Untier Of Knots

By Andrew Sullivan - Dec 17, 2013

What Is The Meaning Of Pope Francis?

You don't have to be a believer to recognize a moment of grace. By grace I mean those precious, rare times when exactly what you were expecting gives way to something utterly different, when patterns of thought and behavior we have grown accustomed to and at times despaired of, suddenly cede to something new and marvelous. It may be the moment when a warrior unexpectedly lays down his weapon, when the sternest disciplinarian breaks into a smile, when an ideologue admits error, when a criminal seeks forgiveness, or when an addict hits bottom and finally sees a future. Grace is the proof that hope is not groundless.

How to describe the debut of Pope Francis and not immediately think of grace? For much of this new century, Christianity seemed to be in close to terminal crisis. Among the fastest-growing groups in society were the nones - those indifferent to religion entirely. Especially among the young, Christians became increasingly identified with harsh judgments, acrid fundamentalism, the smug bromides of the Prosperity Gospel or, more trivially, neurotic cultural obsessions like the alleged "war on Christmas." Evangelical leaders often came and went in scandal, or intolerance or both. Obsessed with issues of sexual morality, mainstream evangelicalism and the Catholic hierarchy in America entered into an alliance with one major political party, the GOP, further weakening Christianity's role in transcending politics, let alone partisanship. Christian leaders seemed too often intent on denial of what intelligent people of good will saw simply as reality - of evolution, of science, of human diversity, of the actual lives of modern Christians themselves. Christian defensiveness was everywhere, as atheism grew in numbers and confidence and zeal.

To make matters far, far worse, the Catholic hierarchy was exposed these past two decades as, in part, a criminal conspiracy to rape the most innocent and vulnerable and to protect their predators. There is almost nothing as evil as the rape of a child - and yet the institution allegedly representing the love of God on earth perpetrated it, covered it up, and escaped full accountability for it on a scale

that is still hard to fathom. You cannot overstate the brutal toll this rightly took on Catholicism's moral authority. Even once-reflexively Catholic countries - like Ireland and Belgium - collapsed into secularism almost overnight, as ordinary Catholics couldn't begin to comprehend how the successors to Peter could have perpetrated and enabled such evil. And meanwhile, the great argument of the modern, post-1968 papacy - against non-procreative and non-marital sex for straights and against all sex for gays - ended in intellectual and practical defeat in almost the entire West, including among most Catholics themselves. American Catholics have long been one of the most supportive religious demographics for marriage equality. And when a debate about contraception and healthcare reform emerged in the U.S. early last year, the Catholic bishops chose to launch a defining crusade against something that countless Catholic women had used at some point in their lives.

And in all this, the papacy was increasingly absent from public debate, focused on building a smaller, purer church in seclusion from what Benedict XVI saw as the moral relativism of modernity. His vision of the church was securing its ramparts to wait out a new, long age of barbarism (as Saint Benedict had done many centuries before as the Roman Empire crumbled), pulling up the drawbridge in rituals, customs and doctrines that became almost ends in themselves. This is what some have referred to as the "Benedict Option" for the church - a term inspired by a powerful jeremiad by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, in which he despaired of "the new dark ages already upon us." What we needed, MacIntyre thought, was another Saint Benedict, the man who gave rise to the church's monastic system - in other words, the kind of small, pure, separate communities that helped Christianity survive after the decline of the Roman Empire. Gone was the sublime, striding confidence of the charismatic anti-Communist Pope John Paul II in the first years of his papacy; what remained was what his gregarious, powerful personality had for a while obscured - a pinched, arch-conservative Catholicism, more attuned to early twentieth century Poland or Bavaria than to the multicultural 21st Century generations of an increasingly global world. Three decades after his charismatic appearance on the world stage, we can now clearly see that John Paul II and his successor bequeathed a much stronger papacy in a much weaker church.

And then, out of the blue, two remarkable things: the first modern papal

resignation, and the whisper of a name emerging from the Sistine Chapel as the conclave of cardinals decided on a successor. The name had always been a sacred one in the long history of Christianity; it was a name no Pope had ever dared to claim before; a name that resonated through the centuries with the possibility of starting from scratch, from the street and the gutter, from the leper colonies and the wildernesses.

That name was Francis.

I.

There has, of course, been an immediate struggle to co-opt Pope Francis for both "right" and "left" in the exhausted categories of the culture war we seem unable to move beyond in American public life. And perhaps the most important and emphatic thing to be said of Francis so far is that this rubric - especially when drawn from the American political debate - cannot explain or elucidate him. We have to leave those categories behind, because they are a sad and unimaginative disservice to what Francis has so far said and done as the Bishop of Rome. And that's particularly true for those on the American Catholic right who are still insisting, if with ever-greater circumspection, that nothing has changed of any substance at all.

Much of what so many people have been struck by, these traditionalists insist, are merely gestures, surface statements and acts that are about presentation and public relations, rather than the body of faith itself. Francis has not changed an iota of doctrine, the cold-water-throwers insist. He co-authored his first Encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, with his predecessor, Benedict XVI, for whom he has expressed nothing but admiration, affection and respect. His searing critique of the ideology of unfettered capitalism - though shocking to some, like Rush Limbaugh, with no knowledge of Catholic social thought - is one that both John Paul II and Benedict XVI shared and expressed, at times more passionately. On the social issues that the press fixates on, such as homosexuality, Francis, while starkly different in tone, has not altered the doctrinal substance. Female priests

remain a non-starter. Francis has budged not an inch from the Church's concern for the unborn or for marriage as a heterosexual institution. Move along, they urgently insist. There is nothing new here.

But, of course, there is. There is something quite stupendously new - as Catholics and especially non-Catholics have sensed. No Pope emerges and immediately changes teachings that have been integral to decades and centuries of Christian practice and belief. To expect such is to misunderstand the very nature of the church and its slow, internal means of reflection, renewal, and reform. But without such specific measures, what can we point to? What actually is this newness that cannot quite be summarized by specific, immediate injunctions?

Perhaps the simplest way to understand what's new is to address a first-order question: What is Francis' own understanding of the office he now holds, and how is it different from his predecessors'? Many non-Catholics and some of the most fervent Catholics see the papacy as the defining institution of the church - even imparting to it an infallibility it has rarely claimed to exercise. The papacy is both the final arbiter of truth or falsehood within the Catholic universe and also a pragmatic institution, designed to bring a vast and often unruly flock into uniformity. Its power within the church has waxed and waned over the centuries - vying with local bishops, national bishops' conferences, and more, all the way down to divergent practices from parish to parish - but it became a rallying institution for traditionalists in their fight against the modern world in the 19th century - and has remained so ever since. Since it can be the only effective tool for order in the church, it has long been central to the project of orthodoxy - and it got a new lease of extraordinary life under Pope John Paul II and his successor, Benedict XVI.

Enter Francis. In his immediately famous interview published in English by the Jesuit magazine *America*, the new Pope was asked how he would like to describe himself as a way of introduction:

> The pope stares at me in silence. I ask him if this is a question that I am allowed to ask.... He nods that it is, and he tells me: “I do not know what might be the most fitting description.... I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a

> sinner."

Now this is not doctrinally new. Every Pope is a sinner, just as every human being is. But not every Pope has immediately and instinctively *defined* himself as such. Not every Pope introduces himself by abandoning every trace of inherited, acquired authority that comes with the office itself and begins from scratch, as a human being, as a *sinner*. In fact, from the very beginning of his Pontificate, Francis has consciously abandoned the idea of papal authority as the moral force behind his words and actions. Some of this is in gestures - his refusal to live in the papal palace, for example, preferring to live in the hostel he stayed in while attending the conclave to elect a new Pope; his preference for simple vestments in stark contrast to his predecessor's ornate and bedazzled costumes; and his eschewal of the honorifics associated with papal authority in favor of the simple title "Bishop of Rome."

Some of it is in words. I was struck by the first he spoke as Pope. On the balcony, before vast crowds, he said, "Brothers and sisters, good evening," - an almost informal, colloquial greeting. Then: "You all know that the duty of the conclave was to give a bishop to Rome. It seems that my brother Cardinals have gone almost to the ends of the earth to get him ... but here we are. The diocesan community of Rome now has its Bishop. Thank you!" Again: he almost goes out of his way to speak to equals, not subjects, and with a touch of humor. And notice again the downplaying of the role of Pope: "*a* bishop *to* Rome." He prayed for his predecessor, on traditional lines, but then broke the rules again:

> And now I would like to give the blessing, but first - first I ask a favor of you: before the Bishop blesses his people, I ask you to pray to the Lord that he will bless me: the prayer of the people asking the blessing for their Bishop. Let us make, in silence, this prayer: your prayer over me.

In that simple gesture, he reversed roles with the crowd. He was not there to bless them *until they had prayed for him* - and that was a request, a *favor*, not an instruction. In a vast public spectacle, we stumbled immediately upon intimacy. And that intimacy has continued.

How many Popes, for example, have spoken of their internal spiritual experiences

in the conclave and after? From the *America* interview:

> [Francis] tells me that when he began to realize that he might be elected, on Wednesday, March 13, during lunch, he felt a deep and inexplicable peace and interior consolation come over him, along with a great darkness, a deep obscurity about everything else. And those feelings accompanied him until his election later that day.

Then an insight from when he first realized he had been elected, from a dialogue with Eugenio Scalfari, the atheist founder of La Repubblica, who paraphrased Francis' remarks from memory. Francis:

> Before I accepted I asked if I could spend a few minutes in the room next to the one with the balcony overlooking the square. My head was completely empty and I was seized by a great anxiety. To make it go away and relax I closed my eyes and made every thought disappear, even the thought of refusing to accept the position, as the liturgical procedure allows.
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> I closed my eyes and I no longer had any anxiety or emotion. At a certain point I was filled with a great light. It lasted a moment, but to me it seemed very long. Then the light faded, I got up suddenly and walked into the room where the cardinals were waiting and the table on which was the act of acceptance. I signed it ...

Anyone blessed with a mystical experience will know what he's speaking about. His prayer here is almost Buddhist - making "every thought disappear." But what's more striking than the simpleness of this meditation is how willing he is to open up in public about the deepest moments in his interior life, to divest the papacy of any veiled mystique or authority, and to relate this moment of mysticism not in an Encyclical or a papal audience, but to an *atheist* in a *newspaper*.

The importance of this only truly hits home when you consider the project of his two predecessors in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic church's first profound attempt to grapple with the challenges of modernity in a way that was not entirely defensive and afraid. This was the Council that gave us

the Mass in the vernacular, that recognized the importance of religious freedom, that opened up the avenues of ecumenical dialogue, that attempted to recover the wisdom of the early church, that brought Scripture back more powerfully into the Catholic conversation, and that finally came to terms with the original sin of the church: anti-Semitism.

Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI were creatures of this council - with Benedict, then Joseph Ratzinger, known at the time as being sympathetic to reform, even serving as a theological consultant to the council. But in the wake of confusion over the council's implementation, liturgical excesses, theological heresies, and declining church attendance, and as the sexual revolution took ever-firmer root in the West, retrenchment arrived. Pope Paul VI unilaterally doubled down against the pill in 1968 and the young Polish pope who followed in the Reagan-Thatcher era went further still. While never denying the centrality of the moment when Pope John XXIII opened the doors and windows of the church to the modern world in 1962, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI were intent on correcting what they both viewed as its dangers to orthodoxy. In response to new dialogues about modernity, women, sexuality, and liberation theology, John Paul II and his chief theological enforcer, Ratzinger, rebuilt Catholic doctrine around a newly powerful and authoritative papacy and a rigid, unchangeable set of rules regarding faith and morals. The newly potent papacy, its once-again unquestionable doctrines emanating from Ratzinger's own Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was intent on suppressing heresies of various kinds; monitoring the universities, seminaries, and religious groups for signs of dissent; and reasserting traditional Catholicism against what both men saw as the unraveling of uniformity in the 1960s and 1970s.

They buttressed this increasingly top-down, centralized, thoroughly orthodox governance with the elevation of ultra-conservative trends in the church, from *Opus Dei*, with its practices of physical mortification, to the Legionaries of Christ, headed by the notorious child molester Marcial Maciel, and the reactionary Society of Saint Pius X, which included a Holocaust denier among its luminaries. The key to restoring the church's moral authority and doctrinal orthodoxy was, for both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, a centralized church, where all roads led to the Vatican, and where every bishop was elevated according to his

unquestioned dedication to the restorationist project.

And this is the most striking and immediate change since Francis' election. The new Pope has not just repudiated that legacy of a supreme pontiff in gestures; he has emphatically reversed it in words and acts, both formal and informal. In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, "The Joy Of The Gospel," Francis writes explicitly of the limits of his own influence on the church:

> Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound "decentralization."

To repeat: what is said by the papal magisterium is neither definitive nor complete for the whole church. The voice of the Bishop of Rome is one voice among many. This is a clear and blunt unwinding of a core project for his predecessors, an emphatic return to the themes of the Second Vatican Council. Francis acknowledges that this may mean all sorts of unpredictable ideas, arguments, and practices emerging in the church again, as the firm papal grip on orthodoxy is relaxed:

> God's word is unpredictable in its power. The Gospel speaks of a seed which, once sown, grows by itself, even as the farmer sleeps. The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking.

It's worth noting the parable from which the metaphor of the seed comes:

> This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, *though he does not know how*. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

The papacy cannot control the word or the work of God. It has an "unruly

freedom." Few ideas were more anathema to the church as understood by Joseph Ratzinger. For Ratzinger, "unruly freedom" was the problem, not the solution. But notice also the premise of this parable - in my italics. The farmer *does not know* how the seed grows. It is a mystery. And the second great correction of Benedict, after the abrupt removal of the papacy from its authoritarian pedestal, is an epistemology of doubt as the central truth of faith.

Benedict XVI and John Paul II focused on restoring dogmatic certainty as the counterpart to papal authority. Francis is arguing that both, if taken too far, can be sirens leading us *away* from God, not ensuring our orthodoxy but sealing us off in calcified positions and rituals that can come to mean nothing outside themselves. He is not shy about saying this, even though the contrast with his immediate - and still living - predecessor is close to shocking:

> In this quest to seek and find God in all things there is still an area of uncertainty. There must be. If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions – that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble.
>
> Uncertainty is in every true discernment that is open to finding confirmation in spiritual consolation.

Or in blunter fashion:

> If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God.

Perhaps another way to describe this would be a profound critique of the desiccated promise of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism requires an absolute, unchanging revelation of truth in every particular. It is Truth beyond history, outside of time, revealed definitively and unquestionable in every detail. In its

Protestant forms, it can mean a Biblical literalism in which every single word in the Bible is to be understood as empirically true. In more recent Catholic formulations, it means that the Truth (and it is always with a capital "T") is only securely located in an infallible, authoritative vicar of Christ on earth. Without that total certainty and absolute authority, we are lost in a miasma of our own relativism, mistaking feelings for facts, sins for wishes. Benedict XVI was intimately familiar with this kind of fundamentalism. The apex of his career before the papacy was being the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Holy Office which was once the Inquisition. In his 1986 disciplining of the theologian Charles Curran, then-prefect Joseph Ratzinger put the rules of his view of the church this way:

> The faithful must accept not only the infallible magisterium. They are to give the religious submission of intellect and will to the teaching which the supreme pontiff or the college of bishops enunciate on faith and morals when they exercise the authentic magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim it with a definitive act.

That's an almost totalitarian demand: the religious submission of intellect and will to the "*supreme* pontiff." The totality of that submission rests on Ratzinger's Augustinian notion of divine revelation: it is always a radical gift; it must always be accepted without question; it comes from above to those utterly unworthy below; and we are too flawed, too sinful, too human to question it in even the slightest respect. And if we ever compromise an iota on that absolute, authentic, top-down truth, then we can know nothing as true. We are, in fact, lost for ever.

And yet here are the words of the new bishop of Rome, speaking of relative truths with Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Argentina in 2010:

> Rabbi, you said one thing, which in part, is certain: we can say what God is not, we can speak of his attributes, but we cannot say what He is. That apophatic dimension, which reveals how I speak about God, is critical to our theology. The English mystics speak a lot about this theme. There is a book by one of them, from the 13th century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, that attempts again and again to describe God and always finishes pointing to

> what He is not...
>
> I would also classify as arrogant those theologies that not only attempted to define with certainty and exactness God's attributes, but also had the pretense of saying who He was.
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> The Book of Job is a continuous discussion about the definition of God. There are four wise men that elaborate this theological search and everything ends with Job's expression: 'By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you.' Job's final image of God is different from his vision of God in the beginning. The intention of this story is that the notion that the four theologians have is not true, because God always is being sought and found. We are presented with this paradox: we seek Him to find Him and because we find Him, we seek Him. It is a very Augustinian game.

It is only in living that we achieve hints and guesses - and only hints and guesses - of what the Divine truly is. And because the Divine is found and lost by humans in time and history, there is no reachable truth for humans outside that time and history. We are part of an unfolding drama in which the Christian, far from clinging to some distant, pristine Truth he cannot fully understand, will seek to understand and discern the "signs of the times" as one clue as to how to live now, in the footsteps of Jesus. Or in the words of T.S. Eliot,

> There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
> And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
> That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
> For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

II.

How did this deep shift suddenly happen? More to the point, how could it have come from a church hierarchy relentlessly selected and promoted for more than

thirty years according to fealty to the Ratzinger project? Where, in other words, did Jorge Bergoglio come from?

The answer is that he was always there. The indispensable English-language biography of the Pope, *Pope Francis: Untying The Knots* by Paul Vallely, provides solid evidence that Bergoglio was the runner-up to Ratzinger in the 2005 conclave. Far from being on the margins of the global church, Bergoglio was at its very center. He was a wunderkind in the church in the Western hemisphere, a Jesuit who swiftly soared through the ranks to become the Provincial Superior for the Society of Jesus throughout Argentina at the tender age of 36, just three months after he had taken his final vows as a Jesuit. He remained in that post for the following six years - years in which the Argentine junta initiated its infamous "dirty war" against perceived enemies of the state, a war that would continue with incalculable human cost from 1976 to 1983.

The Argentine context is essential in grappling with who Francis is and how he became the leader he now presents to the world. It helps explain why the American political scene has difficulty placing him on its usual right-left spectrum. And it also gives us an insight into a crisis in his spiritual and moral life, a crucible from which he emerged a changed man.

That crucible was occupying a leading church position in a fascist dictatorship conducting simply horrifying acts of terror, torture, and murder in mass silence and throughout all levels of society. And it is fair to say that during this period, Bergoglio was no hero. He was no outspoken opponent of the regime, no prophet, and no icon of human rights. He was an operator, a leader of an institution whose interests he needed to protect.

One incident clearly impacted him above all others, and it's worth unpacking. The core claim against Bergoglio is that he was complicit in the Argentine Navy's 1976 kidnapping and torture of two Jesuit priests, Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jalics. The two were associated with liberation theology, working with the poor and marginalized - what today we might call 'organizing' them - risking the ire of the junta. Bergoglio told them to cool it, both because of his skepticism of liberation theology at the time and his fear of a wider conflict between the church and the

junta.

While it's difficult to sort through the details and conflicting reports about what happened next, it is clear that, when the priests refused to follow his advice, he decided he could not embrace their mission nor give it the Jesuit imprimatur. While not collaboration with the regime, this did amount to the withdrawal of the church's protection of these priests, effectively leaving them exposed and vulnerable. It was an act of prudential omission, not commission, and it led to the torture of the priests. It was no real consolation that Bergoglio did not surrender the priests and actually played a part in securing their eventual release. (One of them told the press after Bergoglio's ascension to the papacy that it is "wrong to assert that our capture took place at the initiative of Father Bergoglio ... the fact is, Orlando Yorio and I were not denounced by Father Bergoglio.") The entire episode understandably came to sting his conscience.

Bergoglio had run the Jesuits with a firm hand, becoming known for crisp decisions and follow-through, if also a certain conservatism and, by his own admission, authoritarianism. He was a very successful and powerful young figure - but his sudden ascent to great authority led to what he clearly came to believe was unwitting complicity in the moral evil of the regime. And this changed him. This passage from the interview with *America* is particularly revealing. Francis was asked how his previous experience in church governance has shaped his vision of the church:

> After a brief pause for reflection, Pope Francis becomes very serious, but also very serene, and he responds:
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> > In my experience as superior in the Society, to be honest, I have not always behaved in that way – that is, I did not always do the necessary consultation. And this was not a good thing. My style of government as a Jesuit at the beginning had many faults. That was a difficult time for the Society: an entire generation of Jesuits had disappeared. Because of this I found myself provincial when I was still very young. I was only 36 years old. That was crazy. I had to deal with difficult situations, and I made my decisions abruptly and by myself. Yes, but I must add one thing: when I entrust something to

> someone, I totally trust that person. He or she must make a really big mistake before I rebuke that person. But despite this, eventually people get tired of authoritarianism.
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> My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems and to be accused of being ultraconservative. I lived a time of great interior crisis when I was in Cordova. To be sure, I have never been like Blessed Imelda [a goody-goody], but I have never been a right-winger. It was my authoritarian way of making decisions that created problems.
>
> I say these things from life experience and because I want to make clear what the dangers are. Over time I learned many things. The Lord has allowed this growth in knowledge of government through my faults and my sins. So as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, I had a meeting with the six auxiliary bishops every two weeks, and several times a year with the council of priests. They asked questions and we opened the floor for discussion. This greatly helped me to make the best decisions. But now I hear some people tell me: 'Do not consult too much, and decide by yourself.' Instead, I believe that consultation is very important.

It would be a mistake to believe that Jorge Bergoglio came to question the authoritarian structure of papal supremacy because of some ideological position. He came to doubt it because he saw what it could lead to - *in his own life*. And you can see this in the years following his stint as the Jesuits' leader in Argentina. He became the rector of the Colegio de San José, a position he held for about six years. He traveled to Germany to pursue his doctoral studies, researching the work of Romano Guardini. He taught in Argentina upon his return. And then he was sent to the Jesuit community at Córdoba as an ordinary priest, serving as a confessor and spiritual director, the place where he speaks of his "great interior crisis." These years were a time of exile – he was away from his beloved Buenos Aires. From being one of the youngest and most promising Jesuit leaders, he arrived back at square one. With regrets. And questions. And doubts.

And it was in this period that he became fascinated with a somewhat obscure

painting. It's a Baroque painting of the Virgin Mary in a church in Augsburg, Germany, called "Mary, Untier of Knots." It shows Mary patiently focusing on a long, knotted ribbon, gently untying each knot to leave a white, untangled ribbon behind. Since Francis' introduction of a reproduction of the image in Buenos Aires, it has grown in popularity in South America, with the faithful praying in front of it for Mary to "untie the knots" in their own lives.

What strikes me about it is how undoing knots conveys a way of being in the world. It begins with a recognition that life isn't easy, that a smooth and linear path is rarely given to us, that challenges keep presenting themselves. It is not so much the overcoming of these challenges that defines us, but the manner in which we tackle them.

It's possible to get extremely frustrated by knots, after all, as I remember each time I retrieve a set of iPhone earbuds from the black hole of a coat pocket. Your first thought is just anger: how on earth did this get so fucking tangled up? Your second impulse is to grab it and shake it or even to pull on it to resolve the issue in one stroke. But that only makes things worse. The knots get even tighter. In the end, you realize your only real option - against almost every fiber in your irate being - is to take each knot in turn, patiently and gently undo it, loosen a little, see what happens, and move on to the next. You will never know exactly when all the knots will resolve themselves - it can happen quite quickly after a while or seemingly never. But you do know that patience, and concern with the here and now, is the only way to "solve" the "problem." You don't look forward with a plan; you look down with a practice.

This has a relationship with the concept of "discernment" that is integral to Francis' spiritual life, as it is to any Jesuit's. A Christian life is about patience, about the present and about trust that God is there for us. It does not seek certainty or finality to life's endless ordeals and puzzles. It seeks through prayer and action in the world to listen to God's plan and follow its always-unfolding intimations. It requires waiting. It requires diligence. Here is how Francis describes it:

> I don’t have all the answers; I don’t even have all the questions. I always think of new questions, and there are always new questions coming

> forward. But the answers have to be thought out according to the different situations, and you also have to wait for them. I confess that, because of my disposition, the first answer that comes to me is usually wrong. When I'm facing a situation, the first solution I think of is what not to do. Because of this I have learned not to trust my first reaction. When I'm calmer, after passing through the crucible of solitude, I come closer to understanding what has to be done ... You can do a great deal of harm with the decisions you make. One can be very unfair.

It is hard not to see the shadows of the tortured and the disappeared lingering over that epiphany in Bergoglio's life: "You can do a great deal of harm with the decisions you make." And it is hard not to see Mary, the Untier of Knots, as some kind of breakthrough in his understanding of what it requires to do God's will, with the grace of the Mother of God, asked to accept the hardest task of all: to lose her own son for reasons she never fully understood - and simply had to accept - at the time.

III.

We may never know why exactly Benedict resigned as he did. But I suspect mere exhaustion of the body and mind was not the whole of it. He had to see, because his remains such a first-rate mind, that his project had failed, that the levers he continued to pull - more and more insistent doctrinal orthodoxy, more political conflict with almost every aspect of the modern world, more fastidious control of liturgy - simply had no impact any more. You can see how, in the maintenance of order, Benedict had become lost in rules and categories that Jesus warned against. His great encyclical, Deus Caritas Est, reads like an intellectual brilliantly expressing the love of God - but not a pastor who has easily breathed that love into the church and the world. And so, as Bergoglio had gracefully conceded to him in the 2005 conclave, perhaps one way to see his resignation is as a graceful concession back.

Our relationship with the Divine, in Catholic thought, is always a mixture of total

unworthiness and yet also essential worthiness. Somehow, we have to understand ourselves both as made by God and yet deeply alienated from God. So how do we live with this tension? For Benedict, the critical posture toward God is vertical - from Heaven to Earth, from pontiff to people, and back. This doesn't mean there is no living-in-the-world, no sense of truth in sacramental life, no community, no faith-in-action. But it does emphasize the Augustinian alienation of it all. For Francis, in contrast, the alienation is not so great, and the world more Thomist. The world is good and we live only now, and in it.

And so for Francis, the central posture is clearly horizontal - outward toward others, inclusive, and engaged in constant dialogue. Again this does not deny the utter grace of divine revelation, but this Christian lives far less stricken in his fallen skin. And so while Benedict offered Mass with his back to the congregation, focused on the divine, Francis, as noted by Paul Vallely, immediately shifted back to facing the people, building a community of equals in the eyes of God. Francis deliberately calls himself the Bishop of Rome, not the Supreme Pontiff, breaking down some of the vertical lines. He is emphatic about decentralization, about a mode of leadership that is closer to community organizing than to unquestioned authority in all things:

> The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.

The Pope must *accompany* those challenging existing ways of doing things! Others may know better than he does. Or, to feminize away the patriarchy:

> I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church's ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people, and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans, and raises

> up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel.

And, of course, this means an openness to new things, new truths, new understandings. If the central element of fundamentalism is an orientation to a pristine past - an inerrant, literal Scripture which must never be amended; or an apostolic succession descending from the first Pope, Peter, to the present day in one, unbreakable chain of unquestionable authority - the key to Francis' expression of faith is an openness to the future, a firm place in the present, and a willingness to entertain doubt, to discern new truths and directions, and to *grow*. Think of Benedict's insistence on submission of intellect and will to the only authentic truth (the Pope's), and then read this:

> Within the Church countless issues are being studied and reflected upon with great freedom. Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology, and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the immense riches of God’s word. For those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel.

Underlying all this is a profound shift away from an idea of religion as doctrine and toward an idea of religion as a way of life. Faith is a constantly growing garden, not a permanently finished masterpiece. By this I do not mean to say that doctrine is somehow irrelevant. It isn't. It is still there insofar as we can ever fully understand it. But sometimes, it is appropriate to accept the limitations of what we can understand - and get on with the always deeply simple Christian injunction to love God and to love one another as Jesus loved his friends. We live as temporal, human beings in a finite, fallen world; and faith is, for Francis, a way of life, not a set of propositions. It is a way of life in community with others, lived in the present yet always, deeply, insistently aware of eternity.

Here you feel the profound impact of Saint Ignatius of Loyola's concept of discernment and "contemplation in action." Father Howard Gray S.J. has put it

simply enough:

> Ultimately, Ignatian spirituality trusts the world as a place where God dwells and labors and gathers all to himself in an act of forgiveness where that is needed, and in an act of blessing where that is prayed for.

Life itself provides us with truth beyond that revealed in any text or by any authority. The journey itself changes who we are and that new self, if open to God, is actually our real self. We do not begin in the shadow of a great truth and measure our life by how far we fall shy of it. We live in a world that already contains that truth and we measure our life by our ability to find it. As Michael Oakeshott put it,

> religion ... is not, as some would persuade us, an interest attached to life, a subsidiary activity; nor is it a power which governs life from the outside with a, no doubt divine, but certainly incomprehensible, sanction for its authority. It is simply life itself ... The man of the world is careless of nothing save himself and his life; but to the religious man, life is too short and uncertain to be hoarded, too valuable to be spent at the pleasure of others, or the past or of the future, too precious to be thrown away on something he is not convinced is his highest good. In this sense, then, we are all, at moments, religious ...

This is what Francis captures: the messiness of a Christian faith actually lived. And such a faith has to prioritize - so as not to get caught up in extraneous dogmas or exhausted tropes. Here's a key passage from Francis:

> The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition

that the moral consequences then flow.

And so Francis, like Jesus, has had such an impact in such a short period of time simply because of the way he seems to be. His being does not rely on any claims to inherited, ecclesiastical authority; his very way of life is the only moral authority he wants to claim.

IV.

Countless tales and aphorisms have been attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, most of which are apocryphal. But one stands out, along with the lyrics to songs that still ring with strange wonder today. It is his famous injunction: "Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, with words." His preaching was as untraditional as it was effective. He was famous (and not always favorably) for suddenly engaging in wild, interpretive dances on the streets. Legend has him disappearing into flocks of birds to talk and pray with them, and fearlessly approaching a wolf as if there were no real gulf of understanding between species.

In other words, he changed the world not primarily by what he said but by *how he lived*. Giving up an inheritance, he embraced a poverty of almost pathological dimensions. For periods of time, he would have no shelter except the ruins of churches he voluntarily rebuilt or patched up. He refused any money for labor. He hated the exercise of any power even over his own order, preferring to sit on the floor during meetings and if absolutely forced to make a decision, whispering it in another monk's ear. He even refused to ride a horse, because it elevated him above others. In excruciating pain on his deathbed, he reportedly refused a pillow to rest his head on, then succumbed to that small comfort, and then berated a fellow monk who had brought the pillow to him. He lived by standards no one else truly understood; but they didn't need to understand. They merely had to witness.

Much has been made of Francis' gestures since becoming Pope. Cynics may regard some of it as public relations - but those cynics, especially by today's

standards, are remarkably rare. What some may not have seen is how these actions - of humility, of kindness, of compassion, and of service - are integral to Francis' resuscitation of Christian moral authority. He is telling us that Christianity, before it is anything else, is a way of life, an orientation toward the whole, a living commitment to God through others. And he is telling us that nothing - *nothing* - is more powerful than this.

Could any sustained Encyclical ever convey the power of the Pope's instinctive embrace of a man in the crowd whose skin was covered with disfiguring tumors? I don't need to tell you about that incident because you all have an image of it instantly in your mind. It is the image that contemporaries must have seen in the life of Saint Francis as well: one of his first acts after his conversion was to wander into a leper colony and embrace its inhabitants, wash their bodies, and tend to their wounds. No words can sum up the power of overcoming visceral human disgust with transcendent love for the the person behind that disfiguring mask of disease.

Doctrine is insufficient to convey this truth. And one remembers all too quickly that this was the impact Jesus had. It was not his words alone that transfixed so many around him; it was the manner in which he lived - outside human boundaries, inside the human soul. Jesus gave us no theology. We had to wait for Paul for that. For decades after his crucifixion, it was mainly oral tales of what Jesus had done and the impact he had created that gave us any basis for a theology at all. What Jesus gave us was a mode of living - a mode beyond fear and want and even self-preservation. It wasn't that he died in agony on a cross - thousands and thousands endured similar agonies across the brutal Roman empire. It was the way he *accepted* that death, and transcended it, that changed human consciousness for ever.

And so when Francis talks of Christianity and of the church, it is not a set of doctrines, let alone a set of politics, that animates him. It is what happens when doctrine cedes to life, and when truth transforms that life. "I have a dogmatic certainty," Francis wryly says. "God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else – God is in this person's life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and

weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God."

When he decided on the Thursday before Easter to wash the feet of several imprisoned juvenile offenders, including two women, it was not the first time he had broken with the tradition of only washing the feet of men. He had done the same thing as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. But it was the first time a Pope had simply improvised a ritual formally set down by the Congregation on Divine Worship. And it was not hard to see the message he was sending: that the love of God knows no gender or even denominational boundaries (two of the people whose feet he washed were Muslim). More to the point, simply by doing this - and not explaining it - the act transforms the person doing it. You cannot think your way into this. You have to walk confidently into the adventure of discernment.

And so faith becomes real through living, not thinking. In his dialogue with Scalfari, Francis wrote:

> I would not speak about, not even for those who believe, an "absolute" truth, in the sense that absolute is something detached, something lacking any relationship. Now, the truth is a relationship! This is so true that each of us sees the truth and expresses it, starting from oneself: from one's history and culture, from the situation in which one lives, etc. This does not mean that the truth is variable and subjective. It means that it is given to us only as a way and a life. Was it not Jesus himself who said: "I am the way, the truth, the life"? In other words, the truth is one with love, it requires humbleness and the willingness to be sought, listened to and expressed.

"The truth is given to us only as a way and a life." And here is another core aspect of Francis' retelling of Christianity that cannot be emphasized enough: he is an anti-ideological Pope. For him, ideology means that something alive and growing has been plucked and pickled. It means that openness to God's unknowable future has been ruled out of bounds. And this has a direct meaning for evangelization: "We need to remember that all religious teaching ultimately has to be reflected *in the teacher's way of life*, which awakens the assent of the heart,

by its nearness, love and witness." My italics.

And so, yes, "proselytism is solemn nonsense." That phrase - deployed by the Pope in dialogue with the Italian atheist Eugenio Scalfari (as reported by Scalfari) - may seem shocking at first. But it is not about denying the revelation of Jesus. It is about *how* that revelation is expressed and lived. Evangelism, for Francis, is emphatically not about informing others about the superiority of your own worldview and converting them to it. That kind of proselytism rests on a form of disrespect for another human being. Something else is needed:

> Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, Christians should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but "by attraction."

Again, you see the priority of practice over theory, of life over dogma. Evangelization is about sitting down with anyone anywhere and listening and sharing and being together. A Christian need not be afraid of this encounter. Neither should an atheist. We are in this together, in the same journey of life, with the same ultimate mystery beyond us. When we start from that place - of radical humility and radical epistemological doubt - proselytism does indeed seem like nonsense, a form of arrogance and detachment, reaching for power, not freedom. And evangelization is not about getting others to submit their intellect and will to some new set of truths; it is about an infectious joy for a new way of living in the world. All it requires - apart from joy and faith - is patience.

V.

Then there is the name.

Francis is arguably the most venerated saint since the time of Jesus. His strangeness and intensity have echoed through the Christian imagination for eight centuries, marking him as a special kind of prophet. A bundle of

contradictions to the modern mind, he remains both an advocate of total obedience to church authorities yet is also famous for improvising wildly in their absence; he went to Rome to ensure that his fledgling order might not be deemed heretics for their radically new way of life, and then promptly went on to cast a shadow over much of the decadent Catholicism of that era in dark, decrepit contrast with his simplicity and zeal. Bull-headed, intemperate, paranoid, and mystical, you can see the authorities of the time - secular and religious - treating him gingerly and nervously as some kind of exception to every rule. They knew he was special, but couldn't precisely say why. What they couldn't deny was the profound impact he had on those who encountered him.

Just as you cannot overstate the importance of the name of Benedict that Ratzinger took, so too the name of Francis with Bergoglio. But unlike Benedict, no one had ever claimed that sacred name before. Such an act of presumption could not have been made lightly - especially for a Jesuit. But, as Francis has explained, the name came to him in the conclave. What meanings does that name evoke in Christian thought and history? And what signs does it foretell?

You could make an argument that it could signal a new era of Catholic concern for the environment as climate change gathers force. One could also see Saint Francis' famous encounter with the Grand Sultan of Egypt as a harbinger of a papal outreach to Islam. But one overwhelming theme has already emerged in Pope Francis' words and actions that echoes the core obsession of his namesake saint: poverty.

Pope Francis insists - and has insisted throughout his long career in the church - that poverty is a key to salvation. And in choosing the name Francis, he explained last March in Assisi, this was the central reason why:

> He recalled how, as he was receiving more and more votes in the conclave, the cardinal sitting next to him, Claudio Hummes of Brazil, comforted him "as the situation became dangerous." After the voting reached the two-thirds majority that elected him, applause broke out. Hummes, 78, then hugged and kissed him and told him "Don't forget the poor," the pope recounted, often gesturing with his hands. "That word entered here," he

> added, pointing to his head.
>
> While the formal voting continued, the pope recalled: "I thought of wars ... and Francis (of Assisi) is the man of peace, and that is how the name entered my heart, Francis of Assisi, for me he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects others."

The connection between peace and poverty is one made by Saint Francis. His conversion came after he had gone off to war in defense of his hometown, and, after witnessing horrifying carnage, became a prisoner of war. After his release from captivity, his strange, mystical journey began. Some have suggested that much of what Francis did is compatible with PTSD. He disowned his father and family business, and he chose to live homeless, and close to naked, in the neighboring countryside, among the sick and the animals. From being the dashing man of society he had once been, he became a homeless person with what many of us today would call, at first blush, obvious mental illness.

And what you see in the life of Saint Francis is a turn from extreme violence to extreme poverty, as if only the latter could fully compensate for the reality of the former. This was not merely an injunction to serve the poor. It is the belief that it is only by *being* poor or *becoming* poor that we can come close to God. Saint Francis, it must be said again, was completely pathological about this. His followers were to have no possessions at all. Their shelter had to be rudimentary, if any. They lived peripatetic lives - constantly traveling rather than settling down and achieving even minimal creature comforts. The way of life was so extreme it soon divided Francis' followers between the true mystics and those who wanted some semblance of ordinary life. Saint Francis himself walked and walked through sickness and disease until he died in excruciating pain and blindness at the age of 44.

And so when we find ourselves shocked by Pope Francis' denunciations of the ideology of unfettered market capitalism, it seems to me we shouldn't suddenly think of Karl Marx. We should think of a 13th-century mystic. There is no law of economics here; there is simply the most basic law of the Franciscan order: “To follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in his footsteps.” (At the beginning of the order, there was no second law. Why, after all, did they need

one?)

And this is where the American left may find it hard to wrestle Pope Francis easily into their worldview, just as the American right has. He is obviously open to the welfare state, to protect the dignity of the vulnerable - and certainly much more supportive of it than the current, dominant Randian faction of the Republican party. But there is little sense that a political or economic system can somehow end the problem of poverty in Francis' worldview. And there is the discomfiting idea that poverty itself is not an unmitigated evil. There is, indeed, a deep and mysterious view, enunciated by Jesus, and held most tenaciously by Saint Francis, that all wealth, all comfort, and all material goods are suspect and that poverty itself is a kind of holy state to which we should all aspire.

That's why Saint Francis remains such a utopian, mystical figure. There was no weighing in his circle of the merits of a just or an unjust war in a fallen world, as Thomas Aquinas wrestled with. There was simply the urgent imperative to live now without war or possessions. There was the need not for a better doctrine - but *for a way of life*. Saint Francis' inspiration for his new mode of living, according to legend, was a Gospel passage, Matthew 10:9, that he heard one day and immediately followed:

> Get you no gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses; no wallet for your journey, neither two coats, nor shoes, nor staff: for the laborer is worthy of his food.

Not only was Saint Francis to become homeless and give up his patrimony, he was to travel on foot, wearing nothing but a rough tunic held together with rope.

Whatever else it is, this is not progressivism. It sees no structural, human-devised system as a permanent improver of our material lot. It does not envision a world without poverty, but instead a church of the poor and for the poor. The only material thing it asks of the world, or of God, is daily bread - and only for today, never for tomorrow. If this seems extreme, it's because it is - an unreasonable, radical rebellion against the very nature of our physical selves. It allows for no comfort or security in a bodily sense. It suggests instead that it is only by losing both materially that we have a chance for anything like them spiritually. Of

course, the religious association with extreme poverty is not restricted to the Christian tradition. But in Saint Francis, it achieves almost transcendent integrity. Many of his followers, it is worth remembering, were often of his own well-to-do class, just as many early Christians were prosperous traders and businesspeople. It was not so much the experience of poverty that propelled them so much as the renunciation of their own wealth and power. This, observers sensed and recorded, gave them a liberation like no other.

It's only when you absorb this radical - and, frankly, impossible - worldview in its original Franciscan form, that you can begin to see what it might say to the world today. Remember that Pope Francis believes we exist in human history and need to discern the signs of the times in our own lives. And Saint Francis is a part of his answer. From this perspective, the idea that a society should be judged by the amount of *things* it can distribute to as many people as possible is anathema. The idea that there is a serious social and political crisis if we cannot keep our wealth growing every year above a certain rate is an absurdity.

To put it mildly, this is a 21st-century heresy. Which means, I think, that this Pope is already emerging and will likely only further emerge as the most potent critic of the newly empowered global capitalist project. In this, of course, Francis is not new. John Paul II was as aggressively critical of Western capitalism as he was of Eastern communism. But there is an obvious difference between the early 1980s and the 2010s. Back then, communism existed as a rival to capitalism and as a more proximate threat to world peace. Now, the only dominant ideology in the world is the ideology of material gain - either through the relatively free markets of the West or the state-controlled markets of the East. And so the church's message is now harder to obscure. It stands squarely against the entire dominant ethos of our age. It is the final resistance.

For Francis, history has not come to an end, and capitalism, in as much as it is a global ideology that reduces all of human activity to the cold currency of wealth, is simply another "ism" to be toppled in humankind's unfolding journey toward salvation on earth.

Doctrinal change - in the sexual or institutional terms that the secular world wants - is not likely to be immediately forthcoming in this papacy (although there

is no knowing where the newly invigorated debate Francis has enabled will take us). Doctrine, after all, is not the area where the Pope believes the action is, or where he believes our true human ability extends. But a new clarity and passion in the critique of global materialism has emerged already. Francis' criticism of the American-style "golden age" of inequality applies, it should be noted, with even more force to the Chinese model, which does not even allow for religious and political liberty within its planet-destroying plunder. What this Pope is clearly doing is pitting a church with renewed moral authority against a market ideology which either denies the unforgivable sin of man-made climate change, or celebrates it in a materialist dead-end.

But these remain hints and guesses about Francis. And he will surely grow as the church he accompanies evolves once more. The growth will not come, I suspect, by a total or immediate transformation of the church's institutional structure (although I wouldn't bet against it in due course); nor by some dramatic concession to secular priorities. Francis will grow as the church reacts to him; it will be a dynamic, not a dogma; and it will be marked less by the revelation of new things than by the new recognition of old things, in a new language.

It will be, if its propitious beginnings are any sign, a patient untying of our collective, life-denying knots.