



Pope Francis: A Prophet for our Times

Reflection by Caesar D'Mello, Board Member of Pax Christi International, Member Pax Christi Australia

Pax Christi International, its national movements and groups, and supporters worldwide are immensely saddened by the death of Pope Francis. We, however, note that his passing occurred on Easter Monday, when the Church is reliving the mystery of the Resurrection.

It is with deep gratitude to God that we acknowledge Francis' remarkable life and prophetic ministry. His was a consequential papacy that tirelessly called both the Church and the world to renew and reform. We have lost a pastor, pilgrim and prophet for the men and women of our times, a true *servus servorum Dei* (servant of the servants of God).

Following two celebrated popes admired for their own contribution, St John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, the pontificate of Francis has turned out to be a historic one. Elected at an age when most would desire a relaxed retirement, Francis displayed unprecedented energy and remained alert and responsive to the turbulent zeitgeist and intergenerational crises engulfing the world. The times shaped him, and he, in turn, shaped them.

Taking his papal name from St. Francis of Assisi foreshadowed the servant leadership that was to typify Francis' papacy. The charism of the thirteenth century mystic, eventually named Patron Saint of Ecology, was marked by humility, compassion for the poor, reaching out to the margins, reverence for nature and all living things within, and abiding gratitude to God for his gift of creation that sustains us all. In a paradigm shift Francis brought the poor, the refugees, the homeless, the victims of war – 'the wretched of the earth, smelling of the sheep' – and the environment into the life of the Church.

Francis was visionary yet grounded. Lived experience and a father's concern for the Church and the world, both in need of transformation, guided his teaching, reflections, theological outlook, his mind and heart. Before his election, he was a grassroots pastor rubbing shoulders with the humblest of people as Archbishop of the large archdiocese of Buenos Aires. He responded to its challenges, including during a military takeover, and called out the marked inequality of wealth with many in poverty, motivated by his viscerally felt commitment to the Option for the Poor. He doubled the number of priests serving impoverished areas. Preferring a humble abode to a luxurious Archbishop's residence, he lived in a small apartment with an ailing bishop, preparing simple meals for both. Moving among his flock by public bus and associating with the poor at every turn, he became known as "the slum bishop", a much-loved shepherd of the *Populus Dei*.

The papacy of Francis touched a whole variety of dimensions that impacted the Church and humanity at large. He was a voice that was heard in different settings around the world. Having been a pastoral visitor to many in the Church in various regions of the globe, he spoke on a range of concerns, including poverty, development, refugees and migrants, indigenous peoples, interfaith relations and fraternity, inter alia. Synodality, evangelisation, mission, worship, reform of the curia, clericalism, the place of women in the Church, compassion, peace and geopolitics also concerned him. There were two areas that related to the work of Pax Christi International that are elaborated next.

Laudato Si'

Early in his pontificate an astute and alarmed Francis made a major statement on the state of our planet. For a highest form of teaching available to a Pope, the encyclical, he issued it with the first words borrowed from St. Francis' 'Canticle of the Creatures', *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to you), on 15th May 2015. Considered as one of the most important social encyclicals in the modern era, alongside Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1893) and Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1960), it introduced a major focus to Catholic Social Teaching with theological significance attached to Mother Earth. While deeply distressed at the desecration of the environment, Francis situates 'integral ecology' at the core of creating a just world to enable the flourishing and the restitution of God's creation. With a conviction that insatiable consumerism and materialism rendered creation beneficial to a minority while consigning many to impoverished, subhuman lives, his vision centred on the interconnectedness of economic, social, political cultural and environmental challenges that could not be addressed separately from each other. As he was to explain to the Episcopal Conference of the Dominican Republic later, he asserted "peace, justice and care for creation are three inherently connected questions which cannot be separated in such a way as to be treated individually, lest we fall back to reductionism". He named the unacceptable extent of the earth's degradation "our sin". Addressing the Church, *Laudato Si'* urged "a broad cultural revolution" to avert "a climate emergency" of a warming, deteriorating earth caused by the rampant use of fossil fuels, as established science had demonstrated, and stressed the urgent need for a radical energy transition "to save our common home" today and for generations to come.

The reach of Laudato Si'

Francis' message was received and appreciated far and wide beyond the perimeter of the Church. Hailed as a much overdue clarion call for our times, it galvanised parts of the Church, as study, theology, action and prayer groups proliferated aiming to persuade the faithful to reconsider the pervasive use of fossil fuels in their daily lives. Much as *Pacem in Terris* had energised the wider global community, anxious over the imminent threat to global peace in the 60's, *Laudato Si'* triggered a worldwide momentum alerting people and nations to the growing threat from carbon emissions imperiling the planet. One can only speculate on the extent of its impact as the world's nations gathered six months after *Laudato Si'* in December 2015 in Paris for the United Nations Climate Change Conference to sign a climate accord for Net Zero emissions by 2050. In 2019, Francis was to regard 'ecocide' as a sin and called for it to be made "a fifth category of crimes against peace...recognised as such by the international community".

Active Nonviolence

The precariousness of the peace situation in the world seriously worried Francis. With conflict raging in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, and other places, and tensions simmering among the world's powers, he spoke and warned of the consequences of threatened and actual geopolitical violence at every opportunity. He inspired Pax Christi's work. Its 'Catholic Nonviolence Initiative', promoting nonviolence as a way of life moved by spirituality, as a method and framework for change in intractable situations and crises, and adopted for its potential for human wellbeing or Shalom, was seeded at a Vatican Conference on Just Peace in 2017. Pope Francis' April 2023 Prayer Intention, on the 60th anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*, urged everyone to pray and work towards a nonviolent culture that nurtures peace. He wrote everyone is called "to develop a culture of peace... Living, speaking, and acting without violence is not surrendering, losing or giving up anything, but aspiring to everything." Francis taught that active nonviolence was not just a discrete academic discussion item but needed to be embraced deeply to radically change our outlook, as conflict and war were not the pathway to peace. As the attractiveness of nuclear weapons, especially the so-called 'modular' weapons, grew among military planners from

opposing sides, he declared that not only the use of weapons, but their possession with an intention to deploy them was also immoral. He wrote, “The choice of nonviolence as a style of life is increasingly demanded in the exercise of responsibility at every level, from family education to social and civil commitment, to political activity and international relations...In every situation, this means rejecting violence as a method for resolving conflicts and dealing with them instead through dialogue and negotiation”. He was particularly concerned over the impact of war on the lives, habitats and welfare of the victims - the poor, the families with dead and wounded members, the orphaned, those without resources to cope, the accidental casualties.

Vale Pope Francis

We have been blessed to have a Pope with a breadth of vision and a moral blueprint to help us steer a challenging course through an agitated sea of deep problems. He was a listening, consultative, reflective, transformative and a Gospel-defined leader, who appreciated other perspectives without arrogance. He lived the synodality that he urged for the Church, and engaged in dialogue, discernment and participative decision-making, rejecting entrenched institutional priorities and mode of governing. Emerging “from the periphery of the earth”, his theology was contextual and practical, responding to the signs of the times. The church and the world have lost a visionary, inspirational prophet of our times. May he rest in peace.