

Vicar of Christ, Companion of Jesus

I can't help feeling a little guilty taking part in a great talkfest to mark the first year of this papacy. I doubt Pope Francis would be keen for us to be adding to the tsunami of comment and opinion, most of it laudatory, surging his way. The thing is that he makes us feel good to be Catholic and so it makes us feel good to talk about him; but feeling good, in the grand scheme of things, is not important. It can even be a distraction. So what I want to do this afternoon is simply to try and hear the deep message of Pope Francis more clearly so that we can all stop talking and put it into practice.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio is a member of the Society of Jesus, everyone knows that, and I have been asked specifically to address how his life as a Companion of Jesus might have affected the way he is now fulfilling his role as the Pope, the Vicar of Christ on Earth. My one thought on the matter, and which I shall develop in this contribution, is that, if Papa Bergoglio is profoundly Jesuit, nevertheless he is a rather unusual one. At an admittedly banal level, he certainly doesn't fit the Jesuit stereotype of being "cold, bright and distant like the stars". If I had told you a year ago that the first Jesuit pope would be known for his friendliness and warmth, you might have raised an eyebrow. Had I conjectured that he would speak in plain language that ordinary people understood, you might have suppressed a chuckle. Had I added that he would be dedicated to community life, let alone loved for his humility, I think we would have had a potentially lethal guffaw on our hands. If Voltaire said of us that "they meet without embracing and part without regret" then Pope Francis is nothing less than our mirror image. Well, stereotypes don't get us very far, you will tell me, and that, of course, is true enough. But even as we go deeper, I think we have to face that he is not quite an altogether typical son of Ignatius.

Nor is he the first Bishop of Rome to have been a Companion of Jesus. If you think about it, the very first man to hold that office was a humble fisherman from Galilee who had walked with the Lord in a very literal way, breaking bread with Him on numerous occasions. Companionship with Jesus goes, one would hope, with the job of being Pope. St Peter was a figure of personal devotion for Ignatius of Loyola long before he founded the Society. Peter's intercession had cured him of a dangerous illness early on in his life. It was at the feet of the successor of Peter that Ignatius placed himself and his companions so that they might serve the more universal needs of the Church. And it was the Petrine *quo vadis* legend which lay behind a story about Ignatius' own entry into the eternal city. At a little chapel just outside Rome, at a place called La Storta, Ignatius had a transformative vision of Christ in which he heard the Lord promise him "I will be favourable to you in Rome", a promise which gave him deep confidence and which appears still to be coming true today.

There is something rather Ignatian about St Peter, you might say. He was a man of strong passions, with an intense personal loyalty to Jesus. He was tested beyond his strength and so came to know Jesus as the source of infinite mercy and forgiveness. Peter was also always pushing forward, stepping out of the boat to walk on water, being the first to find the right words to describe Jesus' identity, vowing a fidelity to Jesus

which he couldn't quite honour in practice, and allowing himself to be persuaded by Paul to reach out to the Gentiles. There is a word which Pope Francis uses to describe the Jesuits which I think fits St Peter just as well: that word is *restless*. And that's the word I want to stay with this afternoon.

When he used that word, Francis was actually talking about another Peter. Pierre Favre was a companion of Ignatius who came from the Savoy and who was the first Jesuit to be ordained a priest. Pierre, Ignatius and Francis Xavier are regarded as the three principal founders of the Society and whilst the latter two were raised to the altars without much difficulty, Pierre Favre got stuck for a long time as a Blessed. Pierre was a famously gentle man. A formidable spiritual director, he was humble, self-effacing, hard-working and self-critical. Yet he never attracted the same universal appeal of his two co-founders. That all changed on 17th December last year, when the Holy Father canonised Pierre, a Jesuit who had been an inspiration in his own religious life, in the process giving himself a birthday present which only a Pope can give. St Pierre Favre, Francis says, was a restless man by nature. "Under the guidance of St. Ignatius," he says, "he learned to unite his restless but gentle – indeed exquisite – sensibility with a capacity to make decisions. He was a man of lofty desires; he took charge of his desires, he recognised them."

This Petrine restlessness is not just any old restlessness. It's not the restlessness of the ditherer. Nor that of the compulsive perfectionist. Nor even the restlessness of those who constantly disturb others with their wonderful ideals. It's a rarer and more precious thing and I think it's the key to understanding what makes Francis Jesuit and also sheds light on the things he has been saying and doing as Pope. To paint you a picture of it I want to talk about it under three headings. It's a restlessness that flows from radical spiritual freedom; that trusts in the activity of the Risen Christ; and that is constantly stretching the horizons of one's vision.

Spiritual Freedom

We all want to be free but most of us prefer the comfort of servitude. Becoming free is not easy. It means facing discomfort and even pain. But it's the very foundation of Ignatian restlessness. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* help us to identify and then shed the attachments which hold us back on our pilgrimage into God. It means facing one's serious complicity in sin, and it's only possible because we have found in God a mercy we can trust. True spiritual freedom is the tender heart that knows how sinful it has been and how forgiving God is. When Francis was asked in an interview who he was, he replied that he was a sinner upon whom God had looked with mercy. This is not self-loathing at work! It's the foundation of true freedom as learned from Ignatius.

Reading Ignatius' *Autobiography*, you get a sense of an astonishingly free man. He wasn't ashamed of his weaknesses. He could laugh at himself and encouraged others to do the same. This kind of freedom allows us to be at once intensely serious about the things that matter whilst not taking ourselves seriously at all. Those are remarkable qualities in Pope Francis. He has the freedom to say provocative things about the faith, about poverty and justice, regardless of what people think. And he is also free not to look important or powerful or dignified. Some of his critics have suggested that he is a

crowd-pleaser, making cheap gestures to curry favour with the media. My impression is quite different. I would be very surprised if the Holy Father put any value on good headlines. He is so rooted in the merciful love of God that no one, no prelate, potentate or printing press is about to make him swerve from his mission.

It would be hubristic and, frankly, untrue to say that that's what Jesuits are like; but it is what we *ought to* be like. It is one of the fundamental freedoms for which Ignatius insists his sons should pray. If it is the *Spiritual Exercises* which prepare us, so to speak, to receive the grace, it is invariably life itself that delivers it. And here, I suspect, the Society of Jesus again played a crucial, if more ambiguous role. Much has been written about Bergoglio's time as a young Jesuit Provincial during the dictatorship. If I say that he made many mistakes and hurt a lot of people in that time I am only repeating what he himself has already stated in public. There is no doubt that his relationships with many of the Jesuits in his Province were painful. Rejection and criticism of this sort offer an opportunity to receive the precious gift of spiritual freedom. He seems to have borne those harsh experiences with the serenity and equanimity of a very free man. He knew there were people who thought of him as an enemy and he made no fuss about it. The journey to freedom is a costly one but the result is a pearl of great price and the whole world is now reaping the benefit of God's goodness to Papa Bergoglio.

[Trusting in Christ's activity in the world here and now.](#)

The final stage of the *Spiritual Exercises* is called the Fourth Week. The retreatant contemplates the resurrection appearances of Christ to His disciples. I am afraid that I can't communicate to you in words exactly what that's like; you'll just have to make the *Exercises* for yourself! What I can say is that involves an on-going encounter with the Risen Lord and abiding in His presence. It requires a resolute focus on God's will, a freedom to respond to whatever situation develops and a total trust in the on-going activity of Christ. It's very different from those gung-ho hymns about "building the Kingdom of God" where all the emphasis is on us doing the building. It is rather more reminiscent of the parable Jesus tells about the seed that grows in the ground even when the farmer is asleep (Mark 4:26-29). One word that is often used to describe the experience is "joy"; but, again, a caveat, it's not my joy, the joy of having lots of friends or of being pleased with myself. It's the joy of the Risen Christ, a joy that is not my own but given to me as a free gift (cf. John 15:11).

When Pope Francis speaks or writes about his faith, this experience is right there in the background: *Evangelii Gaudium*, the joy of the Gospel. He comes back repeatedly to the joy of being a Christian. He is a cheerful person but it is not the cheerfulness of a born optimist, let alone the dreary happiness of someone who is pleased at how life has panned out. It is something deeper, freer and not naturally his at all.

He knows that God's work has its own pace and rhythm. He knows not to rush things, whether it is nurturing a vocation, evangelising a whole continent or reforming the Roman curia. Why? Because God is gently working away already and will not be rushed. The task of the disciple is not to do God's work for Him but to be there to help, usually in a very humble way, sometimes just pointing at what is going on. It is the instinct of a man who has spent a lifetime familiarising himself with the way the Risen Lord acts in

the world. He has learned that the best thing we can do is to try not to get in God's way with our plans and ideas. Likewise, it's a very Jesuit instinct that trusts in God's capacity to deal with people directly. When he says that the Church has no right to interfere spiritually in the lives of gay people, I think that's what he means. Francis respects the freedom of persons because he knows that otherwise he risks getting in God's way.

That's why he is not going to be rushed into reforming the Curia. He knows and has said repeatedly that real reform has to take its time, otherwise it ends up as window-dressing. How often are we rushed into changing things in a hurry not so that real change can be achieved but so that someone can cover their back to prevent litigation or to tick a box? Pope Francis' Ignatian restlessness here paradoxically makes him patient where comfort might incline him to hurry.

If you will indulge a slight digression, it seems to me that there is one interface between the Risen Christ and the disciple which Pope Francis has given particular attention to and this is, I think, very Jesuit. And that is the homily, the moment when God's Word is actualised in Christian life. We have become very used after one year to reading the Pope's daily homilies. And what a homilist he is! Word-centred, affective and dazzlingly gifted in his use of imagery. That phrase of his "the smell of the sheep" says in five words everything you need to know about Christian ministry. It's the kind of image that only comes out of deep prayer and reflection both on scripture and on life. Jesuits have valued affective preaching since the very first companions took to the streets to preach the Gospel all over Europe and beyond. If you read nothing else of *Evaangelii Gaudium* then take a look at his lucid, realistic and deeply personal words on the homily. I don't know what your experience is of preaching. I tend to think there is something of a crisis in homiletics; but that's probably because I only usually get to hear my own preaching. Still, I suspect that truly inspired and inspiring preaching is the exception rather than the rule. If Pope Francis can revitalise the preaching of our priests and deacons, then he will have done a very great deal.

[Keeping the horizons open.](#)

There is an odd-sounding expression which Pope Francis has used to talk about the current state of the Church: self-referentiality. It's hard for an English-speaker to get at what he is complaining about but I think it is crucial. It has something to do with the way in which our horizons as individuals, groups and institutions, have an ineluctable tendency to shrink almost without our noticing. I have in mind an example from a film you might know, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Alec Guinness plays a British officer, Colonel Nicholson, whose horizons shrink catastrophically. The British prisoners of war have been given the task of building a bridge for the Japanese so that enemy trains can supply the army lines. The soldiers are somewhat slapdash in their work, losing their tools accidentally-on-purpose and generally not throwing their weight into the task. Nicholson will have none of it. Morale and the reputation of the British Empire demand that the men produce a state-of-the-art bridge. Which they duly do. It is only in the last minutes of the movie, as allied soldiers suddenly appear from nowhere to destroy the bridge, that Nicholson realises he has aided the enemy's war effort.

It's a great parable of what happens when we lose sight of the big picture and become absorbed in our own project instead of keeping our eyes fixed on the wide horizon of the Kingdom. Pope Francis talks about it as an aspect of discernment, and he says that this is for him the heart of Jesuit spirituality. "Discernment," he says,

is[...] an instrument of struggle in order to know the Lord and follow him more closely. I was always struck by a saying that describes the vision of Ignatius: *non coerceri a maximo, sed contineri a minimo divinum est* ("not to be limited by the greatest and yet to be contained in the tiniest—this is the divine"). [...] This virtue of the large and small is magnanimity. Thanks to magnanimity, we can always look at the horizon from the position where we are. That means being able to do the little things of every day with a big heart open to God and to others. That means being able to appreciate the small things inside large horizons, those of the kingdom of God.

If you want to understand how the different aspects of this papacy hold together, then this is the key. Take Pope Francis' attitude towards Catholic sexual ethics. Some have assumed that in concentrating on other aspects of the Church's teaching that he is opening up a new era of permissiveness. I don't think so. What he *is* doing is saving us from getting so constrained by pro-life and family issues that we lose sight of why those issues are themselves important. It's not sexual teaching on one side of the fence and the social Gospel on the other: it's both-and. Shrinking horizons lead to ideology and distance from God and Francis wants to warn us off all of that, lest we lose our restlessness.

Conclusion

I have tried to sketch the kind of restlessness that Pope Francis sees as Jesuit and which describes one of the most striking aspects of his personality and ministry:

Only this restlessness brings peace to the heart of a Jesuit, a restlessness that is also apostolic, so that we never tire of proclaiming the kerygma, of evangelising with courage. And it is restlessness that prepares us to receive the gift of apostolic fruitfulness. Without restlessness, we are sterile.

Francis really lives the charism of the *Spiritual Exercises* very radically indeed, more than me, that's for sure, and perhaps more than many Jesuits do. It is also clear that he has taken with the utmost seriousness the post-Conciliar renewal of the Society; he is not an old-fashioned Jesuit but a very modern one. He combines an intense and disciplined life of prayer and devotion, a visible loyalty to the hierarchical Church with a radical commitment to the poor and the promotion of justice, dialogue with religions and cultures and a courageous proclamation of the Risen Christ. I would like to think that all of us, not least the Jesuits, will be renewed and challenged by this papacy, revitalised by Francis' missionary zeal. As Pope Francis says: "Only if one is centred on God is it possible to go to the fringes of the world!" And in today's dazzlingly pluralistic world, it is to the frontiers that all of us must go.

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