

Pope Francis' Pastoral Vision

(bulletin articles from July 11, July 18, July 25, August 1, August 8, 2021)

July 11, 2021

I have been reading a number of books and articles about Pope Francis this summer, as well as his own writings. I continue to be fascinated (and amazed) at how his vision for Church and society remains steady in the face of massive criticism, much of it from within the inner circles of the Church. I find it an exciting vision because it recognizes that we do not have all the answers and have to remain open to the Holy Spirit to guide us into a new future. Although the Pope believes in all of the doctrines of the Church, his vision relies less on repeating doctrinal certitudes and more on inviting us to accompany persons in their real struggles to live integral human lives. He recognizes that too often the focus on doctrines first leads the Church to not only assert certitudes but to condemn those who do not hold the same certitudes. Instead, he calls us to walk with those who are struggling in any way and to find ways to minister to them, even if their lives do not perfectly conform to Catholic teachings. This calls for a conversion of mind and heart on our part, rather than simply thinking we have the truth to which others have to convert. We do have a wonderful vision to share, but we do so in dialogue with other people's visions calling all to mutual conversion.

In re-reading some of his writings, I began to appreciate better the significance of his early Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel") which he issued in 2013. If you want to understand this Pope, go back and read this document. I have put a link to it on our website under "News/News Briefs." He calls us to be a Church "*always on mission.*" That vision and language is rooted in the Second Vatican Council's idea of the Church as the "pilgrim people of God." If we are a pilgrim people, always on mission, then no historical era has a lock on embodying the fullness of God's truth. We have the core, an essential piece of that truth, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Eucharistic people that flows from that Paschal Mystery. But because that vision is embodied always in historically limited ways, it must be renewed and re-proclaimed and re-embodied in each era and culture. Our role as a Church is not primarily that of police who catch people who are not living up to the standards, or of judges who issue sentences of punishment for failing to live those standards. Our role as a Church is to re-root ourselves in the Gospel and to find ways to live that Gospel in today's world, to live that Gospel with joy so that others might be attracted to its message.

In paragraphs # 222-237, while discussing peace in society and the common good, Pope Francis lays out four "pastoral principles" that guide his vision. I am calling them pastoral principles because they can be applied not just to peace in society but also to our life as a Church and communities of faith. In fact, if we (especially bishops and priests) would truly embrace these four principles in our own pastoral approach, I am convinced we would be a much more authentic, humble, attractive, joyful and dynamic Church. More next week.

July 18, 2021

Last week I referred to a section of Pope Francis' 2013 Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* ("Joy of the Gospel") as one of the keys to understanding his vision of how the world can better approach issues of social change, especially issues that cause great tension and division. He suggests four principles to guide us. I will take them one

at-a-time and apply them, not to the large global issues, but to the Church itself if we want to truly be communities of "joyful missionary disciples" or, as Archbishop Vigneron has expressed in his vision for the Archdiocese, if we want to "Unleash the Gospel." I think the Archbishop's vision fits within the broader vision of the Pope, but I will point out areas of tension that have emerged as well.

The first principle the Pope names is *"Time is greater than space"* (#222-225). Here Pope Francis is highlighting the dialectic between fullness and limitation. Within a given "space" (the world, a bloc of nations, or a single nation, or a state, city or town, a corporation or a business enterprise, a non-governmental organization or a community group, a Church or a diocese or parish, a university or a school, a marriage or a family, and so on) at any given moment, the embodiment of truth or justice or freedom or any transcendent value will always be limited and imperfect. When we forget that, we tend to overvalue and put too much energy into preserving the way things are "right now." We also can either nostalgically think there was a more perfect past or have an idealized future vision and try to impose them on the present reality. In the words of Pope Francis, making "space" greater than "time" is to use our power to make things "right now" the way we want them to be, unwilling to either let change happen or imposing change in such a way that we damage the space within which we are living.

For Pope Francis the better understanding and direction is to recognize that *time is greater than space*. To give greater priority to time over space is to recognize the value of starting processes that can grow and create new and better alternatives. It is to recognize both the good realities that exist as well as the imperfections and limitations of the present and realize that we can accept such imperfections because we can always initiate ways that can make them better. The Pope uses the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30) as a Scriptural image of this—we can see the weeds, but in tearing them out to create a perfect field "right now", we are in danger of destroying the good wheat as well. We need patience and trust. We need a vision for the long haul, but also a willingness to try new and creative approaches, to see what will bear the greatest fruit. A practical example is Pope Francis' emphasis on what he calls "synodal processes and wisdom." Pope Francis places great value on the kind of wisdom that can emerge when bishops gather as groups and share their true thoughts and concerns, rather than having preconceived answers. When he was criticized for limiting that synodal wisdom to men and bishops only, he established procedures for women to have a voting role in future synods. When asked to decide the question of whether women can be ordained as deacons, he tabled that question and challenged regions of bishops to explore how that would fit into their vision of the Church and to think creatively beyond just the categories of ordained versus non-ordained leaders in the Church. The Pope's emphasis on time as greater than space has allowed him to be comfortable in not having all the answers "right now," to be open to the wisdom of others, and to put into place seemingly small but important structural changes that can prove their value over time.

On our local level, the Archdiocese of Detroit's Synod of 2016 on the New Evangelization fits very well within this vision of the Pope. At that Synod the recognition that the Church of the Archdiocese of Detroit had to undergo significant structural change and that the Spirit of God can guide that change emerged strongly. The subsequent "Unleash the Gospel" initiative and the move to the "Family of Parishes" model are efforts to focus the Church on moving beyond the current "space" and business-as-usual and initiate processes that can bear fruit over the next years and decades. If there is one area of concern on my part, in looking at what is happening in the Archdiocese in light of Pope Francis' vision, is that we might be trying to make the new model happen too quickly, forcing what is an idealized vision which needs a lot of time to unfold, to fit our current situation "right now" (thus giving priority to space over time). What is needed is to initiate the new processes and then give them time to mature, so that true discernment of their fruit can be done, as well as recognizing any "weeds" that might emerge.

On the parish level, this first principle raises the following questions for me. Are we willing at St. Regis to let a new vision of parish, of church and school and faith formation, of collaboration with other parishes,

emerge over time? Or will we be so wedded to the current “space” (structures, Mass times, ways of doing things) that we will miss an opportunity to be shaped by the Holy Spirit in a way that will position us well for the next generation(s) of parish life and ministry? Next time, a second principle, “*Realities are more important than ideas.*”

July 25, 2021

Another pastoral principle Pope Francis mentions in *Evangelii Gaudium* is: “*Realities are more important than ideas*” (#231-233). Ideas, of course, are important. They can lead us to critically re-think and re-evaluate what we are doing. They can challenge the status quo and offer possibilities for change. But to let the idea either distort reality or keep us from addressing the real needs of people who are hurting or are being excluded from the goods necessary for a dignified life is to violate this principle. The Pope gives the example of “*empty rhetoric.*” We see this too often in the political realm. Empty rhetoric happens when government leaders and politicians claim to be serving the good of people by what they are proposing but fail to address the real needs of people or cause damage to people. For example, we can debate the merits of our health care system and the best way to correct its deficiencies, but if there are significant segments of our population who do not have access to basic health care, something is wrong. We need to give them health care, even if it is not done in the most efficient way. The reality of the needs of the people is more important than a theoretical construct of the best health care system.

Another example the Pope gives is that of “*intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom.*” This happens so often on social media platforms, where clearly false ideas gain great traction and hinder people from seeing the reality in front of them. Think of those who deny the legitimacy of the last presidential election or those that think COVID-19 vaccinations are some conspiracy to control people’s lives. Because some media platforms promote an idea that is not grounded in reality, they cause great harm to the common good. I think we see this distortion at work in the current debates over gender identity as well. There are those who want to define gender as “whatever I say my gender is,” even for those who have not yet fully matured psychologically and physically, and therefore promote whatever hormonal or even non-reversible surgical procedures are necessary to bring one’s body in line with one’s currently preferred gender, when the reality of psycho-sexual development and integration of one’s gender into one’s identity is much more complex. The Church has to be very careful here as well, because we talk about being communities of care and mercy and kindness and love as elements of a gospel way of life, but do our policies and actions truly reflect those virtues when dealing with people who are struggling with gender identity? Often diocesan school policies unilaterally forbid Catholic schools from accepting someone who is publicly exploring a transgender identity. There is no doubt that such a student will have lots of social challenges, but I would think there could be a way to accompany such a person and their family which shows compassion and care, without compromising the Church’s vision of human sexuality and personhood.

In many ways I think this principle—*realities are more important than ideas*—is the most important of the four principles. Catholic wisdom in all areas of teaching is rooted in what is sometimes termed a “critical realism.” We accept that our understanding of a dogma or doctrine can deepen over time. We accept that much of our non-doctrinal teaching can even radically change. A good example of the latter is the Church’s teaching on religious liberty. We have gone from condemning the idea in the 19th century to making it a hallmark of our teaching today. This principle is also tied to the first one mentioned in a previous column—*time is greater than space*. Because reality is always situated within a specific historical and cultural framework, when that framework changes, our pastoral application of our teaching has to change as well. When human wisdom develops deeper and fuller understandings of the cosmos and of the human person, the Church’s wisdom and teaching eventually takes account of it, rather than burying its head in the sand. It sometimes takes a while—think of the struggle to appreciate the theory of evolution or the vastness of

the universe in terms of time and space—but the failure to accept the reality in front of us is never a good solution.

The Archdiocese of Detroit is currently engaged in a process that brings this principle to the forefront. As parishes move into what is called the “Family of Parishes” model, there could be a tendency to take the idea and try to force every parish reality to fit the idealized model. The Pope’s principle—*realities are more important than ideas*—would suggest that we be careful here, lest we cause greater harm than good. At the same time, are we as a parish willing to recognize the reality in front of us:

- The reality of many fewer priests and the need to significantly reduce the Mass times at each parish?
- The reality of ministries and outreaches that can become much more vital and dynamic if shared by all parishes in the family, rather than duplicated in each parish?
- The reality that the next generation of Catholics needs to be energized and evangelized if we are to have sufficient energy and resources to support our parishes?

It would be tragic to lose the identity and energy of current parishes, in pursuit of an idealized goal. It would be equally tragic to put on blinders and not see the reality in front of us that is calling for significant change in how we structure and live parish life.

Next time: the final two principles. “*Unity prevails over conflict,*” and “*The whole is greater than the parts.*”

August 1, 2021

In addition to the two principles already discussed (“*Time is greater than space*” and “*Realities are more important than ideas*”) Pope Francis mentions two further ones in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: “*Unity prevails over conflict*” (#226-230) and “*The whole is greater than the part*” (#234-237). The Pope applies these principles toward a vision of the common good for society. I also want to apply them to the Church as well.

“*Unity prevails over conflict*” is rooted in the Christian conviction that the Spirit of God desires and is able to create unity in the midst of great diversity. It is a principle that keeps us from ignoring conflict, but also keeps us from being consumed by conflict or the need to “win at all costs.” This principle is an expression of solidarity as understood by Catholic Social Teaching. Solidarity is not just accompanying people in need, rather an intentional desire to understand those who differ from us and to find ways to bridge the gap between that which divides human communities. If we really do not think that unity ultimately prevails over conflict, we will miss creative solutions to that which causes conflict. “*The whole is greater than the part*” is a related principle. The Pope evokes this principle not to minimize the unique individual or the importance of local communities solving their own problems, but to remind us not to lose sight of the bigger picture. We can get so focused on some relatively small piece of the problem and get stuck when that smaller piece is not solved, rather than letting that area be unresolved and still find ways to work toward the larger goal.

We are in a world where too often we settle for loudly proclaiming our issues, our viewpoint, our concerns and do not spend the time to understand the viewpoint or concerns of others. We even are willing to settle for division and conflict rather than seek creative solutions that can bring greater unity and serve the common good of all. It takes intentional effort to listen to and understand a significantly different viewpoint. It is so easy to vilify and denigrate or stir up opposition. That is not the way of the gospel. That is not the way of a disciple of Jesus. Take, for example, the way some people try to dismiss the phrase “Black lives matter” by saying that “White lives matter too” or “All lives matter.” Instead of solidarity—which can also include legitimate differences of viewpoint and critique—we settle for opposition. If we took the time to understand the phrase, its origins and why it became a rallying cry, we might come to see that saying “Black lives matter” is precisely trying to help us understand that all lives matter. It is pointing out what happens when we either do not see or ignore the real harm being done to groups of

people under current practices. If all lives matter then why is there such a discrepancy in the use of force with black people? When those who are black receive the same standards of dignity and justice as others, then we will have achieved the greater goal of treating all lives as being equally important.

As a Church we can use these principles to help move us toward greater unity and wholeness. For example, do we get so focused on a particular issue—Communion to certain politicians or to those who are not in Church-approved marriages—that we are unable to appreciate the greater unity we share and the common vision we share in Eucharist? As a parish, when we gather at Eucharist around the table of the Lord, are we willing to be in solidarity even with those for whom we might vociferously disagree? These two principles, like the previous two, invite us to see the Christian life as a journey, and holiness not as a badge of achievement but as a work in progress among all of us who at least share one thing—being sinners in need of mercy.

Next week I will conclude these thoughts by printing a reflection of Cardinal Dearden (a previous Archbishop of Detroit) from 1979, which, I think, beautifully and prophetically captures exactly what Pope Francis is aiming at.

August 8, 2021

The four pastoral principles from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("Joy of the Gospel") which I have highlighted over the last few weeks of bulletin articles remind me of a homily by the late Cardinal Dearden, Archbishop of Detroit, given at the Mass for deceased priests in 1979. Some time after, excerpts from that homily were taken by Father (later Bishop) Ken Untener, who had originally prepared much of the homily for the archbishop, and turned into a shorter reflection. Somehow it got onto the internet incorrectly labelled as "The Romero Prayer," because it sounded a lot like something that Archbishop Romero (now Saint Oscar Romero) would have said as Archbishop of San Salvador prior to his being martyred in 1980. It really should be called "The Dearden Vision" or "The Dearden-Untener Reflection." I will put the whole homily on our website under News/News Briefs so you can see how the homily was tied to the readings at that Mass: 1 Corinthians 3:4-11 and Matthew 13:31-33. Below are just the excerpts that were pulled out to form the briefer reflection.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the Master Builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

As Pope Francis emphasizes: *Time is greater than space* ("It helps now and then to step back and take the long view"; "Nothing we do is complete...no program accomplishes the church's mission"). *Realities are more important than ideas* ("We cannot do everything...this enables us to do something, and to do it very

well"). *Unity prevails over conflict* ("We water seeds already planted"). *The whole is greater than the parts* ("We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities"). As a Church universal, as a diocese, and as a parish, we could all benefit from integrating these four pastoral principles into everything we do. If we did so, it would be quite counter-cultural, for we live in a world that thinks that success and profits and recognition in the short-term are everything; that expends enormous energy on ideas while the reality of those suffering in the world continues and could be alleviated; that relishes and encourages falsehoods and half-truths which lead to greater division and disunity rather than understanding and reconciliation; and that thinks the individual or "my group" is more important than the common good of all. Thank you, Pope Francis, for your challenging vision to all of us.

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