

# POPE FRANCIS AND INCULTURATION

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**Abstract:** This article contains the idea of Pope Francis' contextualizations as expressed in some of his encyclicals. In his *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis supports inculturation as well as having the view that Hellenist culture is particularly appropriate in expressing Christian faith, and thus needs to be appreciated as a norm for the Church aside from the Holy Bible. In his *Laudato Si* (On Care for our Common Home), Pope Francis refers to a method used in liberation theology that is "See – judge – act". Pope Francis stresses the importance of the process of observation of situations, considering the causes, and designing the actions. By referring to chapter 8 of the Apostolic Mandate *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), the risks that must always be carried by each person who wishes to confront the Gospel with concrete-actual conditions are discussed. In the concluding part of this article several examples of the Pope's sensitivity towards cultures and unusual and complex social political situations are shown by referring to the *Magnum Principium* (The Great Principle) Decree and the visit of Pope Francis to Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si'*, *Amoris Laetitia*, *Magnum Principium*, theology inculturation

## INTRODUCTION

On March 13, 2013, the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church stunned the world by electing Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, to succeed Benedict XVI as pope. There were several reasons for the world to be stunned. Bergoglio was a member of the Society of Jesus, a Jesuit, and the first Jesuit ever to be

elected pope. Born in Latin America, he was the first non-European to be elected pope in some 1,300 years and the first from the “New World” of the Americas.

What became even more stunning, however, was how in the first days and weeks of his pontificate Bergoglio, who took the name of Francis, differed so profoundly from his predecessor. Benedict is first and foremost a theologian, one of the great theologians of our time; Francis is much more of a pastor, having studied for but not having completed the doctorate in theology. Benedict seemed awkward and ill at ease in public; Francis quickly showed himself to be highly charismatic, clearly enjoying his contact with the people he encountered in the crowds that thronged to see him in the days and years after his election. Benedict is the quintessential European; Francis, although the son of Italian immigrants to Argentina, is Latin American to the core. Benedict seemed to love the pomp and circumstance of the papacy, preferring the liturgical style and vestments of the period after the sixteenth century Council of Trent; Francis has shown himself a man of simplicity, preferring a simple white cassock, the weathered black shoes he had worn before his election, and the simpler vestments of Vatican II’s liturgical reform. Benedict was deeply concerned with a Europe that was abandoning religious faith in the wake of postmodern relativism, and so called for greater education in the faith and orthodoxy in doctrine; Francis, although he sees the same problem, calls for the church to become more open, compassionate, tender, and merciful. To use distinctions recently proposed by philosopher and theologian Clemens Sedmak, Benedict would tend toward a “propositional” and “political” orthodoxy, while Francis would tend toward a more “existential” and “pilgrim” perspective on religious truth.<sup>1</sup>

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1 See Clemens Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor: Francis and the Transformation of Orthodoxy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

Benedict and Francis differ markedly in at least one other respect. Benedict is quite wary of culture and context, preferring a theology and church teaching rooted in the great philosophical and theological tradition of the West. Prior to becoming pope, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he had opposed some of the tendencies of Latin American Liberation theology and Asian religious pluralism – both attempts at inculturation. For several decades as well he had voiced his misgivings about contemporary Western culture, with its tendencies to relativism and nihilism. His famous speech at the University of Regensburg in 2006 received much publicity for remarks that were interpreted by many as anti-Muslim. However, other comments he made in the same speech that were not so widely reported point to Benedict's cautious approach to inculturation. For him, there is a real harmony, if not identity, between Greek (or Western) thought and the Christian gospel, to such an extent that a thorough "dehellenization" of doctrine would ultimately betray it. The New Testament itself is already imbued with Hellenistic culture, to such an extent that it cannot be stripped down to a basic content that could take on the form of another culture.

Hellenistic culture, therefore, has become a privileged bearer of Revelation itself, and therefore cannot be completely left behind to discover the "pure gospel."<sup>2</sup> If there would be any kind of inculturation, it would be limited, it seems to me, to what I have called the "countercultural model" or possibly the "translation model."<sup>3</sup>

But while Benedict is wary of inculturation, Francis embraces it as the way to do theology and offer church teaching in today's world. A powerful passage in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* even seems to contradict Benedict's perspective in his Regensburg speech. "We would not do justice," Francis writes, "to the logic of

2 Benedict XVI, Speech at the University of Regensburg, Meeting with the Representatives of Science, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html).

3 See Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 117-37; 37-53.

the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous.” He then continues:

While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural. Hence in the evangelization of new cultures, or cultures which have not received the Christian message, it is not essential to impose a specific cultural form, no matter how beautiful or ancient it may be, together with the Gospel. The message that we proclaim always has a certain cultural dress, but we in the Church can sometimes fall into a needless hallowing of our own culture, and thus show more fanaticism than true evangelical zeal.<sup>4</sup>

What I propose to explore in this lecture is how Pope Francis does indeed embrace the process of inculturation. After six years of his pontificate, Francis’s teachings and writings are voluminous and a study of them all would require a much longer presentation than this lecture. I will reflect, therefore, only on three of Pope Francis’s major documents in some detail – *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si’*, and *Amoris Laetitia* – and then briefly comment on the *Motu Proprio* “Magnum Principium,” and his 2017 trip to Myanmar. Finally, I will reflect briefly on his 2019 Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, written after the Synod on Youth in 2018.

## **EVANGELII GAUDIUM: INCULTURATION AND EVANGELIZATION**

Francis’s great statement on mission, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), makes a strong connection between the *need* for the church to evangelize and the *way* it should evangelize, i. e. by taking the context – particularly the cultural context—seriously. After a powerful first chapter in which he calls for a “missionary transformation” of the church, Francis begins to “take up some basic questions related to

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4 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), 117. From here on, all references EG will be within parentheses in the text.

the work of evangelization” by a brief sketch of “the context in which we all have to live and work” (EG 50). He does this in two major sections, the first of which focuses on the contemporary world, and the second of which focuses on the church.

In the first section, Francis calls attention to the “globalization of indifference” that a “throwaway culture” is causing (EG 53-54). He rails against the financial system that spawns the “idolatry of money” and an “inequality that causes violence” (EG 57-60). He points to the widespread indifference to religion and relativism on the one hand, and a fundamentalism and fanaticism on the other (EG 61-66). He emphasizes the growing urbanization of the world and points out its advantages and dangers (EG 71-75).

In the more church-centered second section of his analysis, while Francis acknowledges the “enormous contribution of the church to today’s world” (EG 76) he names, first, a tendency of some church leaders to have a spirituality that has little or no missionary motivation (EG 78-82). One of his strongest condemnations is the situation in the church that he calls “spiritual worldliness.” He describes this as an “ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and concrete needs of the present time” (EG 95)—in other words, a lack of regard for trying to do evangelization as inculturation.

This is the context of the world in which the church evangelizes and the context of the church itself. But despite the many challenges, Francis insists, the church must continue preaching the gospel with its whole heart: “evangelization is the task of the church” (EG 111). How this is done is the aim of Chapter III of the document, entitled “The Proclamation of the Gospel.” It is here that Francis makes the point, I believe, that such proclamation can only be done as inculturation: with appreciation of culture, of people’s actual situations, and people’s actual struggles.

Much of this chapter talks about the sensitivity that evangelizers need to have towards culture, an emphasis which, after his analysis of the context, might be a bit surprising. One might expect a call to evangelization that is strongly countercultural in spirit. Instead, however, Francis insists that a proper evangelization can only take place as (in his words) inculturation” (EG 122), or the constant doing of theology that is appreciative of God’s presence in culture, even when it is distorted.

“The People of God,” Francis writes, “is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture” (EG 115). Cultural existence is human existence, and grace cannot exist without it: “Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it” (EG 115). Culture is not only enriched by Christianity and but Christianity enriches it in turn. The Holy Spirit is at work both enriching culture and, with the values of culture the Spirit offers “new aspects of revelation” and gives the church “a new face” (EG 116). Indeed, it is the Spirit who offers to the church its catholicity, the great diversity of ways of understanding the gospel. Just as the Triune God is a unity that is rich in diversity, so the church exists in a unity that is grounded in God’s many-faceted splendor. Having laid down these principles, Francis turns to acknowledging that all Christians have the duty to evangelize – they are all “missionary disciples” (see EG 24). Discipleship cannot be separated from being missionary.

A principal way by which evangelization takes root in a particular people is through “popular piety,” also referred to as “popular spirituality,” “the people’s mysticism,” or a “spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly” (EG 122, 124). In a bold move, Francis speaks of this popular piety as a “*locus theologicus*” or “theological source,” a source from which – like scripture and tradition – theology can be developed. In other words, ordinary Christian faith of ordinary people, expressed in simple but culturally-meaningful forms, are real ways of doing inculturation or contextual theology. Francis insists: “let us not stifle or presume to control this missionary power” (EG 126, 124).

Francis had already cautioned his readers against a kind of mechanical kind of orthodoxy that only is about correct formulas. Earlier in the document he noted that sometimes, people can listen to “completely orthodox language,” can actually misunderstand it and “take away something alien to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” We have to be careful, if we hold a formula, not to forget to “convey its substance.” If we do not do that, he says, “this is the greatest danger.” We need to creatively – wand the implication is with some risk – find ways to renew expressions that are orthodox but which have become unclear or irrelevant to ordinary people (EG 41). The need to be creative and risk-taking comes back in Chapter III, when Francis discourages the gospel message to be communicated “by fixed formulations learned by heart or by specific words which express an absolutely invariable content.” We need to opt rather for inculturation, because “if we allow doubts and fears to dampen our courage, instead of being creative we will remain comfortable and make no progress whatsoever” (EG 129). To this end, Francis calls on theologians “to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and science,” mindful always that the point of theology is never for itself – he calls that “desk-bound theology” – but always to promote the mission of the church” (EG 133). Once again we see the strong connection between doing inculturation and Christian mission. Neither can exist without the other.

In a second major part of this Chapter III on the way the gospel should be proclaimed, Francis turns to the homily – that privileged form of preaching that takes place in the context of the church’s liturgy.<sup>5</sup> “The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people” (EG 135). Francis is strong in insisting that the preacher needs to be one steeped in the word and in the Christian life, and he writes eloquently about that. He insists, however, that while a good homily comes from the contemplation of

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5 Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html), 52.



the word, it also comes from a contemplation of the people (EG 154). Quoting Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Francis says that the preacher needs to link the biblical texts to the human situation, developing a "spiritual sensitivity for reading God's message in events" (EG 155)<sup>6</sup> And, as he says wryly, "let us also keep in mind that we should never respond to questions that nobody asks" (EG 155).

### **LAUDATO SI': USING A METHOD OF INCULTURATION**

Clear from the first days of Francis' pontificate was that one of his major concerns is the integrity of creation. In the homily at the Mass that inaugurated his papacy, given on March 19, 2013, Pope Francis spoke about St. Joseph as the "protector" of Jesus, Mary, and the church, but then he spoke about the need for all Christians – indeed all humans – to be protectors: "protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about."<sup>7</sup> Time and again in the short homily Francis comes back to this theme of protection, especially the protection of creation. All in all he refers to the protection of creation six times, and to the respect and protection of the environment two times.

It was not long before it became known that Francis was preparing a major statement, an encyclical, on the topic of ecology. In the meantime, he referred to the ecological crisis toward the end of *Evangelii Gaudium*, numbering the entire creation among the "weak and defenseless beings at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation" (EG 215). He closes this short section

6 See Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html), 33.

7 Pope Francis, Inaugural Homily, March 19, 2013, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130319\\_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html).



with the words: “Small, yet strong in the love of God, like St. Francis of Assisi, all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples” (EG 216).

The highly anticipated encyclical was issued in June of 2015, to the acclaim of both Catholics, many other believers, and unbelievers as well. It was entitled *Laudato Si'*, words from St. Francis of Assisi's poem “Canticle of the Creatures,”<sup>8</sup> and was the first papal encyclical to be devoted entirely to ecology and the protection of creation. It is, to my mind, a masterpiece of inculturation. Francis understands the destruction of our “common home” as one of the most significant crises in the world today, and brings the biblical and Christian tradition into dialogue with it, in order to offer significant wisdom and suggestions for practice to all the peoples of the earth.<sup>9</sup>

The method employed by the encyclical is the method of “See-Judge-Act.” Chapter I, entitled “What Is Happening to Our Common Home,” is a brief but well-informed overview of the causes of the ecological crisis. Francis treats the questions of pollution and climate change, of water, the loss of biodiversity, and then the results of these realities in the decline of the quality of human life, the breakdown of society, and the rise of global inequality. Francis goes on to deplore the weak responses from the world's governments, and, although he acknowledges that there are a variety of opinions about what he considers the ecological crisis, he says that the church must call for “an honest debate among experts.” Nevertheless, he says, there is no doubt that the crisis is real: “we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair.” (LS 17-61; the quotes are from LS 61).

Having “seen” the facts, Francis moves into the “Judge” phase of his method. In Chapter II, he offers a biblical-theological reflection

8 See “Canticle of the Creatures,” <http://www.custodia.org/default.asp?id=1454>.

9 Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (LS), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). References will be in parentheses in the text.

on “the gospel of creation,” followed by a third chapter that traces the “Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” especially in terms of a “misguided anthropocentrism” (LS 119). As Francis explains it, An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship (LS 116).

Chapter IV then moves to develop a basic ecological theology, based on the Christian tradition and in critical dialogue with the mistakes that it has made. Francis’s project is to articulate an “integral ecology” that attempts to balance the human concerns for a good and happy life together with the need for environmental sustainability. Key to such an integral approach is the maintenance of the “common good,” one of the foundational principles of Catholic social teaching and “a central and unifying principle of social ethics” (LS 156).

The final two chapters of *Laudato Si’* embody the “Act” phase of Francis’s method. Chapter V lays down “Lines of Approach and Action,” and Chapter VI, the final chapter, outlines the elements of ecological spirituality and ways to proceed in ecological education.

Ultimately, education for the care of creation calls for what Pope John Paul II first called “ecological conversion.”<sup>10</sup> Such conversion is the foundation for a rich ecological spirituality based on Eucharistic sharing and the Trinitarian life of radical interrelationship. “Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (LS 240).

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<sup>10</sup> See LS 5 for a summary of John Paul II’s teaching on ecology. Francis speaks of it in LS 216-21.

## **AMORIS LAETITIA: INCULTURATION CALLS FOR RISKS**

On April 8, 2016, the Vatican released the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), Pope Francis' reflections after the two Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015 on the Family.<sup>11</sup> The document is a long one – 256 pages of text in the official Vatican edition—and for the most part it is (at least in my opinion) although warmly written, quite unremarkable in content. Except for the final chapter, Chapter 8. It is in this chapter that Francis tries to find new ways to deal with the delicate issue in the Catholic Church of full sacramental participation (especially receiving the Eucharist) by women and men who are living together without being married or who have been divorced and remarried without their marriage being officially annulled. In this chapter in particular, Francis was doing contextual theology – trying to find ways of dealing compassionately with people in difficult situations that took into account their own experience on the one hand and maintaining fidelity to tradition and gospel on the other.

Chapter 8 created a sensation. On the one hand, it appeared as a word of hope to so many women and men in the church that find themselves, often through very little fault of their own, in situations where they cannot participate fully in the church's life.<sup>12</sup> On the other it came under strong criticism by more conservative Catholics, including several prominent churchmen. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis had recognized the need, sometimes, to take risks with traditional formulations for the proper communication of the gospel. In Chapter 8 this is exactly what he did.

The theological foundation for the entire chapter is one of the major themes of Francis' papacy: God's Mercy. From the first days

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11 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf). References will be in parentheses in the text.

12 See Tom Roberts, "Reactions to 'Amoris Laetitia'—A Leap or a Baby Step?" <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/reactions-amoris-laetitia-leap-or-baby-step>. See National Catholic Reporter's extensive series on the document at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/reactions-amoris-laetitia-leap-or-baby-step>.

and weeks after his election, Francis over and over again spoke of the mercy of God.<sup>13</sup> In 2015 he declared that the year 2016 would be an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. In the document that made the proclamation, Francis noted that “When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he writes, quoting St. Augustine, “It is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy.’ And so it is. God’s anger lasts but a moment, his mercy forever.”<sup>15</sup> In *Evangelii Gaudium* we read, as Francis refers to the frequency of his references to God’s mercy: “Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy” (EG 3). It is with mercy that Francis begins Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia*. Quoting the final document of the 2014 Synod he acknowledges that “the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm” (AL 291). He then refers to a favorite image of the church that he first used as pope in an interview with the Jesuit journalist Antonio Spadaro in 2013 – the church as field hospital. “It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.”<sup>16</sup>

Referring to the 2014 Synod document, Francis speaks of the need of a “pastoral dialogue” or “pastoral discernment,” in order to determine how God’s mercy can be understood in the context of situations of people that do not measure up to the expectations of the church in terms of their marriage (AL 293). Engaging in that dialogue

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13 See Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014).

14 Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html), 3.

15 MV 21.

16 *A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis*, Interview by Antonio Spadaro (New York: America/HarperOne, 2013), 30.

or discernment, constantly referring to the documents of the 2014 and 2015 Synod, Francis recognizes that for many people the choice of a civil marriage or living together without marriage is the result not of “prejudice or resistance to a sacramental union, but by cultural or contingent situations” (294)/ Rather than condemning these people outright, the church needs to respect them. Indeed, with such respect and no condemnation, they may often, when the time is right, seek the regularization of their union in the church.

Francis continues his pastoral dialogue and exercise of pastoral discernment when he turns to the question of divorced and remarried Catholics. Quoting a homily that he gave to new cardinals in 2015, he states that “there are two ways of thinking which recur through the Church’s history: casting off and reinstating. The Church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement ... The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart” (AL 296). It is important, therefore, to avoid making judgments that do not take into consideration complex situations, and “to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition” (AL 296).

Because of this, Francis says he agrees with many in the 2014 and 2015 Synods who believe that divorced and remarried people need to be “more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal” (AL 299). People in this situation should not see themselves as excommunicated but “instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always...” (AL 299). Francis insists that such a perspective does not compromise the demands of the gospel because, he says, there is a strong tradition in the church of factors that mitigate personal culpability in situations often beyond people’s control. Thus, “it can no longer simply be said that all those in any ‘irregular’ situation are living in a state of mortal sin and deprived of sanctifying grace” (AL 301).

And so, in the light of God's mercy and the often-difficult circumstances in which people find themselves, the door is open for people living together or in civil unions, and divorced and remarried Catholics, to participate more fully in the church's life. What this fuller participation might be is not mentioned concretely, but it could mean at least being welcomed into the community with an understanding of a person's sincerity in the faith. It could mean that the person could be an active participant in parish activities like being a lector at Mass, or a volunteer in a number of parish ministries. It could also mean that the person would be able to receive communion at Eucharist. Francis recognizes the imperfection of the situation, but insists that God's love and mercy trumps a strict, legalistic approach.

Francis recognizes that there are those in the church "who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion." Nevertheless, he says, what he thinks is that "Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching 'always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street'" (AL 308, quoting EG 45). Sometimes, Francis writes, "we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity," and we put a lot of conditions on God's mercy. But, he exclaims, "that is the worst way of watering down the Gospel" (AL 311).

### **MAGNUM PRINCIPIUM AND THE TRIP TO MYANMAR: BEING SENSITIVE TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT**

In September of 2017, Francis showed a sensitivity to local cultures in a decree entitled "Magnum Principium," a decree that had to do with the process for approving adaptations and translations of liturgical texts in local cultures and languages.<sup>17</sup> The document itself is written in quite technical language, and is focused on a change

17 Pope Francis, *Motu Proprio "Magnum Principium,"* <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/09/170909a.html>.

of wording in the Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law, numbers 838.1, .2, and .3. Its point, however, is simple and very important. Whereas the previous wording of the canons specify that the Vatican (its Congregation for Divine Worship) *approves* any adaptations and translations of the Roman Liturgy from the normative Latin text, the new wording states that it *recognizes and confirms* adaptations and translations that have been approved by local Bishops' Conferences. In other words, it is the local church in a particular context that has the basic say in terms of the particular variations in and translations of the Liturgy.

Soon after the publication of the decree, the head of the Vatican's Congregation of Divine Worship, Cardinal Robert Sarah, published an opinion that the pope had not taken away all the authority of his congregation for approval of adaptations and texts. However, in a rather unprecedented move, Francis issued a public letter to Sarah insisting that he had indeed changed some of the norms for translation and "asserted that *Magnum Principium* does in fact call for a much-reduced Vatican oversight of the translation process."<sup>18</sup> Francis' letter insisted on a "triple fidelity" in liturgical translations—a fidelity to the original Latin text, a fidelity to the language into which the text is being translated, and a fidelity to the comprehension of the text by the faithful in the local context.<sup>19</sup> Francis has clearly opted for local autonomy in decision-making, and for the importance of the local context.

Another striking, if controversial example of Francis's commitment to inculturation took place in November, 2017, when Francis visited the countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh. The political situation in Myanmar was delicate. The military of the country had been involved in a systematic persecution of a Muslim minority in the country called Rohingyas, after

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18 Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Francis's correction of Sarah shows that Vatican II is his 'sure compass,'" National Catholic Reporter, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-correction-sarah-shows-vatican-ii-his-sure-compass>.

19 Elise Harris, "Pope offers clarifications on new process for liturgical translations," <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-offers-clarifications-on-new-process-for-liturgical-translations-14873>.



Muslim extremists committed terrorist attacks in Myanmar. Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, the Archbishop of Yangon, had requested Francis not to mention the name “Rohingya” in his public speeches in the country. It would only cause embarrassment to the government and certainly not help the influence of the church in Myanmar.<sup>20</sup> And so Francis did not use the term, and spoke more generally about human rights and justice during his visit. Nevertheless, as soon as he landed in Bangladesh, he did use the term “Rohingya,” using the striking phrase “the presence of God today is also called Rohingya.”<sup>21</sup>

It seems to me that Francis showed a double sensitivity to local context here. Even though it most likely was difficult for him to be silent – or at least indirect – and even though he was highly criticized for it,<sup>22</sup> he took the advice of the person who knew the local context better than he: the Cardinal Archbishop of Yangon. But then, when he was able to, he not only used the name “Rohingya.” He eloquently expressed how God was present in this terribly suffering group of human beings. The phrase about the presence of God as Rohingya was a little exercise in inculturation – one more small sign that Pope Francis is indeed committed to the process of inculturation.

## **INCULTURATION AND *CHRISTUS VIVIT***

On March 25, 2019, Francis published the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (Christ is Alive).<sup>23</sup> addressing especially the world’s youth after the 2018 Synod on Youth, Faith, and Vocation. The document, first of all, is written in a friendly, almost chatty style, that tries to appeal to today’s youth. “Don’t go through life anaesthetized,” he writes, “or approach the world like tourists. Make

20 “Myanmar Cardinal urges Pope Francis to avoid the use of the term ‘Rohingya,’” <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-rohingya-cardinal/myanmar-cardinal-urges-pope-francis-to-avoid-use-of-the-term-rohingya-idUKKBN1D80Z8>.

21 “Pope Francis: ‘The presence of God today is also called Rohingya,’” <http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/01/asia/pope-bangladesh-myanmar-intl/index.html>.

22 See Marcello Rossi, “Rohingya challenge Pope Francis over silence in Myanmar,” <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/rohingya-challenge-pope-francis-silence-myanmar-171130164008316.html>.

23 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (CV)(Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019).

a ruckus! Cast out the fears that paralyze you, so that you don't become young mummies. ... Open the door of the cage, go out and fly! Please, don't take early retirement" CV 143). Secondly, Francis gives examples of a number of young women and men who have been made saints or who are in the process of canonization: Venerable Carlo Acutis (CV 104-6), St. Alberto Hurtado (CV 175) , Maria Gabriella Perrin (CV 198), Blessed Ceferino Namuncurá (CV 58), Blessed Isadore Bakanja (59), and Blessed Chiara Badano CV 62), to name a few. Third, Francis offers a number of striking images and metaphors from computer culture that would appeal to youth. God's memory, he writes, is not a "hard disk" that "archives" and "saves" all our data. It is rather "a heart filled with tender compassion, one that finds joy in 'deleting' from us every trace of evil" CV 115). Stay connected to the Lord, he exhorts: stay "on line," just as you want to stay on the internet (CV 158). "Life," he explains, "is not salvation up 'in the cloud' and waiting to be downloaded , a new 'app' to be discovered ..." (CV 252). Francis also offers a lovely image shared by a youth delegate from Samoa at the 2018 Synod: The church is a canoe – "the elderly help to keep on course by judging the position of the stars, while the young keep rowing, imagining what waits for them ahead" (CV 201).

## **CONCLUSION**

In the last fifty years at least, theologians have been developing a new way of thinking about doing theology. This was a way that recognized that any time Christian faith seeks understanding it needs to do it by taking into account how God's presence, God's judgment, God's challenge, and even God's absence makes itself known in ordinary human experience – in human, social, historical, cultural contexts. It is because of this new way of thinking that, as I have expressed it often, that there really *is* no such thing as theology; there

is only *contextual* theology.<sup>24</sup> In other words, we can only do theology by being committed to inculturation.

What I have tried to show in this lecture is that Pope Francis understands this insight profoundly. As a Latin American, he is steeped in the method of the theology of liberation. As a Catholic, he is steeped in the Catholic sacramental imagination. As a person of great humanity he is profoundly affected by the plight of the world's poor, victims of a "globalization of indifference." As a deeply religious person he is overwhelmed by God's tenderness and mercy. Because of who he is, I believe, when Francis does theology—in his many speeches, in the documents he writes, in the homilies he gives, in the pastoral decisions he makes—he can only do so as one committed to inculturation.

My hope and my prayer is that as this seminary at Ledalero begins its next fifty years of philosophical and theological education, it can follow Pope Francis's prophetic and apostolic lead.

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24 See for example Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.

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