

The Pilgrim Pope at the Time of the Contagion

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Abstract

The author tries to understand if the act performed in Rome, Sunday, March 15, 2020, by Pope Francis, who went on pilgrimage to the basilica of St. Mary Major to venerate Our Lady *Salus populi romani* and the church of St. Marcellus al Corso to pay homage to the Crucifix, is to be ascribed to the category of devotional or penitential pilgrimage. In communicative terms, what Pope Francis did in Rome is not an irrational, unconscious, impromptu action. Pope Bergoglio does not seem to put his person in the foreground. His constant conviction is to address everyone, without distinction of faith. His choice to go alone to St. Mary Major and St. Marcellus and his act of veneration of the *Salus populi romani* and the St. Marcellus Crucifix in St. Peter's Square on March 27, 2020, respond to the same project of wide-ranging evangelization, which does not distinguish between believers and non-believers.

Keywords: Pope, Pilgrimage, Contagion.

Introduction

In the popular imagination of the past, the figure of the Pope was something that appeared distant and confined in a separate reality. Even the Sunday apparitions from the window of his study, on the top floor of the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, maintained a certain character of remoteness, so much so that to see him better one had to look at the maxi-screens installed in St. Peter's Square or it was necessary to use binoculars. Pope Francis, on the other hand, greatly reduced the distance and did so immediately, not only with his simple and familiar "good evening" greeting, addressed on March 13, 2013, immediately after his election as Pontiff, but also with a personal farewell, as a good parish priest, to over a hundred faithful (leaving the church), who had attended the mass celebrated by him in the Vatican parish of St. Anne on March 17, 2013, even before the inaugural celebration of his papal ministry (which took place on March 19, 2013).

1. The *Salus populi romani*

Francis had made another unpredictable exit, already the morning after his election. He had gone to the Roman basilica of St. Mary Major to pray and bring a bouquet to the painting of Our Lady which is in the Pauline (also Borghese) Chapel and is called *Salus populi romani* (salvation of the Roman people). As Pope, he thus inaugurated a custom that would later lead him to make the same gesture more than eighty times, especially before and after his numerous apostolic visits. That first time the flowers were taken from a table in the Pope's lodgings at the Casa Santa Marta. Later they were prepared by the Spanish Cardinal Santos Abril y Castelló (formerly apostolic nuncio to Argentina from 2000 to 2003 and archpriest of the basilica of St. Mary Major until 2016), by Polish Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko

(who succeeded Abril Castelló) and by the Franciscan friars of the Immaculate Conception, who work at St. Mary Major and choose flowers in the colours of the nations to which the Pontiff goes. During the Pope's visits, the basilica remains open to the faithful, who can thus see the testimony and prayer of Francis (first on his knees and then sitting for the recitation of the rosary). Often, after the visits, the Pope places on the altar of Our Lady tickets, letters and objects received in the visited countries. In the same basilica, there is also the altar on which Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits and therefore of the order to which Jorge Mario Bergoglio himself belongs, celebrated his first mass on Christmas Eve 1538.

The Virgin Mary with the title of *Salus populi romani* is known because she saved Rome from the plague, so, as it is said, in 593 Pope Gregory the Great decided to place her painting in the church of St. Mary Major. The image has also been erroneously attributed to Saint Luke, while, in reality, it is a Byzantine work, probably dating back to the 13th or even the beginning of the 14th century. Careful studies have not been able to determine its date, also because of various pictorial restoration interventions. Therefore, the period fluctuates between the fifth and thirteenth centuries. What remains proven is the style, which even if it is not purely Byzantine at least is inspired by it. Consequently, it could not have been carried in procession more than six hundred years earlier. Most probably, in the 7th century, there were processional rites routed to St. Mary Major to ask for salvation from the plague, but certainly not bearing the picture of the present-day *Salus populi romani*, which, by the way, was probably called *Regina Coeli* in the 13th century, according to a document of 1240.

On the other hand, the event of 1837, when Pope Gregory XVI invoked her to ask for the end of a cholera epidemic, is more relevant. The Virgin Mary *Salus populi romani* was also proclaimed by John Paul II protector of the World Youth Days. It should also be noted that the icon is privileged by the religious institute of the Jesuits for the spread of Marian worship.

2. The document of Aparecida

On July 24, 2013, Pope Francis went to the Shrine of Aparecida, on the occasion of World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, and said: "How much joy it gives me to come to the home of the Mother of every Brazilian, the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida! The day after my election as Bishop of Rome I visited the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome, to entrust to Our Lady my ministry as Successor of Peter. Today I wanted to come here to ask Mary our Mother for the success of World Youth Day and to put the life of the Latin American people at her feet. I would like to tell you one thing first. In this shrine, where six years ago the Fifth General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean was held, a beautiful event occurred which I was able to see for myself: to see how the Bishops - who worked on the theme of the encounter with Christ, discipleship and mission - felt encouraged, accompanied and, in a certain sense, inspired by the thousands of pilgrims who came every day to entrust their lives to Our Lady: that Conference was a great moment of Church. And it can be said that the Aparecida Document was born precisely from this interweaving between the work of the Pastors and the simple faith of the pilgrims, under Mary's maternal protection. The Church, when she seeks Christ, always knocks on the Mother's house and asks: 'Show Jesus to us'. It is from Her that one learns true discipleship. And this is why the Church always goes on the mission in Mary's wake".

It is certainly no coincidence that the Aparecida Document itself addresses in some points (from No. 258 to No. 265) precisely the theme of popular piety: “Christ himself becomes a pilgrim, and walks resurrected among the poor. The decision to leave for the sanctuary is already a profession of faith, the walk is a true song of hope, and the arrival is an encounter of love. The pilgrim’s gaze rests on an image that symbolizes the tenderness and closeness of God” (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 2007, No. 259).

3. The *Evangelii Gaudium*

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (nos. 20-24), on November 24, 2013, the Argentine Pontiff explicitly spoke of an “outgoing Church”, an idea already in the final document of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (held in Aparecida, Brazil, May 13-31, 2007). It was drafted by a commission presided over by Bergoglio himself, who had a considerable influence in the last drafting of the text, which took place at night - on May 30, by four people, including Bergoglio (Fernández, 2007). The Aparecida document took up, among other things, the contents of the homily given on May 16 by the then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who had hoped for a Church not self-sufficient and self-referential but open to the human periphery. The final text referred, not by chance, to a “new missionary stage” (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 2007, Nos. 547-554).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 20 recalled the biblical “exits” of Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah to highlight “the ever new scenarios and challenges of the Church’s evangelizing mission”, so that “we are all invited to accept this call: to come out of one’s comfort”; No. 21 spoke of “the dynamics of exodus and gift, of coming out of oneself, of walking and sowing again and again, always beyond” and No. 23 of “an itinerant intimacy” and of communion that “is essentially configured as missionary communion”. But above all No. 24 made explicit the fact that “the ‘outgoing’ Church is the community of missionary disciples who take the initiative, who get involved, who accompany, who bear fruit and celebrate. *Primerear* - take the initiative: please excuse me for this neologism”.

Precisely the linguistic gamble of the Pope, who uses the Spanish verb *primerear*, deserves special attention, because it transforms the concept of being first, of arriving before others, into a positive idea, that is, in becoming enterprising, to anticipate the moves of the adversary, of evil.

In the text of the *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis, at Nos. 69 and 70, it speaks specifically of popular piety and then at Nos. 122, 123, 124, 125 and 126 its evangelizing power is praised. But already as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, on 19 January 2008, he had clearly expressed his thoughts on the subject, stating, among other things, that “the mission of the Church presents itself as the tireless effort to unite in a single message the transcendent with the immanent, the eternal with the daily, and in this popular religiosity as a certain and sensitive expression of the faith, born in the shadow of many sorrows, has much to tell us” (Bergoglio, 2008).

4. The Pope’s pilgrimage

It seems dictated by the logic of *primerear* the sortie made in Rome by Pope Francis, on the afternoon of Sunday, March 15, 2020, with his pilgrimage, partly

on foot, to go both to St. Mary Major to venerate Our Lady *Salus populi romani*, and the church of St. Marcellus al Corso to pay homage to the wooden Crucifix of the fifteenth century kept there. The latter is known to have been carried in procession through the quarters of Rome, from 4th to 20th August 1522, until reaching St. Peter's basilica, and to have averted the plague, which had already claimed victims. From the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, on the occasion of the Holy Years, the Crucifix of St. Marcellus was systematically transferred to the Vatican basilica for veneration by pilgrims who had come to Rome.

Both the image of the *Salus populi romani* and the Crucifix were taken, without any procession of the faithful, to the main entrance of St. Peter's basilica on 27th March 2020, the fourth Friday of Lent, on the occasion of the singular celebration wanted by Pope Francis, to invoke divine intervention to ward off the contagion of Covid19, which was raging in many parts of the world and particularly in Italy.

To fully understand the gesture of Pope Francis, who went on pilgrimage first to Saint Mary Major and then to Saint Marcellus al Corso, it is necessary to enter into the perspective of his conception of pilgrimage: "going pilgrims to sanctuaries is one of the most eloquent expressions of the faith of the people of God, and manifests the piety of generations of people, who with simplicity believed and entrusted themselves to the intercession of the Virgin Mary. This popular religiosity is a genuine form of evangelization, which needs to be always promoted and valued, without minimizing its importance... In sanctuaries, our people live out their deep spirituality, that piety which from the beginning of their life has been a source of spirituality. Let's think about how intense in some of these places the prayer to Christ Crucified, or the prayer of the Rosary, or the Way of the Cross... the pilgrim brings with him his history, his faith, lights and shadows of his life. Everyone carries in their heart a special desire and a special prayer... Eyes fixed on the Crucifix or the image of Our Lady, a prayer made with tears in their eyes, filled with confidence" (Address of Pope Francis to the pilgrimage workers and rectors of shrines participating in the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, 21 January 2016).

In the text of the speech from Bergoglio, the reasons that led him to become a pilgrim, in a private, almost solitary form, in a city with very little traffic, on the day of the Lord, are clearly understood: faith, piety and religiosity, or the same reasons as in any other pilgrim. But then he also speaks of profound spirituality, simple yet eloquent devotions, as was his act. All this for a prayer to Christ depicted in a crucifix or to turn one's eyes fixed on an image of Our Lady. These are gestures (Muolo, 2017) that he could have done well in the Vatican or St. Peter's basilica or in St. Martha's Chapel. And instead, he preferred to send a strong signal: like any other person, the Pope also faces the path, despite his limp and the weight of 83 years of age and the burden of the Pontiff, who must continually face problems that are not simple. In the background, however, there is the *Leitmotiv* of mercy, not by chance evoked in his coat of arms and strongly re-proposed in the call of the extraordinary jubilee year of mercy, which has seen millions of pilgrims come to Rome to cross the Holy Door.

Not only that. There is another profound sense to highlight: "the pilgrimage is a symbol of life, it makes us think that life is walking, it is a path. If a person does not walk and stays still, it is no use, it does nothing... A soul who does not walk through life doing good, doing many things that must be done for society, for the help of others and also who does not walk through life looking for God..., is a soul that ends up in mediocrity and spiritual misery. Please: do not stop in life!" (Audio-message of Pope Francis to the participants of the 37th pilgrimage on foot Macerata-Loreto, 8 June 2015). The pilgrimage is for Pope Francis a metaphor for life and

becomes even more so when people run the greatest risk, that of losing it, suddenly and for an uncontrollable cause, as in the case of viral contagion.

5. Between devotion and penitence

It is to be understood whether the action performed by Pope Francis is to be ascribed to the category of devotional or penitential pilgrimage. On closer inspection, both characteristics can be found in the fact that was performed by the Pontiff. The devotional aspect is perfectly in line with the previous experience of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who was used to frequent suburban environments, to know the ways and contents of popular religiosity and to become its interpreter and protagonist (just think of his predilection for the Madonna who unties the knots, an image he knew during his brief stay in Germany). The penitential dimension, instead, belongs to a whole tradition that is based on a character at the same time petitionary (ask to obtain), expiatory (suffer to serve guilt), substitute (suffer instead of others) and compensatory (suffer to have). Other connotations can also be added to the Pontiff's pilgrimage: the meditative aspect, which corresponds to a mental process of reflection on the events in progress, and the conversational perspective, which has to do with the dialogue between a human subject and the divine being. Well, all these factors can be found both in the Roman pilgrimage of the Bishop of Rome, who went to two churches in his diocese, and in the devotional acts addressed to the two images of the Crucifix and Our Lady and repeated a few days later in St. Peter's Square, with postures and behaviours quite similar to those already done by other Pontiffs, for example by John Paul II, during Lent of the Holy Year 2000, on the Day of Forgiveness, Sunday 12 March, when he kissed the feet of the Crucifix coming from St. Marcellus.

Another consideration can be made about Pope Francis' pilgrimage: in the past, going on foot by pilgrims was in practice the obligatory way, in the absence of modern means of transport. Even today, however, there are still pilgrimages on foot, the most famous of which is the pilgrimage to St. James of Compostela in Spain, in great demand lately, especially by young people and also by sceptics and agnostics. But we can also mention those to the shrines of the Madonnas of Czestochowa and Piekary in Poland, to Our Lady of the Arch in Campania, as well as to Aparecida in Brazil and Nuestra Señora de Luján in Argentina. It was in Luján, not far from Buenos Aires, that Archbishop Bergoglio went several times on foot, like a simple believer, praying the rosary and then confessing.

In communicative terms, what Pope Francis did in Rome on the third Sunday of Lent in 2020 is not an irrational, unconscious, impromptu action. If we read the episode well, we find in it a whole weave of conceptual categories (outgoing Church, mission, communion, itinerant interiority) that is intertwined with the warp of specific objectives (witness, openness, trust, mercy), showing great reciprocal interchangeability of the elements of both weft and warp, but always within a single programmatic plan of evangelization.

Pope Bergoglio, in doing so, does not seem to put his person in the foreground. He follows, once again, a line of conduct that places him in a condition of desired subordination to the divinity. This happened on the very evening of his election when he decided to make an emblematic gesture: first of all, he asked the Lord to bless everyone. Something similar also happened on 27 March 2020: on foot he reached Saint Peter's Square, almost continuing the pilgrimage of 15 March, and then he did not give the blessing *Urbi et orbi* with his hands but preferred to let the

Lord do it once again, in the Eucharistic form enclosed in the monstrance, raised to every part of the world.

These are signs, these, which do not remain circumscribed within the sphere of Catholic membership but extend to other contexts of believers and non-believers. Pope Francis' constant conviction is to address everyone, without distinction of faith (or not). In short, these were moments in which the message conveyed was clear: an attitude of strong and intense reflection on a dramatic moment of the whole of humanity.

Nor can it be said that Francis usually limits himself to an exclusively spiritual approach. His vision of reality takes into account concrete situations, so it is not surprising to see his *primerear*, his playing in advance, as one can see in his saying that "people are beginning to see people who are hungry" (in his homily on March 28, 2020, in St. Martha) and that there are serious risks due to the crowding of prisons (which he spoke about during the *Angelus* on Sunday, March 29, 2020), thus signalling to the rulers and people of the Church the need to intervene, to reduce the consequences of the contagion and the closure of almost all activities. This too is fully in line with his line of thought, centred on attention to the last, the most disadvantaged.

Conclusion

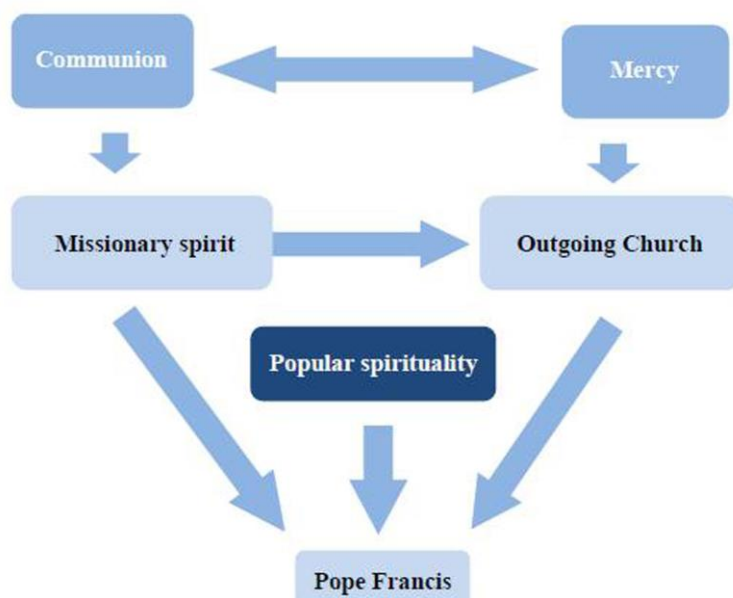
The Roman pilgrimage of Pope Bergoglio is the fruit of various components and is the last historical precipitate of a whole series of elaborations that took place during several decades, thanks also to a continuous pastoral and social experience in the field. It is faced with a conception of reality that has been built little by little until reaching its current status.

Analyzing the pronouncements and behaviour of the Argentinean Pope, two concepts can be seen as the source and matrix of the other principles that distinguish the world view that lies behind the choices made and the performative interventions implemented. They are true and proper performances that can concern the choice of the liturgy, the wearing of a vestment, the option of a free speech without following a prepared written text, the accomplishment of an action that one would say is not appropriate for a Pontiff but that makes him acquire credibility otherwise difficult to achieve. Well, the two key terms are communion and mercy. The second is more obvious since it belongs to the usual language used by Francis, who besides all that has inserted it in the very motto of his coat of arms (first episcopal and then pontifical): *miserando atque eligendo*, an expression of the venerable Bede about the choice of Matthew made by Jesus. That *miserando* even before exercising mercy would mean turning a loving gaze, considering other people as brothers. The other term, communion, is less frequently used in Bergoglian discursiveness but is no less relevant since it is closely linked to the idea of "missionary communion" (at No. 23 of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*). From this comes essentially the expression "outgoing Church" that so characterizes the magisterium of the Pope. In the background, however, there is a valuable theology such as that of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who spoke of the "drama of the communion of saints" (von Balthasar, 1980, It. trans. 1986, pp. 377ff.; 1976a, It. trans. 2012a, 370ff.; 1976b, It. trans. 2012b, 215ff.) and referred to the priestly role, in particular, writing that "the inclusion of believers in the body and therefore in the action of Christ has the necessary consequence that they... receive part of his for-us... At this point, they also carried the statements of Scripture on the priesthood of the

faithful (1 Pet 2, 5.9; Rev 1, 6; 5, 10; 20,6), since the priest is precisely defined by his being for men (Heb 5, 1)” (von Balthasar, 1980, It. trans. 1986, pp. 377-378). All this is about the mystical body and the priesthood of the faithful, but we include the priesthood of Christ for people, and that of the priest for other people, and of people who “exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity” (Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 10).

It can be said that the quadrilateral that serves as a platform for pontifical teachings is based respectively on communion, missionary spirit and outgoing Church, but with mercy to act as a link for the functioning of the inter-conceptual flow (Fig. 1). On the contrary, all things considered, mercy is the lemma that acts as a hinge. The whole acts as a critical mass for the self-sustaining system of thought in Bergoglio. As for popular spirituality (an expression preferred to that of popular religiosity of sociologists or popular piety used by Paul VI and especially by Giuseppe De Luca, founder of the *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, Italian Archive for the History of Piety), there is considerable appreciation on the part of Pope Francis, which emerges on several occasions, for example when he recalls the experience of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate at Aparecida in 2007, with the bishops comforted by the mass of pilgrims visiting that sanctuary: they were “inspired by the thousands of pilgrims who came every day to entrust their lives to Our Lady”.

Fig. 1 - Theoretical framework of conceptual flows in Pope Francis



To tell the truth, however, the discourse on non-liturgical religious modalities, unofficial so to speak, would deserve a broader discussion on the theoretical and doctrinal level. It would be worthwhile to make a special study on the relations between the religiosity of the people and the “Argentine theology of the people and culture”, advocated by Bergoglio himself, a good disciple of the Jesuit Juan Carlos Scannone (2019). Not to mention a theoretical-empirical verification of the possibility that this theological proposal is, in fact, an alternative to the liberation theology of the Peruvian Dominican Gustavo Gutiérrez (1971).

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