, into force at the end of the World Synod without approving its resolutions in a post-synodal letter.

These new and very concrete experiences with synodality can themselves be seen as one of the decisive results of the World Synod. Plurality and diversity were lived out in the unity of the Church through the various Synod participants from all continents of the world. Controversial issues were not ignored, but addressed honestly and openly. Enduring this without breaking apart was an important and groundbreaking positive experience.

With the rediscovery and innovative deepening of synodality as an existential dimension of the church, Pope Francis has given his own church as well as the other Christian churches far-reaching theological and spiritual impulses to further develop both their own and the common understanding of synodality. It is of particular importance for all churches that Pope Francis has provided an answer to the great challenges of the present with the topic of synodality. These are neither about denominational peculiarities nor about crisis phenomena that only affect the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, all Christian churches in Europe find themselves in one and the same situation and must find an answer to the question of how they can fulfill their mission of proclaiming the Gospel under the conditions of the 21st century in such a way that people can experience the message of the Gospel as relevant to their lives in an increasingly complex world. Pope

Francis is convinced that the answer that the Christian churches give to this question will determine their future.

## XI. Orientation for the world

After his election, Pope Francis became one of the most important intellectuals within a very short time. During his 12-year pontificate, he has provided more publicly visible guidance on spiritual and ethical issues at a global level than almost anyone else. In his book “Age of Anger”, the Indian philosopher and journalist Pankaj Mishra describes the Pope as the “most convincing and influential intellectual of our time.”<sup>[8]</sup> This “spiritual orientation” of Pope Francis has much to do with his deep faith, his rich theology, his pastoral experience as Archbishop of Buenos Aires and his pronounced ability not only to analyze current social and ecclesial developments very precisely, but also to interpret them theologically and to point out new and different possibilities for action with great clarity.

In a programmatic speech that Pope Francis gave to the Jesuit College of the magazine “La Civiltà Cattolica” on February 9, 2017, he outlined important basic ideas that determine his leadership actions. The starting point is the conviction that “genuine faith [...] always presupposes a deep desire to change the world. That is the question we must ask ourselves: Do we have great vision and drive? Are we bold? Or are we mediocre and content with reflections ‘from the laboratory’ (‘di laboratorio’)?” According to Pope Francis, ‘from the laboratory’ in this context means that prefabricated, abstract and unworldly answers are unsuitable for proclaiming the Gospel under the conditions of the present and for engaging as a church in the relevant social debates and discourses. If the Church wants to fulfill its mission, it needs above all boldness, vision and drive. In Pope Francis’ understanding, this meant neither merely “resisting an adverse reality” nor insisting on previously appropriate answers. He was convinced: “Christian values and traditions are not rarities that need to be locked away in the display cases of a museum.” The Pope’s appeal was aimed at a “restlessness” (“inquietudine”) of the heart, at a “spiritual atmosphere of searching,” in which the “certainty of faith” is the “driving force” of “search and research.” “We must,” Bergoglio had already stated during his time as Archbishop of Buenos Aires in a message to educators in 2003, “lay the foundation stone for a new building in the midst of history, that is, locate ourselves in a present that has a past and – at least we hope – also a future.” In this sense, Pope Francis advocated a “bold

and creative” way of thinking that does not “throw everything overboard” that constitutes the existing reality, but rather creates a vision of a different future, “which, however, tends to return to the present and seek its paths of possibility there: first the vividly conceived ideal and then the reliable means by which it can be realized, if necessary.” In his speech of 9 February 2017, Pope Francis recommended “imagination” (“immaginazione”) as a necessary quality for this, the ability of which he characterized as follows: “Those who have imagination do not freeze, have a sense of humor, always enjoy the gentleness of mercy and inner freedom. They are able to open up great visions, even in confined spaces”.

Pope Francis’ spiritual orientation and his ability to perceive current developments and point out possible courses of action based on his faith have been impressively demonstrated during the coronavirus pandemic. This is particularly true of the prayer that Pope Francis held in front of St. Peter’s Basilica in the early evening of March 27, 2020.

It seems “as if evening has fallen. Deep darkness has fallen on our squares, streets and cities; it has taken over our lives and filled everything with a deafening silence and a desolate emptiness. [...] We are frightened and feel lost.”

This is how Pope Francis interpreted the situation at the beginning of his address, expressing the experience of many people since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The same experience worldwide: where there had previously been abundance, there was now emptiness. Streets and squares were deserted. Movement was reduced to the bare essentials. Life was concentrated in people’s own homes. All public places where social discourse had previously taken place were closed. This also applied to many churches, where services had not been celebrated for weeks. The coronavirus pandemic also forced serious restrictions and unusual decisions at the Vatican. He was “put in a cage” (ital. “ingabbiato”), as the Pope described his situation at the Angelus prayer on Sunday, March 8, 2020 – the first that was no longer said to the people in St. Peter’s Square with the windows open as usual, but had to take place behind closed doors in the library of the Apostolic Palace. Pope Francis faced reality as it had been changed by the coronavirus. But he did not allow the pandemic to dictate his interpretation of reality. The prayer that the Pope celebrated alone on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica on March 27, 2020 stood for this. However, millions of people around the world were present via television, radio and the internet. With his prayer, Pope Francis filled the corona-related void and transformed it into a public space of faith in which an interpretation of the corona crisis

was offered by listening to the biblical message. Pope Francis' attitude was based on the conviction that even this dramatic situation is not without God and that it is therefore the genuine task of the church to help discover the hidden presence of God in this time.

With this in mind, Pope Francis had already written in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* in 2013:

We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. (EG 71)

In his address on March 27, 2020, Pope Francis made an offer in the midst of the pandemic by recalling the situation of the disciples in a boat in distress who woke the sleeping Jesus to help them in the storm:

Like the disciples of the Gospel, we were caught in an unexpected violent storm. We realized that we are all in the same boat, all weak and disoriented, but at the same time important and necessary, because we are all called to row together, we must all stand by each other. The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers the false and unnecessary certainties on which we have built our plans, projects, habits and priorities. It makes visible how we have neglected and abandoned the things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our community.

It was crucial for Pope Francis that the crisis was not misinterpreted as a time of God's judgment. Rather, in his view, the undesirable developments that have become apparent require us humans to redefine the course of life. The Pope understood the crisis as "the time to decide what really matters and what is transitory, the time to distinguish what is necessary from what is not." Pope Francis was convinced that no one can face such a serious time of crisis alone and invited all to surrender their fears to Jesus "so that he may overcome them. Like the disciples, we will experience that we will not be shipwrecked with him on board. For that is God's strength: to turn everything that happens to us to good, even the bad things. He brings calm to our storms, because with God, life never perishes. The Lord challenges us, and in the midst of the storm he invites us to awaken and activate solidarity and hope, which give stability, support and meaning to those hours when everything seems to be sinking. The Lord awakens to awaken and revive our Easter faith." As a sign of this hope in faith, Pope Francis gave the traditional blessing "Urbi et orbi" – "to the city of Rome and the world" – at the end of the prayer, which was previously

only intended for Easter and Christmas and after the election of a pope. In the rain of Rome, in front of the emptiness of the world, Pope Francis made it clear on this evening that Christians are affected by the coronavirus pandemic in the same way as everyone else, but that they will not be paralyzed by this experience, but have a strength in their faith that helps them to discover the opportunities to be close to people in the midst of the crisis, to share in their worries and to support them in their need. With his prayer and his address, Pope Francis guided humanity – as English journalist Austen Ivereigh put it – like a pilot through the storm of the pandemic. “He was, to coin a phrase, the world’s spiritual guide; and now that the world had entered a dark night, he walked with us, shining a torch on the paths ahead and warning us of the cliffs. He sought to convey the urgency of opening people to grace in times of tribulation, allowing God to shape our story.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The importance of Pope Francis’ spiritual orientation was demonstrated in a special way when he was admitted to Gemelli Hospital on February 14, 2025 and had to stay there for five weeks for treatment. This meant that the Pope's voice was absent during the weeks when the world had to reorganize itself due to the inauguration of the American government. The Pope's voice was sorely missed by many during this confusing and challenging time. For on a global level, the Pope was one of the few who stood up for humanity, for peace and for the rights of migrants and refugees in a way that was fearless, unflinching and at the same time full of integrity. One of his last official acts before he went into hospital was a letter of exhortation to the American bishops, calling on them to oppose the inhumanity of Donald Trump. Jesus Christ loved all people with a universal love, Pope Francis wrote in this letter:

Jesus Christ, loving everyone with a universal love, educates us in the permanent recognition of the dignity of every human being, without exception. In fact, when we speak of “infinite and transcendent dignity,” we wish to emphasize that the most decisive value possessed by the human person surpasses and sustains every other juridical consideration that can be made to regulate life in society. Thus, all the Christian faithful and people of good will are called upon to consider the legitimacy of norms and public policies in the light of the dignity of the person and his or her fundamental rights, not vice versa. (Letter, February 10, 2025, no.3)

On the basis of this conviction, Pope Francis then came to a clear and critical assessment of the new American government's treatment of migrants and refugees:

I have followed closely the major crisis that is taking place in the United States with the initiation of a program of mass deportations. The rightly formed conscience cannot fail to make a critical judgment and express its disagreement with any measure that tacitly

or explicitly identifies the illegal status of some migrants with criminality. At the same time, one must recognize the right of a nation to defend itself and keep communities safe from those who have committed violent or serious crimes while in the country or prior to arrival. That said, the act of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty, insecurity, exploitation, persecution or serious deterioration of the environment, damages the dignity of many men and women, and of entire families, and places them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness. This is not a minor issue: an authentic rule of law is verified precisely in the dignified treatment that all people deserve, especially the poorest and most marginalized. (Letter, no.4–5)

Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken out against all forms of war and violence and has been much criticized for this, on the grounds that he has not clearly named the responsibilities in each case. But he has avoided this out of a longing for peace, without the calculation and cynicism of rulers and warmongers. Many people were convinced that if Pope Francis could raise his voice, it would not change the actions of governments. But it would bring a little dignity and direction back into world politics.

### The Farewell: “With tenderness and courage”

We must “realize that we have moved from a systemic Christianity within a certain social framework to a ‘minority’ Christianity, or rather to a Christianity that requires witness.”<sup>[10]</sup>In these words, Pope Francis sums up his understanding of current developments in the Church and Christianity in the final chapter of his autobiography “Hope,” which was published at the beginning of 2025. At the same time, he also provides a concise description of his own actions and work as Pope. In everything he did, he was concerned with bearing witness to faith in Jesus Christ. Pope Francis’ great power to bear witness was particularly impressive and touching in the last days of his life. On March 23, 2025, Pope Francis returned to the Vatican after five weeks in Gemelli Hospital, under the medical condition that he should continue to take it easy for two months. On Sunday, April 6, 2025, Pope Francis made a surprise appearance at the end of the Mass for the Jubilee of the Sick in St. Peter’s Square and spoke briefly to the people gathered. “Have a good Sunday everyone, thank you very much!” said the head of the Church spontaneously and still in a weak voice, but obviously in better shape than recently. Over the next few days, Pope Francis appeared spontaneously in a wheelchair in St. Peter’s Basilica from time to time. This also happened during the Settimana Santa. It had always been a special concern of Pope Francis to celebrate Maundy Thursday Mass with the ritual washing of feet in prisons or other places where people lived on the margins of society. On April 16, 2025,

he also met with around 70 prisoners in Rome's Regina Coeli prison. Due to his state of health, Francis did not celebrate Mass with the prisoners this year, but he did not want to miss the opportunity to meet some of them on this symbolic day commemorating Jesus' Last Supper and express his closeness to them. This year, Pope Francis himself wrote the meditations for the Way of the Cross, which is celebrated in Rome on the evening of Good Friday in front of the Colosseum. Pope Francis entrusted the celebration of the Easter Vigil in St. Peter's Basilica on April 19, 2025 to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re. In the homily read by the cardinal, Pope Francis called on us to allow the hope of Easter to germinate in our lives, especially at this time:

When we still feel the weight of death in our hearts, when we see how the shadows of evil continue to spread rumblingly in the world, when we feel the wounds of selfishness or violence burning in our flesh and in our society, let us not lose heart, let us return to the message of this night: The light shines slowly, even when darkness surrounds us; the hope of a new life and a world finally liberated awaits us; a new beginning can surprise us, even if it sometimes seems impossible, because Christ has conquered death. This message opens our hearts and fills us with hope. In the risen Jesus we have the certainty that our personal history and the path of humanity are in God's hands, even if they are still surrounded by a darkness in which the lights only shine dimly; and in his great love he will not let us stumble and will not allow evil to have the last word.

After the celebration of Mass on Easter Sunday in St. Peter's Square, Archbishop Diego Giovanni Ravelli read out the Pope's Easter message, in which he encouraged the faithful to shape their lives based on their belief in the resurrection of Christ and combined this with an urgent call for more peace and dialog in the world:

Easter is the feast of life! God created us for life and he wants humanity to rise again! In his eyes, every life is precious! That of children in the womb as well as that of the elderly or the sick, who in more and more countries are seen as people who can be disposed of. How much will to die we see every day in the many conflicts in different parts of the world! How much violence we often see in families, against women or children! How much contempt is sometimes shown to the weakest, the outcasts, the migrants! On this day, I would like us to regain hope and trust in our fellow human beings – including those who are not close to us or who come from distant countries with foreign customs, ways of life, ideas and traditions – because we are all children of God! I wish we could find our way back to the hope that peace is possible!

Pope Francis then said the blessing “Urbi et orbi” from the central loggia of St. Peter's Basilica and then drove around St. Peter's Square in an open car for around 20 minutes, greeting and blessing the people cheering him on. It was the first time since his release from hospital that the Pope had been seen like this in St. Peter's Square. This had always been particularly important to him from the first day of his pontificate, so that on this



Easter day, too, he used all his strength to be close to the people. In the early hours of Easter Monday (April 21, 2025), Pope Francis passed away in the Casa Santa Marta at the age of 88. This is how Pope Francis bade farewell to the people in blessing.

Pope Francis' autobiography ends with words that he leaves us with as the quintessence of his pontificate:

We must show humility, make room for the Lord, not for our imagined certainties. Tenderness is not weakness. Rather, it is true strength. It is the path taken by the strongest and bravest men and women. Let us follow it too. Let us fight with tenderness and courage. Follow this path. Fight with tenderness and courage...I am but a single step. (*Hoffe*, p. 378)

[<sup>1</sup>] Antonio Spadaro SJ, *Das Interview mit Papst Franziskus*, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 2013, 27f.

[<sup>2</sup>] Spadaro, 28.

[<sup>3</sup>] Spadaro, 48.

[<sup>4</sup>] Spadaro, 47.

[<sup>5</sup>] Spadaro, 47f.

[<sup>6</sup>] Spadaro, 48f.

[<sup>7</sup>] Spadaro, 54f.

[<sup>8</sup>] Pankaj Mishra, *Das Zeitalter des Zorns*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2017, 359.

[<sup>9</sup>] Austen Ivereigh, *Wage zu träumen*, Munich: Kösel, 2020, 180f.

[<sup>10</sup>] Pope Francis, *Hoffe. Die Autobiographie*, Munich: Kösel, 2025, 374.