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THE SHAPE OF THEOLOGY AFTER POPE FRANCIS' SYNODALITY

Vatican II highlighted the Church as a *sacrament*—a vision that arose in the context of a "fortress" church marked by a highly centralized papacy. Building on this notion of sacrament as communion and participation, Pope Francis has oriented it toward mission, in fulfilment of Jesus' prayer: "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (Jn 17:21). He does so by introducing the concept of synodality. Synodality is distinct from the synods of the Eastern or Anglican churches, and even from the way the term has traditionally been used in the western church through the Synod of Bishops. Synodality is both a concept of the nature of the Church and a programme for the Church. The Church is—a sacrament of communion, inviting all to participate, and its programme is mission. In this way, communion, participation, and mission are inseparably united.

His proposal has been regarded as a Pandora's box[1], and on more than one occasion, various doubts have been raised about Pope Francis' views. Some theologians have even gone so far as to accuse him of heresy.[2] Nevertheless, Pope Francis continues to forge ahead with determination. This article seeks to propose a new paradigm for theology.

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[1] J. A. Ureta and J. Loredo De Izcue, *The Synodal Process is a Pandora's Box: 100 Questions and Answers*, The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, Spring Grove PN 2023.

[2] Cf. *major statement: The Crimes and Heresies of Pope Francis, Their Causes and Effects, and the Action to Be Taken*, on *Rorate Cæli*, Internet (01.09.2025): rorate-caeli.blogspot.com. *The* dubia *letter submitted to Pope Francis in regard to* Amoris Laetitia (10.05.2024), and *The response to two dubia submitted by two cardinals*, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_risposta-dubia-2023_en.html.

In his "motu proprio" *Ad theologiam promovendam,*[3] Pope Francis calls for a new theological paradigm (4 and 5):

> Theological reflection is therefore called to a turning point, to a paradigm shift, to a "courageous cultural revolution" (Encyclical Letter *Laudato si',* 114) that commits it, in the first place, to being a fundamentally contextual theology, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women live daily, in different geographical environments, and having as its archetype the Incarnation of the eternal Logos, his entry into culture, in the vision of the world, in the religious tradition of a people. From this point on, theology can only develop into a culture of dialogue and encounter between different traditions and different knowledge, between different Christian confessions and different religions, openly confronting everyone, believers and non-believers alike [...]
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> It is the approach of transdisciplinarity, that is, interdisciplinarity in the strong sense, distinct from multidisciplinarity, understood as interdisciplinarity in the weak sense. The latter certainly favors a better understanding of the object of study by considering it from several points of view, which however remain complementary and separate. Transdisciplinarity, on the other hand, must be thought of "as the placement and fermentation of all knowledge within the space of Light and Life offered by the Wisdom that derives from the revelation of God." (Constit. Ap. *Veritatis gaudium*, *Prooemium*, 4c)

I suggest that the *emerging paradigm* for theology may be outlined as follows: *a theology for a pilgrim Church on the move—missionary in nature—embracing all creation until the Lord comes again*.

This can be further elaborated as follows, which constitutes the content of my article:

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[3] Franciscus, Lettera Apostolica in forma di Motu Proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam*, con la quale vengono approvati nuovi statuti della Pontificia Accademia di Teologia (1° novembre 2023), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, CXV (2023) 1209-1213, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

1. The primordial journey is the Exodus, remembered as God's on-going action in which the people entered into a covenant relationship with God and with one another—called not to repeat among themselves the exploitation and oppression they had suffered in Egypt. In Pope Francis' vision, these foundational themes take on the nuances of mercy, fraternity, and social friendship.
2. The early church continued this journey. When disputes arose—such as whether believers had to become Jews first—the Council of Jerusalem resolved the matter. Similarly, when conflict emerged over the distribution of alms, the institution of deacons provided a solution. As the Church progressed, it also faced various heresies concerning the nature of Christ. These were addressed at the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451). In the case of Arianism, the role of the laity proved crucial in preserving the authentic faith, underscoring the respect owed to them. At Chalcedon, a foundational language for Christology was articulated, affirming the union between humanity and divinity.
3. The Church is mission. The "seeds of the Word" precede our missionary activity. Pope Francis' emphasis on God's mercy, along with the call to fraternity and social friendship, forms the very fabric of the missionary journey.
4. That journey continues today, in a world where (a) an increasing number of people profess no religious affiliation, and (b) fraternity and social friendship are often lacking.
5. Therefore, important dimensions of the mission are (a) to engage in a transdisciplinary search (b) to uncover or discover the seeds of the word and (c) to attract a response to the gospel (d) to articulate a message that "smells" of the people and is not sterile or detached (e) to foster fraternity and social friendship (f) to live as pilgrim Church—pilgrim in focus on the goal of the journey, which is God, and pilgrim in detachment from everything else. This entails the conditions for discernment: God first and last, and non-attachment or indifference to all things other than God.
6. After Pentecost, if someone had felt not merely the desire to obtain information about Jesus of Nazareth, but rather the desire to encounter him personally, the only possibility would have been to seek out his disciples—to hear his words and see his gestures,

more alive than ever (cf. *Desiderio Desideravi*, 2023, 8). Today, we encounter Christ in the life and worship of the Church.

The Exodus–Primordial Memory

In *Ad theologiam promovendam*, 3, Pope Francis observes: "For a synodal missionary church on pilgrimage (Italian, *in uscita*, latin, *in exitu*), there cannot but correspond a theology in pilgrimage"[4]. The repeated use of *in exitu* is likely an allusion to Ps 114:1-2 "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion". The Exodus is both a fundamental experience and a central metaphor in Scripture[5]. It conveys two key dimensions. First, the Lord delivered his people, which in turn requires their fidelity (cf. Dt 4:32-40). Second, the emphasis is that the mighty works God accomplished in the past were not only for then but remain effective for his people now and forever. Thus, we hear: "I brought you out..." (Num 15:40) and "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:36). In the Exodus journey, the cloud by day and the fire by night symbolize both revelation and formation[6].

The Exodus is also a recognizable theme in the NT[7]. It is remembered as what happened to our fathers, what happens to us, and what

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[4] "A una Chiesa sinodale, missionaria ed 'in uscita' non può che corrispondere una teologia 'in uscita'" (Latin version: Synodali Ecclesiae, missionariae et "in exitu" theologia "in exitu" necessario respondere debet). Cf. C. Downing, *How Can We Hope and Not Dream? Exodus as Metaphor: A Study of the Biblical Imagination*, in *The Journal of Religion*, 48/1(1968) 35-53; G. Augustin, *Por una Iglesia in salida con el Papa Francisco: Impulsos de la Exhortación Apostolica* Evangelii Gaudium, Tr. J. M. Lozano-Gotor Perona, Sal Terrae, Bilbao 2015.

[5] Cf. S. E. Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, Tr. B. J. Scharrtz, Hebrew Un., Jerusalem 1992, esp. p. 53-68, 234-272.

[6] Cf. R. J. Clifford, W*isdom: A Commentary*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN 2013, p. 46-85 where he points out that Wis 11:1-19:22 God provides for his son Israel; P. Enns, *Exodus Retold: Ancient Exegesis of the Departure from Egypt in Wis 15-21 and 19:1-9,* Brill Academic, Leiden 1997, p. 56-65.

[7] Cf. B. Estell, *The Exodus Motif in the Christian Bible*, in *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TheExo-

climaxes in salvation. In Homer, the past is recalled to highlight the heroic deeds of individuals. In the Bible, however, the events are recalled "for us"—where the outcome is either salvation or damnation. Thus, Scripture does not discriminate between classes of people or between good and bad deeds. The sins and failures of Adam, Jacob, and David are recounted with the same importance as the humility and obedience of Abraham and Moses. The reason is simple: what matters is understanding what it means that God created the world and ourselves, and how we both frustrated and cooperated with his designs. Everything is to be remembered[8]. Everything has a place in the on-going process of liberation, salvation, and formation—as embodied in the praxis of Jesus[9] and continued it the life of the believing community.

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dusMotifintheChristianBible; notes "The motif is thus a thread uniting the entire biblical canon and is an ideal lens through which to view the unity, the development, and the complexity of scripture." R. J. Clifford, *The Exodus in the Christian Bible: The case for 'figural' reading,* in *Theological Studies*, 63/2 (2002) 345-361.

[8] G. Josipovici, *The Book of the Lord: Response to the Bible*, Yale Un. Press, New Haven 1988, p. 139 maintains that the rhythm established in Gen 1:1—"In the beginning, God created..."—is sustained throughout the Bible up to its final book, Revelation.

[9] For Jesus, "Formation was not, in the first place, the transmission of truths to be remembered, but the communication of the new experience of God and the life which radiates from Jesus for the disciples. The community which was forming around Jesus was the expression of this new experience. Formation led people to have a different way of looking, to have different attitudes. It gave them a new conscience concerning the mission and concerning themselves. It helped them to place themselves at the side of the excluded. And soon afterwards, it produced 'conversion' as a consequence of the acceptance of the Good News (Mk 1:15)". "A picture of Jesus, formator of His disciples. Jesus, the Master, is the axis, the center, and the model of formation given to the disciples. By His attitudes He is an example of the Kingdom. He embodies the love of God and reveals it (Mk 6:31; Mt 10:30; Lk 15:11-32). Many small gestures show this witness of life with which Jesus marked His presence in the life of the disciples, preparing them for life and for their mission. This was His way of giving a human form to the experience which He had of God, the Father. The following is a picture of Jesus, the formator of His disciples: He involves them in the mission (Mk 6:7; Lk 9:1-2; 10:1), when they return He reviews with them all that they have lived (Lk 10:17-20). He corrects them when they fail and want to be the first ones (Mk 9:33-35; 10:14-15). He waits for the opportune moment to correct them (Lk 9:46-48; Mk 10:14 15). He helps them to

The notion of pilgrimage is a liminoid phenomenon (Turner)[10]—productive of social encounters free from hierarchical constraints—and has, of course, proved immensely resonant. Pilgrimage can be understood in many senses: as performative act, an embodied act, a semantic field, and a metaphor[11]. To set out on pilgrimage, as indicated above, is to be accompanied along the journey by the divine presence in the sanctuary. "The power of divine presence on the journey is perceived as proleptically related to the experience of presence in the shrine: the pilgrims not only journey to the shrine to meet Yahweh, but the divine power journeys out to pilgrims on their way to meet their deity at the shrine."[12] In the theology of pilgrimage that Pope Francis envisages, the journey itself is a movement under God—a passage of discernment to discover where God is leading his church at this present moment.

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discern (Mk 9:18-19). He challenges them when they are slow (Mk 4:13; 8:14-21). He prepares them to face the conflict (Jn 16:33; Mt 10:17-25). He orders them to observe reality (Mk 8:27-29; Jn 4:35; Mt 16:1-3). He reflects with them on questions of the moment (Lk 13:1-5). He confronts them with the needs of the people (Jn 6:5). He teaches them that the needs of the people are above the ritual prescriptions (Mt12:7-12). He meets alone with them so as to be able to instruct them (Mk 4:34; 7:17; 9:30-31; 10:10; 13:3). He knows how to listen even if the dialogue is difficult (Jn 4:7-42). He helps them to accept themselves (Lk 22:32). He is demanding and asks them to leave everything out of love for Him (Mk 10:17-31). He is severe concerning hypocrisy (Lk 11:37-53). He asks more questions than gives responses (Mk 8:17-21). He is firm and does not allow himself to deviate from the right path (Mk 8:33; Lk 9:54.60) He prepares them for conflict and persecution (Mt 10:16-25)": *Lectio Divina: Mark 9:38-40*, in *Carmelites, Ordo fratrum Beatae Virginis Mariae de Monte Carmelo*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://ocarm.org/en/item/984.

[10] Liminoid refers to having the characteristics of a liminal experience, but in an optional form, not necessarily involving the resolution of a personal crisis. (Liminal denotes that which pertains to a beginning or first stage of a process; inceptive, inchoative, or marginal). Cf. V. W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play,* PAJ Publications, New York 1982, p. 20-88 (untitled chapter: "Liminal to Liminoid in play and flow ritual"); Cf. also V. and E. Turner, *Pilgrimage in Christian Culture,* Colombia Un. Press, New York 2011.

[11] *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, S. Coleman - J. Eade ed., Routledge, London 2004, p. 1-25.

[12] M. S. Smith, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus*, Bloomsbury, London 1997, p. 57.

Acts: The Journey Continues

In his Gospel, Luke traces the journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, outlining all that he did (Lk 1:1–9:50) and taught (Lk 9:51–19:44), until he was taken up (Lk 19:45–24:53). In the *Acts*, the journey continues through the disciples: "You will be my witnesses" (Act 1:1–6:7)—first in Jerusalem, then in all Judaea (Act 6:8–9:31), and finally to the ends of the earth (Acts 9:32–28:31).

While leading figures such as Peter and Paul, together with their ministries, dominate the narrative, there is substantial evidence that many more people beyond the apostles were involved in spreading the gospel—often under adverse circumstances. Even the missionary activities of prominent figures are deeply rooted in the mission of various churches, especially the church in Jerusalem. Mission, while primarily understood as the mission of God (*missio Dei*), is also the mission of the Church (*missio ecclesiae*). It is not confined to the ordained ministry or to particular societies dedicated to mission but is the responsibility of all Christians—so that many more may "go on their way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39).

First, *Acts* reminds us that mission is an integral part of what it means to be Church. Secondly, *Acts* is part of our story. As modern Christians we should not merely view *Acts* as a series of historical events disconnected from our daily reality. In a very real sense, *Acts* is also our history, as it tells the story of the early years of the Christian Church and shows how the gospel transformed lives and communities. Thirdly, *Acts* provides us with inspirational examples to follow. However, it must be remembered, first, that mission is initiated, empowered, and directed by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the call is to be witnesses of the Risen Christ (μάρτυρες), first appearing in Acts 1:8, and then encountered twelve more times throughout the book. Fourthly, a renewed emphasis on *Missio Dei* has provided a much-needed corrective to human-centred understanding of mission over the past three decades. Fifthly, mission involves the crossing of borders and boundaries. In the process, as we see in *Acts*, various tensions arose, which were addressed and resolved. For example, the tension between Jewish and Greek followers was resolved by the institution of the deacons,[13]

[13] Was this really a solution? The deacons, including Philip and Stephen, are not primarily connected with the distribution tables but are depicted as preaching.

and the dispute over whether believers had first to become Jews was resolved at the Council of Jerusalem[14].

Francis' Emphasis on Mercy and Fraternity

Pope Francis could be said to translate the "journey" metaphor of the Exodus—which carries two components in its memory: God's action, which was, is, and continues—into a vision of a journey together, mindful of God's mercy, greater than any human sin: a journey of fraternity. The first greeting of Pope Francis upon his election (13 March 2013) was:

> And now, we take up this journey: Bishop and People. This journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches. A journey of fraternity, of love, of trust among us. Let us always pray for one another. Let us pray for the whole world, that there may be a great spirit of fraternity. It is my hope for you that this journey of the Church, which we start today, and in which my Cardinal Vicar, here present, will assist me, will be fruitful for the evangelization of this most beautiful city[15].

I would suggest that, since then, two aspects of the journey have been emphasized: the boundless mercy of God and the call to build fraternity. Rather than offering an elaborate exposition of these two

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[14] C. Stenschke, *Mission In The Book Of Acts: Mission Of The Church*, in *Scriptura*, 103 (2010) 66-78; R. L. Gallagher and P. Hertig, *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context,* Maryknoll, New York 1970; J. Heining, *The Development of the Mission of the Church in Acts 1-15*, in *CSL Scholar, Concordia Seminary St Luis*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://scholar.csl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=mdiv; D. M. McGinnis, *Mission In Acts: A Rhetorical Call To Action*, PhD Diss., 2011 Sheffield University, Internet (01.09.2025): https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/21837/1/557134.pdf, argues that Luke's primary purpose in writing *Acts* is to inspire and equip the church of his day for effective mission.

[15] *First greeting of the Holy Father Pope Francis - Apostolic Blessing "Urbi et Orbi"*, 13 March 2013, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130313_benedizione-urbi-et-orbi.html.

themes, I will highlight two parables that have acquired particular spiritual significance in Pope Francis' thought.

First, the parable of the prodigal son[16]. Pope Francis emphasizes:

(a) the amazing gift of freedom and God's tenderness towards the prodigal son. The son's separation from his father is only physical; the father always carries him in his heart, trustingly awaiting his return. He watches the road in the hope of seeing him, and, one day, sees him appear in the distance (cf. v. 20). The father, moved with compassion, runs toward him, embraces him, and kisses him. Such tenderness! Though the son has gotten into trouble, the father still welcomes him.

(b) the father also comes out to meet his elder son and awaits the conversion of those who consider themselves righteous. The eldest son, having always stayed at home, becomes indignant and complains, unable to understand or share the father's joy at the returning brother. Yet the father goes to meet him as well, reminding him that they have always been together and shared everything (v. 31) and that one must welcome with joy the brother who has finally returned home. Pope Francis adds

> this makes me think of something: When one feels one is a sinner, one feels worthless, or as I've heard some – many – say: 'Father, I am like dirt', so then, this is the moment to go to the Father. Instead, when one feels righteous – 'I always did the right thing ...' –, equally, the Father comes to seek us, because this attitude of feeling 'right', is the wrong attitude: it is pride! It comes from the devil. The Father waits for those who recognize they are sinners and goes in search of the ones who feel 'righteous'. This is our Father!

(c) Most interestingly, the Pope speaks of a third son[17].

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[16] Cf. Pope Francis, *Angelus, Fourth Sunday of Lent, 6 March 2016*, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160306.html; Pope Francis with A. Tornielli, *The Name of God is Mercy* Random House, New York 2016.

[17] The "third son" seems to have been largely unknown in the pastoral use of the prodigal son—and arguably still is. See e.g. P. Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son: The Pastoral Uses of a Biblical Narrative (c. 1200-1550)*, Brill, Leiden 2017. Perhaps the introduction of the "third son" by the Pope signals his critique of clericalism, as reflected in his two interventions at the 2023 synod session.

> A third son? Where is he? He's hidden! This is the one, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God, a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6-7). This Servant-Son is Jesus. He is the extension of the Father's arms and heart: he welcomes the prodigal son, washes his dirty feet, and prepares the banquet for the feast of forgiveness. Jesus teaches us to be "merciful as the Father is merciful."

(d) God is the merciful Father, who, in Jesus loves us beyond measure and always awaits our conversion.

> The figure of the Father in the parable reveals the heart of God. He is the Merciful Father who, in Jesus, loves us beyond measure, always awaits our conversion every time we make mistakes. He awaits for us to return when we turn away from him thinking, we can do without him. He is always ready to open his arms, no matter what happens. As the Father of the Gospel, God continues to consider us his children, even when we get lost, and comes to us with tenderness when we return. He addresses us so kindly even when we believe we are right. The errors we commit, however grave, do not wear out the fidelity of his love. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we can always begin anew: he welcomes us, gives us the dignity of being his children and tells us: "Go ahead! Be at peace! Rise, go ahead!"

Secondly, the parable of the Good Samaritan, which Pope Francis used extensively in his teaching and letters: "The Good Samaritan indicates a lifestyle, the center of which is not ourselves, but others, with their difficulties, who we meet on our path and who challenge us." In particular, in *Fratelli Tutti*[18] (62-86), Pope Francis reflects on and outlines the parable as a challenge (cf. 69).

> The parable is clear and straightforward, yet it also evokes the interior struggle each of us experiences as we gradually come to know ourselves through our relationships with our brothers and sisters. Sooner or later, we will all encounter a person who is suffering—and today, there are more

[18] Franciscus, *Fratres omnes; De fraternitate et sociali amicitia*, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, CXII (2020) 969-1074; in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

> and more of them. The decision to include or exclude those lying wounded along the roadside can serve as a criterion for judging every economic, political, social and religious project. Each day, we must decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders. If we extend our gaze to the history of our own lives and that of the entire world, we see that all of us are—or have been—like each of the characters in the parable. Within each of us lies something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the Good Samaritan[19].

The Church is Mission

The concluding synthesis of the 2023 Synod session[20] (Part 2, 8 a) stated:

> Rather than saying that the Church has a mission, we affirm that Church 'is' mission. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21): the Church receives from Christ, the One who is sent by the Father, Her own mission. Supported and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church announces and witnesses the Gospel to those who do not know it or welcome it. They do this with that preferential option for the poor that is rooted in the mission of Jesus. In this way the Church co-operates in the coming of the Reign of God, of which She is the seed (cf. LG 5).

As William P. Gregory[21] notes, the sixty years since the opening of Vatican II have brought significant developments in the Church's

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[19] Cf. P. C. Phan, *Why Pope Francis sees the Good Samaritan as the parable for our times*, in *America, The Jesuit Review*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/02/09/good-samaritan-pope-francis-244684; P. Phan, *The Samaritan: A Paradigm of the Culture of Encounter*, in *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://cultureofencounter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-samaritan-a-paradigm-of-the-culture-of-encounter; M. Mescher, *The Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship: Study Guide* Paulist, Mahwah 2021.

[20] XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session (4-29 October 2023) *Synthesis Report*, in *Synod 2021-2024*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

[21] W. P. Gregory, *Pope Francis' Theology of Mission*, in *International Review of Mission*, 111/2 (2022) 322-351. Cf. also W. P. Gregory, *Mission Shifts from*

understanding of mission. At the start of this period, the council itself introduced five major developments. (Cf. AG, GS, UR, NA, LG). First, there was the recognition that all the baptized are called to mission. Mission is not the vocation of priests and religious alone; it is the responsibility of everyone. Second, the notion of mission itself was broadened. Mission was no longer seen merely as the activity of missionaries in "mission lands", working to convert souls and expand the institutional Church. Instead, the Church came to understand mission as taking place everywhere, encompassing initiatives for justice, peace, and the common good, as well as the promotion of ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and inculturation, among other activities. Third, there was a renewed appreciation of the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' message, which provided a wider and less ecclesiocentric framework for conceiving missionary activity. The Church was now seen not as coextensive with the Kingdom on earth, but as its sign, seed, and instrument. Finally, there was the recognition that salvation is possible outside of the Church and explicit faith in Christ, and that God's grace and providence operate more widely than the Church had previously acknowledged.

Two things are particularly important regarding the New Evangelization in relation to Pope Francis. First, it served as a bell-weather for Francis' own extensive efforts to refocus the Church on the actual practice of mission. While Benedict rightly identified a failure in the Church's efforts to preach and catechize, particularly in the West, and called for a renewal of these activities, Francis goes much further. He observes a failure of the Church in all areas of mission across the globe and at every level, from the exercise of the papal office down to local communities. In his assessment, the Church is simply far too non-missionary—both in the lives of many of the baptized and in the functioning of many of its institutions and communities. He sees this as the greatest challenge the Church faces today, surpassing even the lack of faith among contemporary secularized populations. While this is indeed a significant challenge, he considers the non-missionary character of so much Catholic life and practice to be even more urgent. Across

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Pope Benedict XVI to Pope Francis, in *Asbury Theological Seminary ePlace*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://place.asburyseminary.edu/firstfruitspapers/91/.

the board, the Church is failing to shine, and thus it must undergo a missionary conversion and renewal.

What is even more interesting is that the Congregation for Propaganda Fide—renamed by Pope Francis as The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (C.E.P.)—was originally established by Pope Gregory XV through the Papal Bull *Inscrutabili Divinae Providentiae* (June 22, 1622). Among its more significant early documents, the *Instruction* of 1659, also known as the *Magna Charta* of the Congregation, was addressed to all Vicariates Apostolic in China and Indochina and contained directives for all missionaries. Two points are particularly noteworthy: the encouragement of the promotion of indigenous clergy, and an explicit commitment to inculturation, which included a prohibition against opposing local customs and traditions except when they conflicted with faith or morals[22]. It is the spirit of this Instruction that is reflected in AG 9:

> But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the bliss of men. Thus, missionary activity tends toward eschatological fullness.

Seeds of the Word

As we pointed out earlier, a key rhythm of the Bible is "God created the heavens and the earth..." Thus, God has already planted what can be called the "seeds of the Word", which we are called to nurture, water, and lead to full growth. This teaching about the seeds of the Word is reflected in the words of Pope Francis:

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[22] *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en/congregazioni/congregazione-per-levangelizzazione-dei-popoli/profilo.html.

> Another myth needing to be dispelled is that the Catholic Church, distinguished throughout the world for its great commitment to works of social promotion, does all this to proselytize, as if caring for others were a way of enticing people to "join up." No! The Church does not go forward by proselytism, *it goes forward by attraction*[23].

"Moving forward by attraction" is linked to the concept of *semina verbi*[24], which predates Vatican II and is enshrined in its teachings.

> In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various. undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows (AG 11).
>
> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (*haud raro referunt tamen radium illius Veritatis, quae illuminat omnes homines*). Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (NA 2).

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[23] Pope Francis, *Address*, Apostolic Journey to Mongolia: Meeting with Charity Workers and Inauguration of the House of Mercy (Ulaanbaatar, 4 September 2023), in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/september/documents/20230904-mongolia-operatori-carita.html – emphasis added; cf. Mk 4:26-28.

[24] J. L. Moreno, «*Semina Verbi*», *de San Justino al Vaticano II*, in *Universidad de Navarra*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://dadun.unav.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/ef539bd8-2d33-4fef-a084-337a9d85f48f/content; P. Banna, *Justino y la razón seminal – Un camino hacia el diálogo interreligiosa*, in *Cuestiones Teologicas*, 5/115 (2024) 1-20.

Journeying in a World

a. With Decreasing Religious Affiliation

The world is not given to us "on a plate"; it is offered to us as a creative task. It is impossible to remove morality from this picture. We work—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—using our honesty, courage, and truthful imagination to interpret what is present to us, shaping it and "making something of it." We participate in the encounter with a world that is other than ourselves[25]. In this process, we pursue creative, truth-seeking imagination rather than egoistic illusion and fantasy. At the same time, we observe decreasing religious affiliation and a decline in fraternity and social friendship.

The number of Catholics is growing. The worldwide Catholic population will increase from 1,344 million in 2019 to 1,360 million in 2020, an absolute increase of 16 million, or about +1.2 percent. The growth occurs across all continents except Europe, which sees a slight decline of 292,000. The most significant increases are in Africa (+8,302,000) and the Americas (+5,373,000), followed by Asia (+1,909,000) and Oceania (+118,000). This data indicates that the growth in the Catholic population is concentrated in the missionary world, particularly in Africa.

Depending on whether religious switching continues at recent rates, accelerates, or stops entirely, projections indicate that Christians of all ages in the US could shrink from 64% of the population today to somewhere between just over half (54%) and slightly above one-third (35%) by 2070. Over the same period, "nones" (those with no religious affiliation) are expected to rise from the current 30% to between 34% and 52% of the U.S. population. Since the 1990s, large numbers of Americans have left Christianity to join the growing ranks of adults identifying as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular." This accelerating trend is reshaping the U.S. religious landscape, prompting many to question the future of religion in America[26]. Globally, by 2050,

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[25] I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* Penguin, New York 1992, p. 295.

[26] Statistics cited from: C. Johnpillai, *Journey of Propaganda Fide (400 years): Mission Then and Now*, in *Sedos*, 54/9-10 (2022); in *Pew Research Cen-*

50.4% of Christians will live in non-Christian-majority nations. Yet, despite these shifts, significant numbers of people remain unreached[27].

b. Lacking Fraternity and Social Friendship

That there are many conflicts in the world is no secret[28]. As Pope Francis[29] says:

> Now more than ever, what is revealed is the fallacy of making individualism the organizing principle of society[30]. What will be our new principle? We need a movement of people who know we need each other, who have a sense of responsibility to others and to the world. We need to proclaim that being kind, having faith and working for the common good are great life goals that need courage and vigor, while glib superficiality and the mockery of ethics have done us no good. The modern era has developed equality and liberty with such determination, now needs to focus on fraternity with the same drive and tenacity to confront the challenges ahead. Fraternity will enable equality to take its rightful place in the symphony.

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ter, Internet (01.09.2025): www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/.

[27] *Asia and Africa leading global growth of Christianity: 5 key trends to spur momentum in our churches*, in *Salt&Light*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://saltandlight.sg/news/asia-and-africa-leading-global-growth-of-christianity-5-key-trends-to-spur-momentum-in-our-churches/.

[28] 2024 Global Forecast: A World Dividing, p. III, *Conflict Zones*, C. Cohen and A. Kisling ed., Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC 2024, Internet (01.01.2025): https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-01/240201_GlobalForecast_2024_ConflictZones.pdf.

[29] Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*; cf. *Fratelli Tutti* (2022) mentions fraternity 55 times.

[30] Pope Francis calls it a fallacy—and rightly so in terms of ultimate ends—yet in the "pilgrim" situation it functions as a *de facto* operating principle cf. K. Sigmund, *The Calculus of Selfishness*, Princeton Un. Press, Princeton 2010, p. vii: "enlightened self-interest." Cf. The extremities of the spectrum R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford Un. Press, 40th Anniversary Ed., Oxford 2016, argues that competitiveness is the key to survival; M. Nowak, *Super Cooperators: Altruism, Evolution and Why we need Each Other to Succeed*, Free Press, New York 2011 argues the need of cooperation for survival.

The Tasks of Mission

Basically,

> Theology must doubtless be rooted and grounded in sacred Scripture and in the living tradition, but for this very reason it must simultaneously accompany cultural and social processes, and particularly difficult transitions. Indeed, "at this time theology must address conflicts: not only those that we experience within the Church but also those that concern the world as a whole (*Veritatis Gaudium*, 4).

In *Ad theologiam promovenda*, at least three prominent thrusts emerge—a theology "on journey", transdisciplinary, and pastoral. This takes place within the awareness that we are living through a change of epoch, one that calls for dialogue, contextuality, and the use of the inductive method, leading to a paradigm shift and the emergence of a courageous cultural method. For what purpose? In the service of mission.

Therefore, an important dimension of the search is (a) to engage in a transdisciplinary search (b) to uncover and discover the seeds of the Word and (c) to attract a response to the gospel (d) to articulate a message that "smells" of the people and is not sterile and detached (e) to foster fraternity and social friendship (f) to live as a pilgrim Church—as pilgrims focused on the ultimate goal of the journey, God, and as pilgrims, unattached to anything else. These are the conditions for discernment: God first and last, and non-attachment or indifference to everything other than God.

a. *A Transdisciplinary Search*. Transdisciplinarity (a term introduced by Jean Piaget in 1970) refers to a research strategy that crosses disciplinary boundaries in order to create a holistic approach. It also signifies the pursuit of a unity of knowledge that transcends individual disciplines[31]. In *Ad theologiam promovenda* Pope Francis affirms this vision, stating:

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[31] B. Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity,* Tr. K.-C. Voss, State of New York Un. Press, New York 2002, esp. p. 147-156; *A Vision of Transdisciplinarity Laying Foundations for A World Knowledge Dialogue,* F. Darbellay *et al*. ed.,

> It is the approach of transdisciplinarity, that is, interdisciplinarity in the strong sense, distinct from multidisciplinarity, understood as interdisciplinarity in the weak sense. The latter certainly favors a better understanding of the object of study by considering it from several points of view, which however remain complementary and separate. Transdisciplinarity, on the other hand, must be thought of "*as the placement and fermentation of all knowledge within the space of Light and Life offered by the Wisdom that derives from the revelation of God*."[32].

The transdisciplinary approach enables us not to discover the death of humanity, but rather the resurrection of the human person as the subject of his or her own discourse. It points not to the end of history, but to the beginning of a new stage in human history. Transdisciplinary researchers increasingly resemble a new breed of contemporary knights-errant—irrepressible rekindlers of hope. No single mind can possibly grasp the results of all disciplines; that is clearly impossibile. Yet a genuine decision-maker must be able to engage in dialogue with all of them at once.

Religion is the experience of a transcendent reality and the source of our consciousness of existing in the world. For Christianity, this derives from and is founded on the event of Jesus Christ. The specific characteristic of Christianity lies in its understanding of this event through the key given by the Council of Chalcedon. In Christ, the mystery—of the infinite and the finite, the immanent and the transcendent, unity and duality—is concretized in such a way that the one Christ is at the same time perfect God and perfect man. This union is without confusion between divinity and humanity, without separation of the two, not merely by juxtaposition. In the final analysis,

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EPFL Press, Lausanne 2008; *Interdisciplinarity, Multidisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity in Humanities*, B. Akçeşme *et al*. ed., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2016.

[32] Ap. Const. *Veritatis Gaudium* (2017) 4 c (emphasis added). From this follows the third fundamental criterion that I propose—inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches carried out with wisdom and creativity in the light of Revelation. What distinguishes the academic, formative, and research approach of the system of ecclesiastical studies, both in content and method, is the vital intellectual principle of the unity-in-difference of knowledge and the respect for its multiple, correlated, and convergent expressions.

the divinity is not seen under any single particular aspect as dominant, but always in such a way that the full integrity of the humanity is safeguarded[33].

Thus, the use of multiple sciences can illuminate humanity, but when they are incorporated into the Christian faith, it is the divinity that becomes the determining element, even as the integrity of humanity is preserved. The harmony of the transdisciplinary Subject and the transdisciplinary Object corresponds to the harmony between levels of perception and levels of Reality. In the transdisciplinary vision, the classic real/imaginary dichotomy also disappears. We can think of a level of Reality as a fold encompassing all levels of perception, and we can think of a level of perception as a fold of the totality of levels of Reality. The real is a fold of the imagination, and the imagination is a fold of the real. The ancients were right: there is indeed an *imaginatio vera*—a foundational, true, creative, visionary imagination. Such transdisciplinarity forms the basis of creativity across many fields—art, architecture, literature, sculpture and more.[34] Creativity enhances the particular (through whatever form is takes) and through this process the transcendent appears more clearly. This unfolding must take place in stages, within the ongoing movement of our theology. Transdisciplinarity is, therefore, a way of bearing witness to our presence in the world and to our lived experience. It links the astonishing ways of knowing in our time with the life of faith, concretized in such a way that the one Christ is revealed as both perfect God and perfect man.

b. *Seeds of the Word*. As pointed out earlier, a key rhythm of the Bible is: "God created the heavens and the earth..." Thus, it follows that he has already planted what can be called the "seeds of the Word", which we are called to attract, nurture, and bring to full growth. (cf. Mk 4:26-28).

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[33] C. Vagaggini, *Doing Theology: Speaking to the "Man of Today" Drawing on Traditional Models*, Tr. and abbrev. N. Abeyasingha, IJA Publications, Bangalore 2003, p. 137, cf. 135-140.

[34] Cf. B. Hardy, *Dickens and Creativity*, Continuum, London 2008; D.H. Cropley, *Creatvity in Engineering: Novel Solutions to Complex Problem*, Academic Press, London 2018; *The Palgrave Handbook of Creativity and Culture Research*, V. P. Glăveanu ed., Palgrave, London 2016.

The foundation for this lies in the concept of *semina verbi,*[35] which predates Vatican II. To understand more precisely the meaning of λόγος σπερματικός, it is helpful to distinguish, within Justin's writings, between the innate seed of the Logos (ἔμφυτον σπέρμα τοῦ λόγου 2Apol. 7,1) present in every human being, and the seeds of truth (σπέρματα ἀληθείας). According to Justin, the Stoics are characterized by praiseworthy teachings (*dogmata*) not because they possessed the fullness of the Logos, but because they lived according to a part or seed of it. This "part" (*meros*), implanted in all, provides at least partial knowledge[36]. This concept of the seeds of the Word finds explicit expression in Vatican II (Cf. AG 11 and NA 2).

c. *Response to the Gospel by Attraction*. In Mongolia, where there are only about 1500 Catholics, the Pope remarked[37]:

> I would like to reject certain "myths." First, the myth that only the wealthy can engage in volunteer work. That is indeed a "fantasy", whereas reality tells us the opposite. It is not necessary to be wealthy to do good; rather, almost always it is people of modest means who choose to devote their time, skills and generosity to caring for others. Another myth needing to be dispelled is that the Catholic Church, distinguished throughout the world for its great commitment to works of social promotion, does all this to proselytize, as if caring for others were a way of enticing people to "join up." No! The Church does not go forward by proselytism, it goes forward by attraction. Christians do whatever they can to alleviate the suffering of the needy, because in the person of the poor they acknowledge Jesus, the Son of God, and, in him, the dignity of each person, called to be a son or daughter of God. I would like to envision this House of Mercy as a place where people of different creeds, and non-believers as well, can join efforts with local Catholics in order to offer compassionate assistance to our many brothers and sisters in the one human family. Indeed. the word "compassion" means the ability to suffer with others, and the State will rightly seek to protect and promote it. For this dream to come true, it is essential, here and else-

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[35] Moreno, *«Semina Verbi»*; Banna, *Justino y la razón seminal*.

[36] W. E. Helleman, *Justin Martyr and The "Logos": An Apologetical Strategy*, in *Philosophia Reformata*, 67/2 (2002) 134, cf. 128-147.

[37] Francis, *Address*, Apostolic Journey to Mongolia.

> where, that those in public office support such humanitarian initiatives, encouraging a virtuous synergy for the sake of the common good. Finally, a third myth needs to be discredited: the notion that only money counts, as if the only way to care for others is to employ a salaried staff and invest in large facilities. Certainly, charity demands professionalism, but charitable works should not turn into businesses. Rather, they should retain their freshness as works of charity where those in need can find people ready to listen to them with compassion, regardless of whatever pay they may receive.

"The Church goes forward by attraction and offers compassionate assistance to others within the one human family." In this statement, Pope Francis points to a vital dimension of evangelization: the Church advances not by coercion but by the radiant witness of faith, love, and compassion. Implied here is the kind of knowledge that post-synodal theology is called to cultivate—a knowledge by connaturality.

This resonates with the phenomenon of sympathetic resonance or sympathetic vibration: when a passive string or body responds to external vibrations because of a harmonic likeness. Likewise, *sensus conaturalitatis* refers to an innate sense or intuition by which one recognizes certain truths without the mediation of external evidence or formal reasoning. Philosophically, it is often linked to natural law and moral intuition[38]. Theologically however, connaturality is possible only through the gift of the wisdom, given by God. Unlike other gifts, wisdom is a knowledge of divine things through union—that is, through love. Since this wisdom resides in the will, it moves the intellect to judge rightly. The role of the will here sets wisdom apart from other intellectual gifts: it is knowledge of divine things not primarily through reasoning, but through taste and affective union. It is knowl-

[38] Thomas, *STh*, II-II 42,2: "Now rectitude of judgment is twofold: first, on account of perfect use of reason, secondly, on account of a kind of connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge. Thus, about matters of chastity, a man who has learnt the science of morals judges rightly through inquiry by reason, while he who has the habit of chastity judges rightly of such matters by a kind of connaturality. Accordingly, it belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to form a right judgment about divine things through inquiry by reason, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to form a right judgment about them on account of a kind of connaturality with them".

edge through union rather than through reason[39]—perhaps because of the divine seed already planted within.

Jacques Maritain[40] explains that there are two different ways of judging matters pertaining to a moral virtue—fortitude for example. On the one hand, one may possess moral science: the conceptual and rational knowledge of virtues. This produces in us merely an intellectual conformity to the truths involved. If asked a question about fortitude, we can give the correct answer by consulting the intelligible objects contained in our concepts. A moral philosopher, therefore, may know everything about virtues and yet not be a virtuous person. On the other hand, one may actually possess the virtue itself in one's powers of will and desire—embodying it, being in accordance with it, or co-natured with it in one's very being. In this case, if asked a question about fortitude, the answer will not come primarily through rational concepts but through inclination—by consulting what one is, and the inner dispositions of one's being. A virtuous man, even if ignorant of moral philosophy, may know as much—or more—about virtue than a philosopher, because of this knowledge through connaturality. This knowledge through union or or inclination—connaturality or congeniality—engages the intellect not in isolation, but together with the affective inclinations and dispositions of the will. The intellect, in this mode, is guided and directed by the will. It is not a rational, discursive knowledge attained by logical reasoning, but it is nevertheless genuine

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[39] P. Morrissey, *The Sapiential Dimension of Theology according to St. Thomas*, in *New Blackfriars*, 93/1045 (2012) 314, cf. 309-323: "St. Thomas affirms three distinct and irreducible 'wisdoms': first, the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, that is, a knowledge of divine things that comes from the Holy Spirit and not through human reason; a *scientia* that comes through the mode of instinct and the inclination to love. The second is theological wisdom that comes from Sacred Teaching (*sacra doctrina*), founded on the first and infallible Truth (God) as outlined in canonical Scripture. The third is metaphysical wisdom, founded on human reason. The first and second have a divine source, although each according to its own way. The second and third, although in differing ways, use human concepts and reason." Cf. also T. Suto, *Virtue and Knowledge: Connatural Knowledge According to Thomas Aquinas*, in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 58/1 (2004) 61-79.

[40] J. Maritain, *On Knowledge through Connaturality*, in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 4/4 (1951) 474.

knowledge— though often obscure, incapable of giving a full account of itself, and perhaps resistant to being translated into words.

In those who are moved by attraction, it is not rash to say that they live according to their consciences, often committed to absolute values, and thus bear within themselves seeds of the Word that are present and operative. Pope Francis' teachings are a call to mission, embodying orthopraxy as a summons to action. His writings therefore have a more practical character than the highly doctrinal contributions that filled magisterial documents in the decades immediately after the Council. Pope Francis' questions are not abstract ones about, for example, the nature of salvation, the meaning of the gospel in relation to world cultures, the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God, or the interconnections among the various activities of mission. Rather, his questions are concrete and pastoral: *How well are we Christians living out our mission today? If not well, why not? What obstacles and spiritual temptations – individual and institutional – stand in our way? In what ways might our present lifestyles amount to a counter-witness that discourages others? What customs, practices, and habits, must we reexamine?*

Following decades of post-conciliar theological consolidation, Pope Francis is, in effect, like a ship's captain declaring "We have our theological maps in order—we know what we need to do. Now we need to do it." Or, as Jesus said, and as John Paul II often repeated: "Put out into the deep" (Luke 5:4). It is time to enact the full mission discerned by Vatican II for the whole Church[41]. Francis' call for the missionary reform of the Church involves a renewed emphasis on the social dimensions of evangelization: dialogue, peacemaking, and the corporal works of mercy. For Francis, this does not diminish the goal

[41] "Today is the time; let us ask ourselves: 'Me, what can I do that is good for the Gospel?' In the Synod we asked ourselves this question, wishing to open up new paths for the proclamation of the Gospel. Only what is lived is proclaimed. And to live by Jesus, to live by the Gospel, one must come out of oneself. We felt spurred on to go out to sea, to leave the comfortable shores of our safe harbours to enter deep waters: not into the marshy waters of ideologies, but the open sea in which the Spirit invites us to cast our nets": Pope Francis, *Angelus, Sunday 27 October 2019*, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2019/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20191027.html.

of the New Evangelization but secures it within its necessary interdependence with the other dimensions of mission. For only a Church that shines forth in everything it does can propose the faith in words in a way that is meaningful and attractive to others.

d. *"Smells" of the People; Not sterile and Detached*. The requirement that pastoral work should "have the smell of the sheep" is well known[42]. In *Ad theologiam promovenda*, 3, Pope Francis recalls:

> As I wrote in the Letter to Grand Chancellor of the Catholic University of Argentina, addressing professors and students of theology: Don't settle for a table-top theology. Let your place of reflection be at the frontiers [...] Even good theologians, like good shepherds, smell of the people and of the street and, with their reflection, they pour oil and wine on the wounds of men[43].

There is ample literature on this aspect with regard to pastoral ministry. Yet in speaking of theology, people themselves should not be sidelined, nor should the need for serious academic study be disregarded.

From the earliest controversies[44], the Church has sought to hold fast to the faith. But its articulations and commitments have not always been correct on the first attempt—particularly in the case of Arianism. In the fourth century, Jerome[45] (379 AD) observed: "The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian." Many bishops subscribed to the Arian formulae, but the ordinary faithful, along with some bishops, held firmly to the true faith. This underscores the importance of listening to the faithful, as Newman emphasized[46]:

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[42] Pope Francis with G. Merola, *With the Smell of the Sheep: The Pope speaks to his Priests and other Shepherds,* Maryknoll, New York 2017.

[43] J. C. Scannone, *Theology of the People: The Pastoral and Theological Roots of Pope Francis*, Paulist Press, New York 2021.

[44] Cf. D. K. McKim, *Theological Turning Points: Major Issues in Christian Thought,* John Knox Press, Atlanta 1988.

[45] *The Dialogue Against the Luciferians*, 19, in *New Advent*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.newadvent.org/fathers/3005.htm.

[46] J. H. Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, Rambler (July 1859), Sheed & Ward, Kansas City 1961, in *National Institute for Newman*

"Nevertheless in that very day the divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than by the Episcopate." Hence the need to understand the *sensus fidei* as embracing the entire community (Cf. LG 12, which suggests that the dynamic within which a *sensus fidei* occurs must be one of dialogical encounter). The theological magisterium and the teaching magisterium, therefore, must remain in touch with the *sensus fidei* of the faithful[47].

In this case, the bishops learned from the faithful. Unfortunately, in our times, what is called clericalism has emerged. Pope Francis has spoken very strongly against clericalism. "The lack of awareness of the fact that the mission belongs to the whole Church and not to the priest or bishop limits the horizon and, what is worse, limits all the initiatives that the Spirit can arouse in our midst. Let's face it, the laity are not our servants, nor our employees."[48] What he calls for is the gospel imperative—not the manifestation of power and dominance, but the exercise of pastoral authority as service (cf. Mt 20:25) This means the priesthood of the laity and the servanthood of the ordained working together in harmony.

First, Francis calls for a moral conversion from "spiritual worldliness" and clericalism. In his letter to the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome (dated August 2023), Pope Francis urges[49]:

> Spiritual worldliness is a "gentle" temptation and for this reason even more insidious. Indeed, it seeps in, well aware of how to hide behind good appearances, even within "religious" motivations. And, even if we

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Studies, Internet (01.09.2025): https://newmanreader.org/works/rambler/consulting.html.

[47] D. Vitali, *Universitas fidelium in credendo falli nequit (LG 12): il "sensus fidelium" al Concilio Vaticano II*, in *Gregorianum*, 86/3 (2005) 607-628.

[48] Pope Francis, *Greeting*, Apostolic Journey to Chile and Peru (15-22 January 2018), Meeting with the Bishops, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180116_cile-santiago-vescovi.html.

[49] Pope Francis, *Letter to the Priests of the Diocese of Rome*, 5 August 2023, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2023/documents/20230805-lettera-sacerdoti.html.

> recognize it and banish it from us, sooner or later it presents itself again, disguised in a different fashion.

Ironically, Pope Francis directs some of his strongest words to the Curia[50]. His statements serve as a profound examination of conscience for all members of the clergy[51].

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[50] To offer a few examples, in 2014, Pope Francis observed: "Here I would like to mention some of these probable diseases, 'curial diseases'. They are the more common diseases in our life in the Curia. They are diseases and temptations which weaken our service to the Lord. I think a 'listing' of these diseases – along the lines of the Desert Fathers who used to draw up such lists – will help us to prepare for the sacrament of Reconciliation, which will be a good step for all of us to take in preparing for Christmas": Pope Francis, *Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, Monday, 22 December 2014, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html. In 2015 – "I would ask the Heads of Dicasteries and other superiors to ponder this, to add to it and to complete it. It is a list based on an acrostic analysis of the word *Misericordia* – Father Ricci did this in China – with the aim of having it serve as our guide and beacon," Pope Francis, *Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, Monday, 21 December 2015, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151221_curia-romana.html. In 2016 – "Here I spontaneously think of the ancient adage that describes the process of the Spiritual Exercises in the Ignatian method: *deformata reformare, reformata conformare, conformata confirmare et confirmata transformare*": Pope Francis, *Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, Thursday, 22 December 2016, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/december/documents/papa-francesco_20161222_curia-romana.html. In 2017 – "reflecting on this ministerial, petrine and curial finality of service, I used the expression '*diaconal primacy*', which immediately calls to mind the image of the *Servus servorum Dei*, so beloved of Saint Gregory the Great": Pope Francis, *Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, Thursday, 21 December 2017, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/december/documents/papa-francesco_20171221_curia-romana.html.

[51] Pope Francis accused some American Catholics of harboring "a very strong, organized, reactionary attitude,." On the other hand, Pew Research has found that approximately 83% of American Catholics hold a favorable view of the pope: cfr. *Pope Francis chides his American critics – but who is he talking about?* (September 5, 2023), in *RNS Religion New Service*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://religionnews.com/2023/09/05/pope-francis-chides-his-critics-but-who-is-he-talking-about/.

Secondly, he insists that pastors must have the "smell of the sheep." They are called to serve the faithful, not to dominate them. As he emphasized to priests during the Chrism Mass on 28 March 2013:

> Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers. We know the difference: the intermediary, the manager, "has already received his reward," and since he does not put his own skin and his own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks. This is precisely the reason for the dissatisfaction of some, who end up sad – sad priests – in some sense becoming collectors of antiques or novelties, instead of being shepherds living with "the odour of the sheep." This I ask you: be shepherds, with the "odour of the sheep," make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fishers of men[52].

Besides attitudes and approaches of a pastoral nature, serious study is essential. In a short chirograph (2024)[53] and later, in a letter to Cardinal Grech (2024), Pope Francis proposed ten themes for study emerging from the final synthesis of the synod[54]. Study cannot be dispensed with. Through the study, a certain consonance with the Spirit must be sought. This consonance depends on the presence of and guidance of the Spirit of discernment, summarized in the principle: God first and last, with everything else—the agendas and programmes of the theologian and pastor—handled with detachment and non-attachment (cf. the man who went away sad because he had great possessions). Theology is a journey and a pursuit. There is no guarantee that what is produced will fully align

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[52] Cf. similar sentiments about "pastoral power" (outside Catholic teaching) in M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, Tr. Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2007; reviewed by B. Golder, *Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power*, in *Radical Philosophy Review*, 10/2 (2007) 157-176. Cf. P. Büttgen, *Théologie politique et pouvoir pastoral*, in *Annales - Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 62/5 (2007) 1129-1154.

[53] Pope Francis, *Chirograph on the collaboration between the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia and the General Secretariat of the Synod*, 16 February 2024, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240216-chirografo-collaborazione.html.

[54] Pope Francis, *Letter to His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech*, 22 February 2024, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314f.html.

with what the Spirit requires at a given moment. Yet the journey must continue in the spirit of four principles articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 222-237, which guide Pope Francis' exercise of the papacy: time is greater than space, unity prevails over conflict, realities are more important than ideas, and the whole is greater than the parts. The longest journey, as well as the shortest, begins with a single step and continues step by step. This journey must become our own as we strive to understand, implement, and express the emerging paradigm of theology.

e. *Fostering Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Pope Francis' position in *Fratelli Tutti* is clear. In his message to the United Nations Security Council on14 June 2023, read by Archbishop Paul Gallagher, he stated[55]:

> Today's globalized world has brought all of us closer together, yet it has not made us any more fraternal. Indeed, we are suffering from a *famine of fraternity*, which arises from the many situations of injustice, poverty and inequality and also from the lack of a culture of solidarity. "New ideologies, characterized by widespread individualism, egocentrism and materialistic consumerism, weaken social bonds, fueling that 'throw-away' mentality, which leads to contempt for and abandonment of, the weakest and those considered 'useless'. In this way human coexistence increasingly tends to resemble a mere *do ut des* which is both pragmatic and selfish". Yet the worst effect of this famine of fraternity is armed conflict and war, that makes enemies of not only individuals but entire peoples, and whose negative consequences reverberate for generations. With the founding of the United Nations, it seemed that the world had learned, after two terrible world wars, to move towards a more stable peace, to become, at last, a family of nations. It seems, though, that we are going backwards in history, with the rise of myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalisms that have kindled conflicts which are not only anachronistic and outdated, but even more violent.

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[55] Pope Francis, *Address to the Security Council of the United Nations*, 14 June 2023, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/june/documents/20230614-consigliosicurezza-onu.html. Read with *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) and *Laudato si'* (2015). Cf. A. Spardaro, *Fraternity and Social Friendship*, in *Civiltà Cattolica* (English, 14 Oct 2020), Internet (01.09.2025): www.laciviltacattolica.com/fraternity-and-social-friendship/.

The challenge is always that of the parable of the Good Samaritan. However, it should be noted that the Good Samaritan cares not only for wounded people but also for wounded "creation". *Fratelli Tutti* cites *Laudato si'* at least ten times. The point is that humans who seek to exploit and dominate the earth give rise to a kind of technology that operates according to its own logic of progress, eventually liberating itself from human control and ultimately threatening to destroy its human inventor. Fraternity and social friendship extend to all creation, as reflected in the mission in Mk 16:15 and linked with the temptation narrative in Mk 1:12-13.

> We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (*Laudato si'*, 139).

We need a kind of conversion—a conversion from being harbingers of the technological mindset, driven by the hunger for power over all things and a compulsion to reduce everything to mere commodities, to a new vision of reality and of ourselves, one that allows everything in the world to manifest its own intrinsic worth[56].

It could be said that what was expected of the next stage of the Synod was implied in what Pope Francis told the assembly towards the end of the sessions (October 2023): people possess their baptismal dignity, they are entrusted with the faith, and the hierarchy does well to listen to them in discernment and accompaniment[57]. Austen Ivereigh[58] pointedly noted,

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[56] Cf. T. Kalary, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Encyclical* Laudato Si' *of Pope Francis*, in *Jnanadeepa*, 22/1 (2018) 159-174; M. Carbajo Nuñez, *The universal fraternity; Franciscan roots of* Fraterlli Tutti*,* Media House, Delhi 2023.

[57] Pope Francis, *Intervention at the 18th General Congregation of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, Wednesday, 25 October 2023, in *The Holy See*, Internet (01.09.2025): www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231025-intervento-sinodo.html.

[58] A. Ivereigh, *How the Synod will change the Church*, in *The Tablet*, 11 Nov 2023, p. 5.

> He [Pope Francis] left us with two powerful images: of the ordinary faithful with sticks in their hands waiting for the bishops at the Council of Ephesus to proclaim Mary as Mother of God, and of God's holy faithful people "bearing the contempt, mistreatment, marginalization of institutionalized clerialism".

Thus, it can be said that synodality envisages a recognition of the priesthood of the laity and the servanthood of the ordained clergy, extending in the Church's pastoral practice after the Synod to embrace all creation—our common home.

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the Protagonist

Our encounter with Jesus today takes place in the Church. As Pope Francis states in *Desiderio Desideravi*, 8:

> If we had somehow arrived in Jerusalem after Pentecost and had felt the desire not only to have information about Jesus of Nazareth but rather the desire still to be able to meet him, we would have had no other possibility than that of searching out his disciples so that we could hear his words and see his gestures, more alive than ever. We would have had no other possibility of a true encounter with him other than that of the community that celebrates. For this reason the Church has always protected as its most precious treasure the command of the Lord, "Do this in memory of me."

Do this in memory of me – in the pilgrim Church and as pilgrim ourselves, focused on the goal of the journey: God. As pilgrims, attached to nothing, we embrace the conditions for discernment: God first and last, with non-attachment or indifference to everything other than God, moving forward. This is the discernment and accompaniment called for by a Church on the move. As Jim Reeves' lyric (1962) expresses: "This world is not my home / I'm just a-passing through / My treasures are laid up / Somewhere beyond the blue." This sentiment can be extended to all forms of self-seeking and selfishness. Consensus, as Pope Francis points out, is reached "by overflow"—as occured at the Synod on the Family, but not at the Synod on the Amazon. This reflects the working of the Spirit, achieved not by intellectual gymnastics,

cheap or populist pastoral approaches, or following the news media. As Pope Francis notes in *Let us Dream*, it is the Spirit that guides authentic unity and discernment:

> The media have a key role to play in opening the Synod to the People of God, and the wider world, communicating and helping people see the issues and challenges the Church is facing. But in some cases journalists run the risk of confusing contrapositions with polarizations, reducing the synod dynamic to simplistic yes-no binaries as if the Synod were a dramatic showdown between opposing forces. That is not how it feels inside the synod hall. However, sometimes the media narrative ends up undermining the capacity for discernment. We saw this in the Synod on the Family, where the aim was to move beyond some of the "casuistic" thinking that prevents the Church from dealing with di cult cases with the nuanced approach of its own healthy Tradition. Jesus condemns the casuistry of the doctors of the law, for example, in chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel. Using these kinds of categories to judge situations made it hard, on the one hand, to grasp the complexity of real-life situations, and on the other, hindered the Church's ability to offer support and guidance to people using Gospel categories. In the Synod on the Family this was naturally a much broader question than the specific issue of the pastoral care of the divorced or separated and remarried and their access to the sacraments, as many believed. Yet the framing of the synod by media linked to particular groups reduced and simplified the whole work of the Synod to this one issue, as if this synod had been called solely to decide whether or not to allow divorced and remarried people to receive Communion. The narrative was set that the Church should either "relax the rules" or maintain its "strict" stance. In other words, the media frame rejecting that narrative reinforced the very casuistry the Synod was seeking to move beyond. The bad spirit conditioned the discernment, favoring positions on either side ("for" or "against") and encouraging debilitating conflicts. The effect was to reduce the spiritual freedom that is so vital in a synodal process. Each side, entrenched in "their" truth, ended up being imprisoned in their own positions. Yet the Spirit saved us in the end, in a breakthrough at the close of the second (October 2015) meeting of the Synod on the Family. The overflow, in this case, came above all through those with a deep knowledge of Saint Thomas Aquinas, among them the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. They recovered the true moral doctrine

> of the authentic scholastic tradition of Saint Thomas, rescuing it from the decadent scholasticism that had led to a casuistic morality. Because of the immense variety of situations and circumstances people found themselves in, Aquinas's teaching that no general rule could apply in every situation allowed the synod to agree on the need for a case-by-case discernment. There was no need to change the Church's law, only how it was applied. By attending to the specifics of each case, attentive to God's grace operating in the nitty-gritty of people's lives, we could move on from the black-and-white moralism that risked closing o paths of grace and growth. It was neither a tightening nor a loosening of the "rules" but an application of them that left room for circumstances that didn't t neatly into categories. This was the great breakthrough the Spirit brought us: a better synthesis of truth and mercy in a fresh understanding drawn from within our own Tradition. Without changing law or doctrine but recovering an authentic meaning of both, the Church is now better able to walk with people who are living together or divorced, to help them see where God's grace is operating in their lives, and to help them embrace the fullness of Church teaching. Chapter 8 of the post-synod document I issued in April 2016, *Amoris Laetitia*, draws on the pure doctrine of Aquinas. Yet it's still hard for some to accept this process: a sign of how many remain not only conditioned by casuistic positions, but also of how their intentions, visions, and even ideologies prevent them from recognizing a synodal path safeguarded by the Church's own Tradition.

By contrast, he notes that at the Synod on Amazonia in October 2019, a similar polarization arose over a secondary issue, but this time, for the moment, no resolution was reached through overflow.

What Next?

Theology is essentially the effort of the believer, in tranquil possession of faith, to understand the mystery he believes, worships, celebrates, and lives. Over the centuries, a wide range of models[59] has

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[59] Y. Congar and J. Guthrie, *A History of Theology (Unam Sanctam Apostolicam)*, ATF Press., Adelaide 2019; C. Vagaggini, *Teologia*, in *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia*, G. Barbarglio ed., Ed. Paoline, Roma 1977 p. 1597-1711; McK-

emerged, along with countless nuances,[60] in the attempt to articulate in words the mystery at the heart of Christianity. Beyond words, the theological enterprise is carried out on many levels—trough the liturgical celebration of the mystery, theological action (as exemplified by the gestures of Pope Francis and others), approaches of popular piety, the visual arts and literature, and even the witness of silence. Charles de Foucauld lived among the Tuareg people in the Sahara Desert of North Africa. He described his ministry by saying, "I would like to be sufficiently good that people will say: If such is the servant, what must the master be"! Similarly, the true story of a group of French Cistercian Trappist monks, who were ultimately killed in the violence that engulfed Algeria in the 1990s, testifies to this spirit of witness[61].

Robert Barron[62] explores contemporary culture as a context for theological reflection. Iris Murdoch, a prominent philosopher and novelist, an Irish agnostic and non-believer in God, observes:

> Even if it should prove to be the case that nothing we would now call religion is destined to survive, philosophical arguments may still properly be offered to the effect that morality must be philosophically defined

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IM, *Theological Turning Points*; P. ENNS, *The Moody Handbook of Theology,* Moody Publishers*,* Chicago 1989.

[60] The theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar can be described as an attempt to provide an exposition of a verse from one of Gerard Manley Hopkin's most memorable poems, in which the Jesuit poet declares, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God"; B. HAERING, *The Law of Christ: Moral Thelogy for priests and laity*, I-III, Tr. E. G. Kaiser, Newman Press, Westminster MD 1963 (*Forward*, where he explains his specific viewpoint); Edward Schillebeeckx, on the other hand, sought to articulate a theology for the present day, in which culture and biblical narrative no longer naturally overlap, thereby requiring an adjusted theory of religious experience. His approach aims to remain faithful to the tradition while remaining open to currents of experience not yet discernible within that same tradition. While Schillebeeckx emphasizes the concreteness of human experience, he maintains confidence in a transcultural and transhistorical meaning that necessarily implies a metaphysical reference. Cf. D. ROCHFORD, *The Theological Hermeneutics of Edward Schillebeeckx*, in *Theological Studies*, 63 (2002) 251-267, esp. 251, 267.

[61] Cf. The film: X. BEAUVOIS, *Of Gods and Men* (France, 2011), 122 min. (orig. French *Des hommes et des dieux*).

[62] I. MURDOCH, *Seeds of the Word: Finding God in the Culture,* Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, Skokie 2015.

> in terms of an unconditional demand. The religious life often employs ritual, which is not an essential item in the moral life. One may be attracted by various kinds of religious ritual, see and feel them as vehicles of enlightenment, as exercises likely to strengthen good desires and in wanting religion to survive, want ritual to survive too[63].

The theology on the move (*teologia in uscita*) envisioned by Pope Francis is a missionary theology. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings of good, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Is 52:7). The gospel of the "good tidings" of the Christian is beautiful in its elegant simplicity: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. This passage is proclaimed through sacred stories interpreted for people today and celebrated in sacramental rites that reach people at the level where real change occurs. Unwearied proclamation of this message in pastoral care is often a painful process: "My little children with whom I am again in travail, until Christ be formed in you." It offers salvation and patiently awaits acceptance and conversion, without coercion or pressurization.

Everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen in human history exists on the supernatural plane. Its structuring and dynamic function is grace. Everything that humanity—both as individuals and as society—knows and lives, even what is true and good outside the person of Christ, is known and lived imperfectly. This plurality reflects the inexhaustible mystery, which is approached, known, and lived in varied and imperfect ways. Thus, at one time, sensitivity may be drawn to one aspect of the mystery, and another time to another aspect—but always within the mystery itself. The ultimate outcome? Falling down in worship before the mystery and offering gifts of frankincense and myrrh; celebrating our devotion in the rites of the liturgy and in popular piety; and living it with constancy in daily spirituality.

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[63] I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Continuum, London 1992, p. 484; Cf. M. Altof, *Murdoch and the Art of Imagining,* Continuum, London 2008.

The mystery is true and always valid: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We live in the interval between the event of the resurrection and the hope of his coming. Yet the mystery is greater than any one of us. When the Lord comes, metaphors will no longer be needed—we shall see face to face, with clarity. Until that time, we continue to strive, keeping the words of Rabindranath Tagore in mind[64]:

> The water in a vessel is sparkling
> The water in the ocean is dark;
> The small truth has words that are clear
> The great truth has great silence.

Nihal Abeyasingha*

[64] Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*, Macmillan and Co., London 1919, 176, p. 46.

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