

Principles, Methods, and Inspiring Surprises in Pope Francis' 10 year Pontificate: From Catholic Social Teaching to Catholic Social Learning

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Introduction

It is an honour and joy to be with you here in Warsaw.

The aim of this session is to 'reflect' on central features of Pope Francis' approach to ethics, in particular, on several principles that guide his thinking and the methods he employs in approaching today's moral issues. The theme of migration will be our focus. The session will be divided into three parts. Part One will explore Francis' general approach to ethics, with a special reference to the idea of Catholic Social Learning mentioned in his book, co-authored with Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*.¹ Part Two will explore migration through two lenses: a particular case in Poland and Pope Francis' gestures and words. Part III will attempt to connect Parts One and Two. It will pose some questions with a view of probing further the notion of Catholic Social Learning, something that I hope we will continue exploring in our discussion.

Part I

Ethics according to Pope Francis

- a) When Francis is asked about his position on a particular moral, often controversial, issue he tends to answer by drawing attention to a bigger picture. So, his answer 'don't judge' isn't that he has no view on a particular matter but rather that he wants us to shift to a different method, a method of 'discernment' which he consistently endorses.
- b) It is not easy to translate Francis' statements and ideas to specific principles or norms – so the term 'Francis' ethics' is used here loosely. After all, Francis doesn't appeal directly or to rely on any specific moral theory. One can detect a variety of philosophical, theological and socio-psychological influences on his thinking.
- c) For me, Francis' ethics can be designated as **a cross-communal, relational and dialogical ethics** (the synodal pathway is an expression of this ethic). It is different from a codified version of ethics with which we have been accustomed for centuries.

I would like to start with four broad principles identified by Ethna Regan in her 'The Bergoglian Principles: Pope Francis' Dialectical Approach to Political Theology.' Regan sifts through Francis' statements and actions and finds the four following principles²:

- 'time is greater than space;'
- 'unity prevails over conflict;'
- 'realities are more important than ideas;'
- 'the whole is greater than the part.'

¹ Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. Simon and Shuster

² Ethna Regan, 'The Bergoglian Principles: Pope Francis' Dialectical Approach to Political Theology', <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/12/670/htm>)

I will briefly paraphrase Regan's interpretation of these principles. It is important to add that these principles have their strengths and weaknesses; none is perfect or absolute.

'Time is greater than space.' Space is often associated with power while time is a more flexible concept, requiring a different type of attending to and seeing things. This principle reverses the dynamic in which space and power are given preference over time and processes. Francis stresses that processes such as synodality are more important than domination of space. Settling in for space can result in short-termism and self-referential institutions —religious and secular—that, in the long term, can inhibit real progress. Focusing on time enables shifts in the mindset to matters that promote progress in the long-term.

'Unity prevails over conflict.' This is not an easy principle as focusing on unity can result in suppression of difference or dissent or minimizing suffering in the name of peace and unity. Perhaps we see this as problematic in Francis' approach to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Regan, however, points out that 'Francis' emphasis on unity is not about giving unity priority over conflict in such a way that negates or minimizes the reality of conflict; it is about the hope that unity will prevail over conflict—that in the midst of conflict this hope will shape the priorities of those involved. Francis describes unity as 'diversified and life-giving.' Thus, it is not simply unity as defined by the majority, the powerful, or the victors. It is a unity that is pluralistic and which enables flourishing for all.

'Realities are more important than ideas.' This principle focuses on praxis – the dimension of life involving action. There is a necessary dialogical tension between ideas and realities, and without this dialogical tension, this principle could be evoked in dangerous suppression of new insights and ideas. However, political visions, theories, such as theories of justice, can sometimes remain in the realm of pure ideas. In his Message to the Faculty of the Alphonsian Academy in Rome Francis tells moral theologians 'guard against excessive idealization' by 'being close to the everyday situations of individuals and families' and 'get hands dirty with concrete problems.'³

'The whole is greater than the part.' This principle is framed in *Evangelii Gaudium* in terms of the creative tension between the global and the local. A global perspective guarantees breadth of vision but risks static abstraction; a local perspective guarantees groundedness in reality but risks narrow localism. Francis calls for broadening of horizons and seeing the bigger picture while accepting the tension – this is in line with the Ignatian model of discernment and the point I made earlier about Francis's method. Francis uses the image of the polyhedron, 'which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each.' (EG, §236)

There is one other ethical concept that caught my eye first in his book *Let Us Dream* and then in the speech by Cardinal Tomasi C.S. to *Fondazione Centesimus Annus* in 2022 — this concept is called 'Catholic Social Learning'⁴.

Catholic Social Learning (CSL) is more a methodology than a principle. When Tomasi speaks of it, he talks about a 'new methodology of three steps' or, more accurately, three activities or practices that CSL involves. Tomasi explains that the first step/activity is 'to contemplate.' It involves engaging with the situation or issue affectively as well as intellectually. The second step is to 'to discern.' This is about allowing the complexity and even contradictions of the situation to come into focus. It requires opening oneself to broad ways of viewing the situation and seeing the bigger picture. Note that this is in line with

³ Ibid. (visited on 20 February 2020)

⁴ see <https://centesimusannus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CATHOLIC-SOCIAL-LEARNING-A-New-Methodology-for-a-New-Economy-Speech-to-F...-1.pdf> Visited on 4 September 2023

the fourth principle on Regan's list 'the whole is greater than the part.' The third and final step/activity is to propose. This is not about giving ready-made formulas or instructions. It is more about stimulating thinking, discussing solutions by inviting others to ponder and contribute to the desired outcomes. It seems that the goal of CSL is to arrive at solutions together not by imposing but by proposing. This method is more open-ended than simply teaching. Perhaps it's slightly vague but ultimately it is *a method of learning together.*

What other (specific) principles guide Francis' thinking? There are many. Here are a few core ones:

- **Mercy and charity – he wants to put them at the heart of Catholic ethics.** These two deeply linked principles are key to all Francis's statements, probably most present in *Amoris Laetitia* where Francis talks about the 'primacy of charity as a response to the completely gratuitous offer of God's love.' He says that 'at times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance.' (AL 311)
- **Primacy of Conscience** -- 'We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.' (AL 37)
- **Integral development** - this principle penetrates his whole approach: '**care for the natural environment**' and '**common home**' in *Laudato Si'* but also in so many other statements.
- **Honest and Open Dialogue** – the whole synodal process is about this kind of dialogue. It is not a dialogue for the sake of chatting. It is a dialogue with a purpose. Francis spells out in detail what such a dialogue involves. For me, in his letter to moral theologians taking part in their global meeting, Catholic Ethics in the World Charge, in Sarajevo 2018, Francis captures well what he wants to foster. In the letter he says: 'build bridges among yourselves,' 'share ideas and programmes,' 'develop forms of closeness.'⁵ He talks about intra- and inter- disciplinary dialogue to overcome polarization. The purpose of the dialogue is unity (the second principle on Regan's list).

All the different principles I am listing here are connected and are expressed in different ways in Francis' statements. I now move to Part Two and turn to the issue of migration.

PART II

Focus on migration⁶

a) A local case to illustrate some current problems

I would like to open our reflection on migration by referring to a book by Mikolaj Grynberg, *Jezus Umarl w Polsce (Jesus died in Poland)* which gives a glimpse of the migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in the region of Podlasie, Northeast Poland. But, first, a few words of explanation:

- I am not an expert in migration. I am well aware that the issue is complex and has many sides to it;
- The reason I'm bringing Grynberg's book and focusing on it and not some other case - for example, the English Channel crossing in Calais - is that I am familiar with Podlasie. I was

⁵ Letter from Pope Francis to moral theologians, Catholic Ethics in the World Charge, Sarajevo 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/07/26/letter-pope-francis-moral-theologians-gathered-sarajevo>

⁶ According to the UN there were about 70 million people on the move just before the Covid-19 pandemic. Such population would make the fifth largest country in the world, after China, India, the United States, and Indonesia; nearly 20 times bigger than the population of Poland. Death toll: hard to know but well over 25,000 since 2014 who came to Europe via the Mediterranean.

born and lived there for 23 years. I still spend time there as I did for most of this past August. I know its beauty, problems and fears;

- I knew little about what exactly was happening on that border as there are strict laws which don't allow visitors to the zone near the border. Journalists, especially, are not welcome there;
- I also have some distance from that situation as for the past 32 years I have lived in the UK. I am a migrant with dual – Polish and British – citizenship. My mother was a refugee from what is now Belarus (then Poland) who came to Podlasie after the Second World War. My family lives about a 40 minute drive from the Polish-Belarusian border;
- I only learnt about this book 6 weeks ago (it was published in July 2023). When I was invited to present this topic to you, I had no intention to talk about the case of Polish borderlands. But, when I read the book, I knew I had to refer to it;
- Finally, I am aware that I will make some moral judgements because the book makes such judgments - in ethics we do make moral judgements. But making judgments and being judgmental are different things. I have no intention of being judgmental. Please challenge me later if you feel that I crossed my professional border and became judgmental;

So, what is Mikolaj Grynberg's book '*Jesus Died in Poland*' about?

It is about the migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. It presents 20 interviews, 18 of which are with people who engage in attending to the needs of migrants. These are mostly local people, men and women, some Catholics, others don't declare their worldviews. Amongst them are a medical doctor, a fireman, a previous governor of Podlasie, a director of the local cultural institute (Dom Kultury), a local leader of the Club of Catholic Intelligence (KIK). Two of the interviewees are anonymous border control officers (the only ones who agreed to speak to the reporter). One reluctantly admits his involvement in the pushbacks (the illegal practice of deporting people back to Belarus). Both officers emphasize their duty to obey orders.

Helping the refugees in the zone close to the boarder is illegal. Only official organizations are allowed to be there. But there are too few of them and some schemes that operate there are not fit for the purpose. Helpers are often penalized, disciplined and warned against entering the zone.

Grynberg's book describes how in this sparsely populated region with large forests and a vast nature reserve, the state has abandoned its obligations. Some common points that appear in almost all interviews include:

- Everyone seems to be overwhelmed by the crisis;
- They feel helpless but somehow find strength and resources to carry on their support to provide food, warm clothes or organize phone chargers. They also clean the forests, contact the refugees' families, help in filling in documents, offer shelter and protection from being pushed back to Belarus;
- None of the helpers aspired to be involved in this work;

⁷ See the Interview with Mikolaj Grynberg about his book – *Tygodnik Powszechny* (35/2023 19.08.2023). It is in Polish.) https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/ludzie-ludziom-mikolaj-grynberg-o-granicy-referendum-i-nadziei-184392?overridden_route_name=entity.node.canonical&base_route_name=entity.node.canonical&page_manager_page=node_view&page_manager_page_variant=node_view-panels_variant-0&page_manager_page_variant_weight=-10 visited on 1 September 2023

- Every helper, often with family members and friends, feels compelled to do it, and says they can't walk away;
- Not one helper thinks they are doing anything great. They feel awkward when they are thanked by those whom they help. Maciej Zywno, ex-governor of the region, captures well the attitude of the people involved in helping: 'Saving lives is a duty, not a privilege.' (*Ratowanie życia jest obowiązkiem a nie przywilejem*, p.117) Another person when asked why she helps simply says: 'I have a spare room.' (p.264) In return for it, she says, she gets so much more: she learns about the lives of quite different people from different cultures and hears about their jobs (some were lawyers or accountants in their countries). The transformation she sees when they get shaved, washed, and put on clean clothes brings her enormous satisfaction. She is in touch with some of her 'lodgers' who are settling into Germany. But there are also some tragic stories of people pushed back, some who are very ill and some who lose hope and sometimes life.

The book reveals the multitude of failures:

- Failures by officials, the Polish government - the lack of proper systems for dealing with migrants, the lack of policies or simply breaking the policies that exist, breaching human rights conventions and disrespecting human dignity;
- Failures by the Church (both Catholic and Orthodox- the area has a large population of Orthodox people). The Club of Catholic Intelligence leader says: 'Ja tu jeszcze świecę oczami za Kościół, to jest Katobaza, więc wszyscy oczekują tutaj katolików.' ('I am embarrassed on behalf of the Church, this is Katobaza [kato for Catholic, baza for a base, a 'Catholic base', a help point], everyone is expecting Catholics here.') Local churches (clergy and parishioners) are invisible, either helping secretly or doing nothing. Several interviewees described how their requests for assistance went in vain. One of them describes in detail the welcome he received by his local priest, but it turned out to be a superficial politeness. He was hoping to receive permission to occasionally use the parish laundry or storage space but such permission wasn't granted.

Jesus died in Poland presents a contrast to the way the Polish border with Ukraine operates. That border is supported by officials, organizations and volunteers. The majority of migrants crossing the Belarusian-Polish border are from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and North Africa. The book reveals racism, short-termism, and an unwillingness to speak honestly about the situation, the cover-ups, malpractice, negligence, secrecy, and the lack of transparency and accountability. It also reveals a high level of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in all different groups (the refugees, border staff, the helpers).

The final pages of the book list names of those who died on the border. Some are without names. At the time of publication (July 2023), the NGO Grupa Granica (Border Group) was looking for 344 individuals marked as 'lost.'

But it is the pushbacks that bother most those who talked to author. One border officer felt awkward, even ashamed, when asked about pushbacks. He had several explanations why the practice was justified and why he couldn't challenge his superiors. His role is to obey orders, he can't lose his job as he has a credit to repay.

The issue of the wall is also present in many of the interviews. The helpers comment that for a short period of time the wall worked, mainly as a deterrent. Fewer migrants were coming. However, it no longer works and causes a great number of physical injuries.

Grynberg explains that he wrote this book in order to highlight not only what is happening on this particular border but also to show how a small number of citizens take on themselves the responsibility of the state to protect people in need and ensure that nobody dies in their forest.

The author compares those who are helping on this border to those who were helping the Jews during the Second World War, not so much in terms of endangering or sacrificing their lives, but more in terms of being a small minority prepared to go against the stream, against the official rhetoric, and simply as a way of responding to basic human needs, in the spirit of the Good Samaritan.

There is a lot more I could say about this book. But I will stop here and turn again to Pope Francis and his approach to migration.

Pope Francis on migration

A few words about Francis as a person:

- **he comes from a migrant family** - his father migrated to Argentina from Italy, in flight from Benito Mussolini's Fascist government;
- born in Argentina, **he represents the Global South** - the so-called developing world—with experiences of migration perhaps somewhat different from what we know in Europe (N.B. 85 percent of all migrants are hosted by the Global South);
- his perspective on the issue is bound to be bigger than his predecessors. According to Ivereigh, migration is the biggest personal concern for Francis 'as communism was personal for Karol Wojtyła.'⁸

So, here is a glimpse to of this approach.

Gestures

Francis shows the power of gestures rather than gestures of power.

- **He celebrated his eighty-fifth birthday by meeting with refugees** who had been in a camp in Cyprus and with, the help of the Community of Sant'Egidio and some assistance from the Pope, had begun settling in Italy shortly after his visit to Cyprus.
- He arranged for three families of refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria to travel on the papal plane to Rome from Lesbos, where he was on a pastoral visit, and helped them settle in Italy. He later arranged for more arrivals of refugees to the Vatican. These gestures speak volumes.

Words and Ideas

- he denounces 'walls of fear and the vetoes dictated by nationalistic interests' (a speech in Cyprus)
- He speaks of a parallel between political divisions and the migrant issue (many statements)
- He connects migration with climate change and also migration and poverty
- He makes parallels between certain treatment of migrants and refugees and the campaigns of Hitler and Stalin: 'we read stories of concentration camps of the last century and say "How could this possibly have happened"? Brothers and sisters, it is happening today' (Cyprus)

⁸ Austen Ivereigh, 'Why Does Francis Focus on Migration? Because God asks for mercy, not sacrifice', Commonweal, 11 March, 2023 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/migrants-francis-pope-ivereigh-refugees-catholic-samaritan> visited 1 September 2023

- When touring a migrant camp in Lesbos with the Orthodox archbishop of Athens and Greece, Ieronymos II, and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the pope speaks on behalf of the three, saying: ‘We hope that the world will heed these scenes of tragic and indeed desperate need, and respond in a way worthy of our common humanity.’
- He says: ‘I ask every man and woman, all of us, to overcome the **paralysis of fear, the indifference that kills, the cynical disregard that nonchalantly condemns** to death those on the fringes!’
- He warns about **the globalization of indifference** by which we have become used to the suffering of others. (Lampedusa)
- He points to the ‘great numbers of children born in recent years [who] have known only the reality of camps for displaced persons’ and claims that ‘**The future cannot lie in refugee camps.**’ (South Sudan).
- In his 10 annual messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees he recognizes the complexity of the migrant crisis including international gangs involved in human trafficking that are part of the problem. Ultimately he calls for a better treatment of migrants and overcoming indifference to their plight.

Interestingly, this year’s message - 24 September 2023 – has a new element and addresses the migrants more directly and in a different way than in some of his previous messages. It is entitled ‘Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay.’ In it, Francis calls for a careful analysis of every aspect of the different stages, from departure to arrival, including the possibility of return. He refers to the synod and says: ‘The synodal path that we have undertaken as a Church leads us to see in those who are most vulnerable – among whom are many migrants and refugees – special companions on our way, to be loved and cared for as brothers and sisters. **Only by walking together will we be able to go far** and reach the common goal of our journey.’

Francis’ words, gestures and actions are largely in contrast to what we hear from the majority of political leaders and even some leaders in the Church. Can CSL be a way forward?

PART III

Catholic Social Learning and the Migrant Crisis

In this final part I will attempt to connect the first two parts and propose to explore further the concept of CSL.

How can the four principles of Francis’ ethics inform our **thinking** about the migrant crisis?

- ‘**time is greater than space**’ emphasizes the priority of processes over institutions. The helpers in Grynberg’s book seem to embody this principle in their response to the crisis.
- ‘**unity prevails over conflict**’ calls for dialogue. There will be no progress if officials, politicians of all parties, border control service, other officials, volunteers, activists, demographers, social workers, policy makers, medical staff – locally and internationally don’t sit together and talk.
- ‘**realities are more important than ideas**’ reminds us that rhetoric no longer serves us. What does it mean to practice what we preach? I think the acts of those who help the migrants in Podlasie practice without preaching what others (including me) preach but don’t practice.

- ‘**the whole is greater than the part.**’ Means that, for Francis, the future state of the world depends on the ability of nation-states to welcome migrants, to address holistically their

nationalistic tendencies and to move beyond the destructive populist divisions that divide society into ‘the people, and the elites, patriots and foreigners.’

When it comes to the other principles we highlighted earlier:

- **Mercy and Charity** are exactly what helpers on the Polish-Belarusian border embody;
- **Primacy of Conscience** -- ‘We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.’ Again the accounts I read in the book speak a lot about those with mature conscience and those led by the superego (‘doing orders is what matters’; ‘I’m only doing my job’ approach);
- **Integral Development** takes us back to what we said earlier about the four principles formulated by Regan, especially the priority of processes over power, and unity over conflict. There is no integral development without **Honest and Open Dialogue**.

Without a doubt the plight of migrants is a test of the character of civil society; The way we treat migrants reveals something about who we are, personally and collectively.

So, what do we need to do in order to move on this journey?

Here is Pope Francis’ answer in the words of Ivereigh to which I will incorporate Tomasi’s three steps of CSL. This is a form of a spiritual exercise:

- ✓ ‘face the truth’ - follow **Step 1 of CSL** (endorsed by Tomasi): **contemplate**;
- ✓ ‘repent and weep;’
- ✓ ‘feel shame and cry out for help;’
- ✓ then ‘see clearly where God is calling us’ – **Step 2: discern**;
- ✓ and finally, have the courage to act on that clarity by following **Step 3: propose** –in other words, engage in dialogue with everyone including those who can’t stand migrants, or are afraid of them, speak to border officers as Grynberg did, advocate for better solutions than we currently have.

More practically, in 2015 Francis asked ‘every parish and religious community in Europe to house at least one migrant family fleeing death by war and hunger.’ Earlier he told religious communities facing decline to open the doors, telling them that ‘empty convents do not belong to you, they are for the flesh of Christ, which is what refugees are.’ The Vatican’s migrants’ section offers a comprehensive collection of “pastoral orientations” that we are invited to adopt as individuals and as communities, as well as policies we can urge on governments.’⁹

Conclusion

For Pope Francis, ‘borderlands are the places where the Gospels are being both resisted and enacted in our time, just as they were two thousand years ago.’¹⁰ Can Catholic Social Learning start with today’s borderlands and coasts? Can the stories of human woundedness - of the stranger who knocks at the door of a nation-state, the immigration officer, our own as individuals and societies - be part of CSL? Perhaps it is only through discovering our own wounds, biases and indifferences that we begin to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

make the learning social and Catholic. What would it be like to start CSL with concepts of brokenness and vulnerability and become a learning rather than a teaching church? Can we even envisage our Church as a learning church, at her every level? Practicing some kind of self and ecclesial displacement might have to be part of the process. I think it will be hard to embark on the Catholic Social Learning project without considering these and similar questions. What is the alternative to not becoming the learning church?

Let me end on a theological note, in the spirit of Ignatian discernment: Where there is crisis, there is more power for the Holy Spirit to work. In *Let Us Dream*, Francis quotes the poet Friedrich Hölderlin—'where the danger is, there grows the saving power of mercy.' This, for me, captures well the spirituality of borderlands. The same message speaks through the story of the Ulma family from Markowa, killed with their seven children by the Nazis in 1944 for having sheltered Jews during World War II, and beatified on 10 September 2023. May the Ulmas inspire and pray for us - that we (as they did) see the human form and the image of God in everyone we encounter and find grace in every crisis we experience. Thank you.