

Pope Francis's Strong Thought

by Keith Edward Lemna

Does a literature review of the most serious writings about or from Pope Francis confirm him to be a champion of “pragmatic” Christianity in the mold of “weak thought”? “Weak thought” (*pensiero debole*), the invention of the Italian atheist and nihilist Catholic Gianni Vattimo, is the most self-aware and logically consistent form of contemporary, progressive Christian (a-)theology.¹ It is, of course, not known to the run of journalists or editorialists in the English-speaking world. Nevertheless, “weak thought” underlies the prospect for the Catholic Church’s future that journalists and media personalities, not to mention many Catholic academicians, thrill to when they assess Pope Francis.

“Weak thought” would empty the counsels of the Roman Catholic Church of any claim to divinely given authority, whether to teach, to preach, or to sanctify through the communion of its sacraments. “Weak thinking” by the Catholic bishops, united to the Bishop of Rome, would disclaim definitive interpretation of the Gospel, and *for that reason* would constitute, on Vattimo’s account, a profoundly Christian configuration to the self-emptying or *kenosis* of Christ on Calvary, whereby he himself definitively gave up all claims to the prerogatives of divinity.

Consequently, “weak thought” should lead the Church to reinterpret its teachings in the arena of marriage, family, “gender,” and life issues. Where the Church’s traditional teaching enters into sharpest conflict with present-day European and North American social norms, there “weak thinking” will resign the “metaphysical violence” of *Überwindung* — of “overcoming” — in favor of *Verwindung* — of “tension,” “twisting,” “accommodation,” “healing.” “Weak thought” privatizes religion, moving it away from adherence to authoritative norms or principles and in the direction of social dialogue and edification. Santiago Zabala, a proponent of Vattimo’s work, describes the direction that “weak thought” would take the papacy:

Today, there are few Catholics who do not favor freedom of decision regarding birth control, the marriage of priests, the ordination of women, the free election of bishops by priests, the use of condoms as a precaution against AIDS, the admission to communion of divorcees who remarry, the legalization of abortion; above all, there are few who do not believe that it is possible to be a good Catholic and publicly disagree with the teachings of the Church. If the Catholic Church is to have a future as an institution in the twenty-first century, it will require a papacy that is not above the world, as the head of the Church, but in the Church as, in the words of Pope Gregory the Great, the “servant of the servants of God.” The Catholic Church no longer needs primacy in law and honor; it needs a constructive pastoral primacy, in the sense of a spiritual guide, concentrating on the duties required by the present...²

In sum, Zabala sees a “post-metaphysical,” “weak” papacy as little more than a dialogue partner for Western Europeans and North Americans, the function of which would be to consecrate the emerging secular, anthropological consensus that has come about in some ways apart from and in stark contrast to the Catholic Church’s teachings.

¹ For a summary of Vattimo’s views, see: Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, tr. Luca D’Asanto and David Webb (Stanford University Press, 1999); Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Thomas Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009); Thomas Guarino, “The Return of Religion in Europe? The Postmodern Religion of Gianni Vattimo,” *Logos* 14:2 (2009): 15-36.

² In Rorty and Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 16.

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Does the papacy of Pope Francis fit into this mold? In this essay, I shall suggest that, so far, books about Pope Francis lead us to think that it is not so very clear whether he is, or at least might become (through what is considered to be his admirable open-mindedness) a champion of a sort of “weak thought.” On the other hand, I shall suggest, books that give us direct access to his writings disclose a Francis who commands a more robust, metaphysical, “stronger” Christian thinking than Vattimo would approve on any level. Yet, I will suggest in conclusion, even these books do not completely dispel what the journalists have told us about him, for there is indeed “weakness” in Pope Francis’s “strength.”

Certainly, Pope Francis has become a veritable superstar celebrity in the eyes of journalists, and his penchant for populist theology and spirituality has earned him the loving admiration of those who daily throng St. Peter’s Square to hear him speak. In the United States, he has already been featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* (as 2013 “Person of the Year”), *Rolling Stone Magazine*, and even *The Advocate*, hardly traditional bastions of support for the Roman Catholic Church. Such publications generally understand Francis to be the great “liberal” reformer of Catholicism, who is indeed willing to set aside claims to divine authority, to make the Church’s “official” thinking “weaker” in Vattimo’s sense. By their accounts, Francis embodies a desperately needed correction to the malign legacy of his two immediate predecessors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, who sought to revive an “authoritarian” papacy, to subvert the “spirit” of the reformist Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), convened by Pope John XXIII. These two “retrograde” pontiffs, as the media narrative would have it, closed the windows to the modern world that John XXIII had wanted to throw wide open; they thwarted John’s intention that the Church reach accommodation with the democratized and pragmatic sensibilities of contemporary Western Europeans and North Americans, particularly in regard to the sexual revolution. Pope Francis, in presumably taking up again the mantle of John XXIII, has taken on the aura of “superpope,” agent of a “transformative” papacy, a notion that Francis himself has acknowledged and publicly deplored.³

This sort of picture of Pope Francis — as atheist who will put an end to the Church (see the infamous remarks of big-media personality Bill Maher⁴), as champion of “weak thought,” or, even as emissary of what has been called the most popular religion in the United States, “moralistic therapeutic deism” (a kind of spontaneous cultural expression of the instinctive, populist, American version of “weak thought”⁵) — might seem implausible on its face. There are those, media adulators aside, who might hope that a review of the literature on the Pope’s life and thinking would dispel this kind of fantasizing. Nevertheless, the most pertinent secondary literature on Francis so far tends to encourage the view of a Pope who is uniquely open to the “weak Gospel” of Vattimo’s theorizing. From the outset of his papacy, books have been rushed into print, sounding out, often in subtle ways, the hope for a “weaker” Church, a Church of dialogue without proclamation, a Church of the suffering humanity of Jesus, his eternal divinity “bracketed” or discounted altogether.

Very soon after Francis’s election, the well-known Vatican-watcher Andrea Torinelli, who had known him as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, published what seemed to be a very innocuous book on the new pope.⁶ The book contains some interesting biographical tidbits and a lengthy rehearsal of journalistic rumor-mongering

³ “Pope Francis Grants Interview to Italian Daily Corriere della sera,” Vatican Radio, last modified March 5, 2014, accessed May 13, 2014, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/03/05/pope_franis_grants_interview_to_italian_daily_corriere_della_sera/en1-778625

⁴ “Bill Maher: The Pope’s an Atheist, and the Vatican Will Likely Poison Him,” National Catholic Register, last modified June 2, 2013, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/matthew-archbold/bill-maher-the-popes-an-atheist-and-the-vatican-will-likely-poison-him>

⁵ “The Francis Factor,” The Archdiocese of Baltimore, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.archbalt.org/about-us/francis-factor-omalley.cfm>. Archbishop O’Malley is at pains to insist in this presentation on Pope Francis that the latter is not, in fact, a “moralistic therapeutic deist,” as some have made him out to be. The expression comes from Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶ Andrea Torinelli, *Jorge Mario Bergoglio: Pope of a New World*, tr. William J. Melcher (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013). In a similar vein, one might also point to a book by John Allen Jr., *Against the Tide: The Radical Leadership of Pope Francis* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 2014). This book is a bit more updated than Torinelli’s but written in the same vein. See also, Matthew E. Brunson, *Pope Francis* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2013). This book gave a nice early look at Pope Francis and does a nice job detailing his Argentinian background and without any detectable ecclesio-political slant.

concerning the conclave that elected him. It is written in a perfunctory hagiographical style, and in many ways provides a nice, initial, popular introduction to Bergoglio's life and his pastoral sensibilities.

However, Torinelli's work also presents a subtle "hermeneutic of weakness" regarding the Pope's thought and character. The book portrays Pope Francis as a pastor who is willing to forego the rigors of Church discipline and doctrine for the sake of concrete pastoral exigencies. One almost senses a sigh of relief on Torinelli's part in this regard, because the previous two popes had stressed so consistently, from the time of Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (1978), the anthropological relevance of the Church's doctrinal claims. They forthrightly taught that pastoral practice can be effective only if it communicates a doctrinally correct appreciation of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, John Paul II stressed the universal veracity of the Church's moral norms and the need to recover metaphysics in theology. Pope Benedict XVI, for his part, insisted that only the Trinitarian God affirmed in the ecumenical councils is the God of love, and that charity can flourish only through the living communication, in the sacramental communion of the Church, of Trinitarian doctrine. Torinelli's book, in my opinion, is among the first readings of Pope Francis to signal hope for the dawning of a new era of papal understanding in this regard, an era in which doctrine and praxis will no longer be so thoroughly conjoined. Pastoral praxis will become "weaker"; doctrine, responding to practice, will elevate the "imperatives" of an unmoored loving-kindness over the communication of eternal verities. This "weakening" would in fact be a return, so it is thought, to the guiding pastoral wisdom of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI.

Admittedly, I have read Torinelli's book through the lens of *Vatican Insider*, the renowned, ecclesially themed website of *La Stampa*, the newspaper that employs him. The daily articles of *Vatican Insider* tend to accentuate Pope Francis's "weakness." One can see this by contrasting these daily publications with those of Sandro Magister, the Vaticanist who created the equally renowned website *La Chiesa*, which highlights Pope Francis's strength in standing up to the regnant secular thinking on anthropology. Tellingly, the *Vatican Insider* website has featured the opinions of Leonardo Boff regarding Pope Francis.⁷ Boff, a theologian and former Franciscan priest, was once an embattled stalwart of a directly Marxist form of liberation theology. His heterodox ecclesiology earned a silencing under John Paul II, and he is now dedicated to reflecting on environmental ecology. Boff lacks Gianni Vattimo's conceptual rigor and his sophisticated assessment of the history of ideas. However, his prescription for the future of the Church regarding marriage and family, life issues, and the like echoes Vattimo's. Boff is of the opinion, as reported by *Vatican Insider*, that Pope Francis is much closer to his view of things than many assume. Torinelli, for his part, does point out in his book that Pope Francis is doctrinally conservative, but book and website alike are given to the tantalizing prospect that, with Francis, pastoral practice may induce a "weakening" on the side of doctrine.

This hope for a "weak" papacy is spelled out unambiguously by the journalist Paul Vallely, in one of the most substantial books yet devoted to Francis.⁸ This book relies on a deeper treasury of research than one finds in Torinelli's initial effort. Predictably, like Torinelli, and like most authors on Pope Francis to this point, Vallely spends a great deal of time discussing the conclave, and gives obligatory background information (now available from myriad sources, including many under review here) on Pope Francis's life. Vallely stresses Francis's experience as Provincial Superior of the Jesuits in Argentina, for his thesis is that Francis's celebrated "open-mindedness," his non-judgmental pastoral attitude, is owing to a conscience troubled by his role in the Argentine junta's "Dirty War" (1976–83) against dissident citizens from the Left.

Vallely's narrative describes the young Jorge Mario Bergoglio, appointed Provincial Superior in 1973, at age 36, as a "conservative," trying to roll back the clock of Jesuit formation to the pre-conciliar hour from which the Jesuits had, in the meantime, moved forward. His involvement in the events of the "Dirty War," which impacted the second half of his term as Provincial (1976–79), Vallely suggests, profoundly shook his convictions. Vallely discusses this thesis in great detail: the "Dirty War" is, he thinks, essential to who Pope Francis is now, for it changed him in a decisive manner.

Allegations that Fr. Bergoglio had been complicit in the actions of the Argentine junta had surfaced in the investigations of the post-junta Alfonsín government (1984), and were revived, widely aired — and widely rebutted — in the immediate

⁷ Cf. "With Pope Francis Spring Has Arrived," *Vatican Insider*, last modified April 29, 2013, accessed May 14 2014, <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/inquiries-and-interviews/detail/articolo/boff-pope-el-papa-24413/>.

⁸ Paul Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

wake of Francis's election. Principal to the allegations was the fate of the Jesuit Frs. Francisco Jalics and Orlando Yorio, who were under Fr. Bergoglio's direct supervision. Somehow denounced as active supporters of leftist guerillas and terrorists, they were kidnapped by the government from the slums in which they ministered to the poor and were imprisoned and tortured. Set free after five long months of harrowing captivity, they were convinced that Fr. Bergoglio had been at least in part responsible for their ordeal.

Pope Francis has consistently and publicly denied complicity in their kidnapping. He claims to have intervened directly with the military government for their release, at least in secret, although some dispute this account. Torinelli dismisses unequivocally charges that Pope Francis was complicit in these matters, but Valley lingers on the issue. Did Pope Francis aid or abet the military regime's "Dirty War," especially in regard to the Jesuit priests under his care as Provincial Superior? Valley comes to the conclusion that he generally worked clandestinely and in secret for the good of the priests under his charge and for others. However, he suggests that Pope Francis suffers from bad or at least ambiguous conscience about his conduct. Could he have done more? Should he have been more public in his opposition to the military regime? These are surely, Valley thinks, questions that run through the Pope's mind.

In much of the second half of his book, Valley draws the portrait of a pope driven by a troubled conscience to be more "open-minded" about movements in the Church, such as liberation theology or radical pastoral outreach to the poor, that, prior to the "Dirty War," he had been inclined to dismiss on principle. Bad conscience seems to make for good ministry. Valley appears to suggest that we might expect Francis's open-mindedness to extend to other issues as well. Who knows what such open-mindedness might be inclined to embrace as the Church moves forward? The pope, once a bit stodgy and retrograde, has seen the (literally) potentially fatal error of his previous intransigence. He has become, one might say, "weaker," in imitation of the Suffering Servant who renounced his divinity.

Valley's portrait of Pope Francis in this regard is not as crudely drawn as many offered by his colleagues in the mass media, but he does, it seems to me, prop it up, as do his colleagues, by confecting a "Spirit of Pope Francis," an "open-minded" alter ego calculated to tame the instinctive doctrinal "conservative." Such a pope might be led to disabuse himself of claims to doctrinal authority for the sake of extending a pastoral embrace to elements in the Church and in the world that oppose some of the Church's traditional teachings, particularly in the anthropological domain. In the end, for all practical purposes, such a pope would not, in fact, prove "doctrinally conservative" at all.

Somewhat more promising among the secondary literature is a book that Pope Francis has himself been pleased to see published, *Francis: A Pope For Our Time*, by the Argentinian journalists Luis Rosales and Daniel Olivera.⁹ Rosales and Olivera do not insinuate that Pope Francis is driven by bad conscience and is open to Vattimo-like "weakening" of Catholic thought, as many have publicly desired and Valley seems to argue. Their book is certainly hagiographical, but in a relatively anodyne manner. It is divided into two parts. The first traces the standard points of Francis's biography, seeking to show how his experiences have shaped his pastoral practice, from his deep prayer life to his work with the poor in Argentina. For instance, as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, and well after the era of the "Dirty War," Pope Francis did much to encourage ministry to the poorest of the poor, who live in the slums on the periphery of the city. We learn from one of his priests that Pope Francis thought that the center or heart of Argentina is, in fact, on the periphery of the city, where the poorest of the poor reside, rather than in its traditional cultural center, the Plaza de Mayo. As Archbishop, Francis himself gravitated to the periphery, and his experience there surely has shaped his consistent message: the Church must "go to the periphery" — whether social, economic, or spiritual — where dwell those who belong at the center of the Church's evangelization.

Hence, Rosales and Olivera see Francis as a prophetic pope, whose teachings recall (as Francis, too, seems to acknowledge) the prophet Amos, who himself attacked the exploitation of the poor by kings in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Yet, Francis is, they are at pains to insist, no Marxist, because, as they argue, he sees Marxism as an ideology, and he eschews all ideologies, including fascism and liberalism, that obstruct a pure acceptance of the practical teachings of the Jesus of the Gospel.

⁹ Luis Rosales and Daniel Olivera, *Francis: A Pope For Our Time: The Definitive Biography* (West Palm Beach, FL: Humanix Books, 2013). On Pope Francis's approval of this book, see "Pope Francis: Thumbs Up for Biography," last modified March 21, 2014, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/Pope-Francis-Luis-Rosales-biography-book/2014/03/21/id/561028/>

In the book's second half, the authors explore the impact they expect Pope Francis to have on the issues facing the Church today. What does it mean, they ask, to have a pope so rooted in the example of Saint Francis? For one thing, they suggest, it means that the Church will become much more a "poor Church for the poor." The authors insist that in embracing voluntary material poverty, on the model of both Saint Francis and Pope Francis, the Church can better combat the spiritual poverty of the modern age, which refers to the loss, especially among the affluent of the "first world," of connection "to the transcendental meaning of our journey in this world."¹⁰ Pope Francis's eponymous invocation of Saint Francis also portends, in their view, a greater environmental ecological awareness and openness to dialogue with Muslims, and a new, inspired witness on the part of the Bishop of Rome to the modern, mendicant religious orders. The book explores what the authors expect will be Pope Francis's profoundly positive impact on ecumenism, and they suggest that his Latin American roots mark him particularly as the pope for our time, in light of the Church's growth in the Global South.

Rosales and Olivera largely avoid their peers' tendentious portraiture. Nevertheless they do, in the very first paragraph of the book, make a statement that might be taken to set the tone for the rest of the book: "His [Pope Francis's] humility and simplicity, combined with his proven political prowess and his ability to communicate, create reason to hope that the Vatican will change its course after years of abandoning the essence of Christ's teachings and path."¹¹ I find it difficult to interpret this statement except as invective against the previous papacy; it is difficult, too, to locate its gravamen, except in disappointed desire for "weaker" pastors. Although, and in the next paragraph, the authors insist that the pope is in fact a "doctrinal conservative,"¹² their observation reads like a concession; it pales against their enthusiasm for Francis's "irreverent symbolic gestures,"¹³ tokens of a pastoral de-emphasis on doctrine and discipline in the Church.

In contrast, Pope Francis's own words offer distinct evidence of "stronger thought" than many of his advocates, both in the mass media and in the books so far explored, might wish to ascribe to him. Doctrine and praxis appear not much disjoined in his thinking. One of his old Argentinian Jesuit teachers, Father Enrique Eduardo Fabbri, has implied that Pope Francis is not strictly a disciple of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S.J. (1927-2012), the former progressivist Archbishop of Milan, who counseled a doctrinal, pastoral "weakening" to the Church, and who famously said that the Church is 200 years behind the times.¹⁴ Many contemporary journalists assume that Pope Francis is purely and simply a Martinian,¹⁵ which, in some practical respects, would make him rather indistinguishable from Vattimo. Fabbri is a self-admitted Martinian, and he suggests that Pope Francis and he never developed a very close relationship because he, Fabbri, has been a little too Martinian or too "advanced" (Fabbri's word) in his thinking on marriage and family issues for Pope Francis.¹⁶

Certainly, when we read Pope Francis's own words, we are struck, as I have suggested, by a thinker who is indeed "stronger" and "less advanced," both doctrinally and pastorally, than the media-born figure in whom many have placed their deepest hope. He is not a "Martinian" *simpliciter*. Two interviews, given as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, have been published as books and translated into English; these indicate at junctures that Francis is given to "strong thinking" and is not about to accommodate the ambient culture in ways that would degrade the Church's doctrinal inheritance

¹⁰ Rosales and Olivera, p. 115.

¹¹ Rosales and Olivera, p. xi.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Pope Francis: Our Brother, Our Friend*, Alejandro Bermúdez ed. and trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 35-39. This book is much worth reading in order to get background on Pope Francis directly from the people who knew him in Argentina. Space prohibits me from discussing this book further in the present review.

¹⁵ Cf. Paul Elie, "The Pope in the Attic: Pope Benedict in the Time of Pope Francis," *The Atlantic* (May 2014), accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-pope-in-the-attic/359816/>

¹⁶ *Pope Francis: Our Brother*, p. 36.

in the anthropological domain. Were the mass media attuned, so to speak, to the “whole Francis,” he would surely be somewhat less popular with them.¹⁷

An interview Pope Francis gave to the Argentinian journalists Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin has served as a foundation for several secondary sources that have explored the pope’s biography.¹⁸ The first half of the book deals with his family history and his path to the priesthood and religious life. Pope Francis demonstrates throughout his refined literary background, which is a subject, we learn, that he was asked to teach as a young Jesuit, even though he had no previous background in the subject matter of literature. The first half of the book offers theological reflections of real strength: the necessity of work as the answer to the social question of the modern age and the importance in the Christian life of suffering for the sake of imitating Christ. Regarding the latter point, Pope Francis stresses that self-sacrifice, deprivation, and fasting are essential to spiritual growth, as long as these are not exaggerated in the manner of the Spanish Baroque period and are lived with cheerfulness and joy, on the model of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a saint for whom Pope Francis, like all of his papal predecessors stretching back a hundred years to Pope Pius X, has a special fondness.

The second half of the book deals with a range of specific religious questions that the Church faces in the current globalized social context. Pope Francis comes across in this part of the book as deeply motivated by the missionary mandate of the Church. Mission means, for him, that the Church must go outside itself, risk injury to itself (as he says), in meeting people where they are, rather than stay locked up within itself, subject to sickness and atrophy. He emphasizes the need for a friendly, welcoming Church, a Church that communicates the joy of the Gospel. Must a welcoming, joyful Church be shaped by “weak thought”? Francis seems to deny it: “I sincerely believe that in this day and age the most basic thing for the Church is not to limit or reduce the requirements or make this or that easier, but to go out and seek people, to know people by name.”¹⁹ So, at the same time as Francis stresses the need to accentuate, in the service of evangelization, what unites Christian believers with the rest of humanity, he announces his conviction that what is distinctive in the Christian life need not, ought not, be downplayed.

In the second interview book, a conversation between Pope Francis and the Argentinian rabbi Abraham Skorka, Pope Francis’s inclination to “strong thought” emerges with even greater clarity.²⁰ This book ranges over a wide variety of topics, from the existence of God, to the meaning of death, to public policy in Argentina. Pope Francis’s desire to evangelize is no less clear in this book, but his commitment to the fundamental tenets of Catholic doctrine, even in areas that are ceaselessly called into question in the present day, is enunciated with genuineness. For instance, he affirms the existence of the devil very plainly: “I believe the devil exists.”²¹ As pope, he has not failed to emphasize this “hard teaching” of the Church. He has done so more than any other pope since Pope Paul VI. The devil is not, for him, merely a metaphor for the darkness of the human heart, although he affirms as well the “hard teaching” of the doctrine of original sin, which has indeed, he insists, left our hearts darkened.

It is true that some of the “weaker” accents in Pope Francis’s teachings, those that are so beloved by the mass media, come out in this exchange with Skorka: for instance, his thinking on sin, which, if given a slight turn in a certain direction, can give the appearance of antinomianism (which is, after all, true of Saint Paul as well), his desire that the Church should avoid any hint of proselytism in its missionary endeavors, or the depth of his aversion to Catholic “restorationist” traditionalists, whom he regards as fundamentalists, more troubling to the Church’s mission than people who publicly disavow the Church’s teachings. On the other hand, he upbraids contemporary society for its consumerism, hedonism,

¹⁷ And yet, there may be already an awakening in this respect. See Jamie Manson, “Time to Face Facts: Pope Francis Agrees with Assessment of LCWR,” National Catholic Reporter, last modified May 13, 2014. Accessed May 14, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/time-face-facts-pope-francis-agrees-doctrinal-assessment-lcwr>

¹⁸ Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words*, trans. Laura Dail Literary Agency (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2013).

¹⁹ *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words*, 81.

²⁰ Pope Francis and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the 20th Century*, trans. Alejandro Bermúdez and Howard Goodman (New York: Image, 2013).

²¹ Pope Francis and Skorka, p. 8.

and narcissism, and reaffirms the Church's consistent adherence to natural law anthropology on abortion and on marriage and family issues, even going so far as to describe the push for homosexual marriage in the present day as the pursuit of an "anti-value" and an "anthropological regression."²² It is, in sum, difficult to make out a case that Pope Francis's papacy will eventually be shaped by "weak thought" on these issues.

Recently, three books have been published in English that contain articles, homilies, and spiritual conferences that Francis had written or given as Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires and that render his "strong thought" especially vivid. The first is a collection of messages to Argentine educators.²³ He promotes in this book the development of schools truly devoted to integrated education, to an education that respects the development of the whole person. He recognizes that the religious dimension of the person must be respected and nurtured, and that education should involve the transmission of wisdom, which entails "transmission" of Jesus Christ, who is wisdom incarnate. Francis's vision of education, as advanced here, opposes reductionist programs that would constrain the development of the intellectual life to the domains of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, that would, in *fine*, strip education of its religious dimension.

A particularly "strong" book devoted to Francis's own words, the second in the list of three to which I have just referred, details his profoundly theological and spiritual understanding of humility.²⁴ Here, Pope Francis emerges as a Christocentric thinker whose vision of the Christian life is rooted in deep, meditative prayer. The first part of the book contains presentations that he gave in Argentina on the nature of corruption; the second, on self-accusation, was inspired by the writings of Saint Dorotheus of Gaza, a sixth-century Christian monk and abbot. In these writings, Pope Francis communicates a strong sense of the need for interior transformation, away from corruption, but always informed by a sense of one's own inadequacy and need for God's merciful grace.

Corruption is, Francis argues, an interior state, the result of a fundamental turning away from God's grace through the delusion of habitual self-sufficiency. It can make its appearance in different ways, but it stems from a failure to receive God as one's most prized treasure. Corruption is different from sin, for it consists in habitual failure to open oneself to mercy, or in the disposition to refuse forgiveness and even to deceive oneself that one has no need of forgiveness. Corruption can set into the fabric of society as well as in the individual soul. As the liberation theologians speak of "social sin," Pope Francis speaks of "social corruption," but for Francis it is clear, as it may not be for some liberation theologians, that the guilt of the individual cannot be gainsaid. We each bear personal responsibility for our own corruption.

Francis's reflections on corruption, sin, and self-accusation show us a thinker who has strongly received the Christian monastic tradition. His prescriptions for the moral life are thus not detachable from his acceptance of orthodox Christian doctrine and spiritual practice. These are intertwined in his thinking as in the thinking of the Church Fathers. He is Augustinian in his understanding of grace. His focus on the need to be ever-vigilant regarding the truth of our own interior states of soul, so as not to become corrupt, hypocritical, or pharisaical, recalls the like focus of the Church Fathers — East and West. Like the Fathers, whom he has so clearly read, he grounds his understanding of the Christian life on the beatitudes of Christ, on the revealed architecture of interior transformation through grace. His reflections on corruption speak to all human beings — Christian and non-Christian — and call us all to conversion or to openness to God's merciful revelation in Christ, which is to overcome our false and habitual sense of self-sufficiency. The call from corruption to conversion, as Pope Francis understands it, is a call to divest ourselves of the inner Pharisee that resides within each one of us.

²² Pope Francis and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth*, p. 95.

²³ Pope Francis, *Education for Choosing Life: Proposals for Difficult Times*, trans. Deborah Cole (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014). Other sources for Pope Francis's thought could be explored here. For instance, *The Aparecida Document*, the most recent production of the General Conference of the Bishops of Latin American and the Caribbean, or his writings on Luigi Giussani, the founder of the ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation. Recently I have explored these in Keith Lemna and David Delaney, "Three Pathways into the Theological Mind of Pope Francis," *Nova et Vetera* 12:1 (Winter, 2014): 25-36. Also, this article explores the Pope's connection to the Argentinian "theology of the people." Space does not permit me to rehash this material in the present article.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *The Way of Humility: Corruption and Sin, On Self-Accusation*, trans. Helena Scott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013).

Finally, the book in which the strength of Pope Francis's thinking and teaching stands forth most clearly is *Open Mind, Faithful Heart: Reflections on Following Jesus*, the third book to which I have referred and the last that I want to treat here.²⁵ A trinitarian, Christocentric, ecclesiocentric mindset is on full display in this book, as is a deep, prayerful appropriation of Sacred Scripture. In a word, this is the best book that has been published by or about Pope Francis thus far; it would not surprise me were it to become, over time, a modern-day, spiritual classic. Were someone to ask me to recommend just one book that gets to the heart of Pope Francis's thinking, I would direct him or her to this title.

Open Mind, Faithful Heart is a collection of texts from diverse spiritual retreats or conferences that Francis gave in Argentina to collaborators in Christian ministry. There is a compelling unity to the book, made possible by the book's editors and by Francis's coherent and consistent vision. The book is very practical and concrete. It is truly pastoral, but not without overt rooting in Catholic doctrine.

A forward by Argentine Archbishop José María Arancedo of Santa Fe de la Vera Cruz nicely summarizes the structure of the book, which is articulated in four parts. Archbishop Arancedo compares the logic of its structure to that of the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and he notes that its spiritual reflections are rooted in an orthodox Christology, which gives both the human and divine natures of the person of Christ their proper due. The starting point for the book is encounter with Jesus Christ and reflection on the nature of prayer; the need for personal relationship with the God revealed in Christ remains its theme throughout.

The stress that *Open Mind, Faithful Heart* places on the requirement that the Christian believer follow the way of the cross if he or she is to live an authentically Christian life illuminates Francis's early papal teaching. In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, his first official papal writing, Pope Francis reminded us that the Christian life should not be forlorn or a life of sadness: it is a life of joy.²⁶ But the joy he speaks of comes through the glory of the cross.²⁷ There is, then, no opposition in the pope's thinking between the theology of the cross and a theology of glory. His exhortation is to follow Christ with missionary vigor wherever he wants to lead us, even if our life should be demanded of us. This sense of personal mission will, he insists, bring renewed zest and joy to the Christian life.

The theme of joy connected to the glory of the cross is prevalent in *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*. The pope calls us to live, perseveringly, a "constant encounter" with Christ; to live in perfect accordance with the mission that God has given to each of us and with the courage of the cross. God calls us in Christ to meet the evangelical needs of the Church, in love for him, for self, and for humanity.

There is, in fact, both strength and weakness in this proposal. Because these characteristics are uniquely juxtaposed in his teachings, we must acknowledge, in the end, that the journalists whose writings I have recounted in this review have a point in interpreting Pope Francis as they do, even if they have not quite taken the full measure of him. His doctrinal orthodoxy, the "strength" of his thinking, is the orthodoxy of radical conformity to the weakness and *human* failure of the cross of Christ.

The final few reflections contained in *Open Mind, Faithful Heart* help us to understand this apparently paradoxical juxtaposition of characteristics (see chapters 44-48 especially). Pope Francis wants us to grasp the totality of Christ's divestment of self on the cross, so that we can fully embrace the cross in our own lives and understand what it means to be Christian. Jesus dies, he reminds us, as the "accursed one" (cf. Deuteronomy 21:22-23), hung on a tree outside of the walls of Jerusalem. A prophet, we are told in Scripture, cannot be killed outside of the walls of Jerusalem (Luke 13:33). Jesus is thus not put to death as a prophet, but as a political revolutionary or zealot. He is not recognized for who he is. Pope Francis explains: "Jesus' total divestment includes the manner of his death on the cross: he did not even have the final satisfaction of dying in a way that bore witness to the true meaning of his existence."²⁸ The totality of Christ's

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart: Reflections on Following Jesus*, trans. Joseph V. Owens, S.J. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company).

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican Website, 2013, accessed May 14, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, I.5.

²⁸ Pope Francis, *Open Mind, Faith Heart*, p. 278.

divestment is the inescapable model of all Christian discipleship. We must give ourselves to God in total surrender. We must exemplify, in our own lives, the “failure” of the cross. Good Jesuit that he is, Pope Francis universalizes Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s counsel in this regard:

To those making the Spiritual Exercises and deciding about how to lead their lives, he [Saint Ignatius of Loyola] proposes that they ‘choose poverty with Christ poor rather than wealth, contempt with Christ laden with it rather than honors’ (SpEx 167) — all this for the sake of following Jesus Christ more closely. This proposal of Ignatius is not a debatable spiritual opinion of a particular epoch; it is not just a ‘corollary’ that can be more or less negotiated according to circumstances. It is of the very essence of the destitution of Christ: if we do not accept it in the total way that Ignatius proposes, then we are not wholeheartedly following the Master.²⁹

The weakness that Pope Francis embraces, with Saint Ignatius of Loyola, has nothing in common with nihilistic “weakness.” If, in Vattimo’s “weak thought,” God hands over all of his power to man by revoking his own, an act symbolized in the kenosis of the cross, and thereby dismantles any relationship of power or verticality between himself and humanity, for Pope Francis the glory of the cross is an act whereby the God-man efficaciously models total, perfect human surrender to the will of the Father. The Father remains the Father and Christ is always the only eternally begotten Son of God. Certainly, Pope Francis understands the “weakness” of the cross to have certain implications in the pastoral life of the Church, implications of which we are often incognizant. He might very well differ from his two immediate predecessors in the papacy in this respect. In this limited sense, the journalists may be correct. Individual Christian witness and the witness of the Church at large must be, on Pope Francis’s view, willing to embrace failure. It is a mistake for the Church to seek political dominance. Its witness must be more subtle than that, a “broken witness,” one might say. The Church must be, unqualifiedly, willing and open, in Pope Francis’s view, to show the power of God’s transforming mercy through its own weakness and humility. In this way only can the Church reflect in itself the attractive glory of God’s eternal, triune life.³⁰

But none of this entails a Lent without Easter. Pope Francis has been insistent on the point.³¹ I think it is clear from his own writings that none of this entails for Pope Francis a remaking of Catholic dogma, a denial of the triune God who has power over death. Rather, it requires, on his view, a better understanding and witness to the “paradox” of the Gospel: the strength of God’s love is known to us only in the weakness and suffering of our flesh. Mission, in his view, can only proceed from a position of weakness, but it must be a joyful, merciful weakness, confident in the power of God to wipe away every tear. The doctrine of the Church must be embodied through this witness, not jettisoned or bracketed. Indeed, the doctrine can be better embraced by people who think they oppose the Gospel when it is offered to them with the face of mercy and self-surrender. This does not entail a reduction of the papacy to a mere partner in dialogue, in the sense implied by the quotation from Zabala given above.³² The dialogue of mercy that Pope Francis seeks is a bringing across to people of the Logos of Christ. For Pope Francis, Christian dialogue should seek to bring to people the hook of divine revelation, including the dogmatic tradition through which God’s eternal, triune love is made known to us, under the lure of humility and mercy, attitudes of the spirit that, he thinks, conform to the dogmas of the faith.

As we move forward in interpreting Pope Francis, it is essential that we read his own pre-papal words, and *Open Mind, Faithful Heart* is of special importance in this respect. The journalists who have written about Pope Francis thus far have missed the nuances of his theological message, however important and valuable their work is in giving us access to important biographical details. They have hoped for a change in doctrine or even, in some cases, for a bracketing of the transcendent God. Some have hoped for a re-envisioned Christology. None of this is to be found in Francis’s own words. In his words there is weakness in strength, to be sure, but the weakness in this strength is the cross of Christ, through which the divine power of the eternal Trinity inaugurates the life and authority of the Church and brings real resurrection of the flesh.

²⁹ Ibid, 279-80.

³⁰ Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, I.5.

³¹ Ibid, I.6.

³² See above, note 2.