Opinion
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Pope Francis blesses a woman after his weekly general audience Feb. 15 in the Vatican audience hall. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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If the most essential frame for understanding Pope Francis is his pastoral sensibility, and it is, that frame also shapes both the contours and the content of his role as teacher. This role as teacher of the faith has become, in the last two centuries, one of the most consequential and challenging for the papacy.

We are all familiar with the old adage *Roma locuta est, causa finita est*, Rome has spoken, the issue is finished. For most of the second millennium, however, theological controversies were farmed out to different theological faculties, which would argue the merits. The Gregorian University in Rome was not begun until the 16th century, even though universities had been active in Bologna since the 11th century, Paris from the 13th century and the Jagiellonian in Krakow from the mid-14th century. The theological conclusions from these faculties would be sent to Rome if there was the necessity of a juridical decision, a penalty of some sort, a declaration of what was now determined to be out of bounds. Such declarations from Rome, it is worth pointing out, always left an enormous area for continued discussion inbounds.

Only in the 19th century did the practice arise of papal encyclicals being issued to positively teach what Catholics should believe. I recall my mentor Msgr. John Tracy Ellis describing this phenomenon and adding, "The chair of Peter is many things, but it is not a faculty chair."

Other things were changing in the 19th century. The intellectual upheaval of the Reformation, followed by the seraglio of the Enlightenment, continued to shape the way people thought of the place of God, the human person and the church in the life of the community and the life of the cosmos. Notre Dame's Brad Gregory did a masterful job establishing the links between the religious cleavages of the Reformation and the birth of secularization in his book *The Unintended Reformation*. Those who answered Voltaire's call — *Écrasez l'infâme*! — succeeded in advancing secularization, but more subtle dynamics played their part too, most especially the emergence of widespread affluence. Kantian ideas about ethics displaced Thomistic ones. It was generally agreed that bringing dogmatic truths into the public square would reignite a Thirty Years' War. There were national variations, but generally, throughout the West, religion became reduced to ethics in the public square and that, in turn, affected our self-understanding as believers. Christian ethics of left or right were never meant to stand on their own. Shorn from their dogmatic foundations, church teaching became one opinion among many.

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If Vatican I and the papacies of Popes Pius IX and Pius X tried to cope with secularization by creating an ecclesiastical fortress, with a mentality to match, the experience of two world wars and the Shoah convinced the leaders of our church that, for all its outward splendor, there was something missing, radically missing. If Christians had responded to such horrors no differently from others, what difference did faith make? This examination of collective conscience led to the calling of Vatican II and all that followed.

Unlike some liberal critics of previous papacies, I do not believe that Pope John Paul II or Pope Benedict XVI tried to put the Vatican II toothpaste back in the tube. They

wrestled with the challenge of communicating the faith in a Western society that had more or less stopped recognizing any authorities, especially religious authorities. Both popes understood and wrote about the damage of reducing religion to ethics, for example, in the 1999 apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America* and the 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, respectively. Both men, however, did not successfully challenge an ambient ecclesial and media culture that drowned out these key insights in favor of discussions of pelvic theology and culture war battlelines.

Pope Francis brings his pastor's insights to this massive and knotty task of evangelizing in the post-modern West while also promoting evangelization in the Global South. He refuses to let the concerns of moral theology dominate as if they were prior to the kerygma of the Gospel with its emphasis on God's closeness and mercy. And he has met resistance from within the church from those who complain this emphasis on mercy dilutes church teaching, especially at the two synods on the family held in 2014 and 2015. I called those critics "Team Javert" back then, and the tag has only become more accurate as the years have gone by.



Pope Francis visits the San Carlo Community, a Catholic-run drug rehabilitation center on the outskirts of Rome Feb. 26, 2016, near Castel Gandolfo, Italy. The pope encouraged the 55 patients to trust God's mercy to keep them strong. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

The Holy Father responded to this line of criticism in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. He did not call for a rigid explanation of church teaching followed by a merciful application of that teaching, as if the pulpit was for rigor and the confessional for laxity. No. He reminded us that mercy is itself the core of the church's teaching.

No passage in all his writings these 10 years better exemplifies Francis as teacher than that document's Paragraph 311: "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. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel."

It is unfathomable to me why this is so controversial, but it is.

Just last week (Feb. 15), in his general audience, Pope Francis returned to this theme. "Who is God? The One who is close, the One who is tender, the One who is merciful. This is the reality of God," the pope said. "We, in preaching, often urge people to do something, and that is fine; but let's not forget that the main message is that he is near: closeness, mercy, and tenderness. Accepting God's love is more difficult because we always want to be in the center, we want to be protagonists, we are more inclined to do than to let ourselves be molded, to speak than to listen."

The solipsism that characterizes so much spirituality in our time finds no home in the pope's worldview.

Neither does one of the most perduring temptations to the faith, Pelagianism, the idea that we can save ourselves through moral exertion. He went on to say this

about how to proclaim the Gospel:

> [Jesus] says this: "I send you out as sheep among wolves" [Matthew 10:16]. He does not ask us to be able to face the wolves, that is, to be able to argue, to offer counter arguments, and to defend ourselves. No, no. We might think like this: Let us become relevant, numerous, prestigious, and the world will listen to us and respect us and we will defeat the wolves. No, it's not like that. No, I send you out as sheep, as lambs. This is important. If you don't want to be sheep, the Lord will not defend you from the wolves. Deal with it as best you can. But if you are sheep, rest assured that the Lord will defend you from the wolves. Be humble.

Francis rejects the idea that we Catholics can barricade ourselves in some ecclesiastical fort, protecting ourselves from the contaminations of the world, creating a modern-day Port-Royal where moral scrupulosity is the norm (and Jesuits are hated!). A missionary church must rely on the Lord, not on our own skill at erecting stone walls or achieving moral purity or defining doctrinal clarity. Only a pope with a pastor's heart can see the real impediments to evangelization and teaching erected by the Jansenists of our time and propose something different, something that resonates with those to whom the Lord has promised to be close.

This, then, is the essence of Francis' teaching: God meant what he said in Psalms 34 and 130: The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed; with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption. In understanding Francis' pontificate, it is this role as teacher of mercy that connects the other two outstanding hermeneutical frames, his self-understanding of his role as pastor and reformer.

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.