
A Liberating Theology of Service

ON MARCH 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ,¹ the Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was elected as Bishop of Rome. In this chapter, I want to examine the theology of this pope “from the ends of the earth,” as he described himself to the crowd gathered that evening in St. Peter’s Square. How does Francis’s approach help give more substance to a liberating theology of grace? To answer this question, I will first situate Francis’s theology within the Argentinean and broader Latin American context. Then I will look at the four principles that underlie his theological vision, all of which go against theologies of entitlement and support theologies of responsibility and service. This will emerge even more clearly in the following chapter where I concentrate on his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, since in it he engages with precisely the issues that are preoccupying me in these pages. What does it mean for all to be sisters and brothers? The pope gives no simplistic answer either, but he does set out a program for action that deserves to be taken seriously.

Pope Francis and Liberation Theology

When Pope Francis remarked that the cardinal electors had to go to the end of the earth to find a pope, he was referring both to Acts 1:8 and to

1. There are many biographies of Pope Francis. By far the best that I have read in English is Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*.

his native country of Argentina. The country is always something of an anomaly in Latin America, including its version of liberation theology. At the time of his election, it is probably fair to say that liberation theologians were not entirely convinced by Bergoglio.² When I was studying in the Jesuit Center for Higher Studies (now the Jesuit Faculty of Philosophy and Theology) in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in the early 1990s, a number of our teachers would go off for some months to teach in the Jesuit theologate in Argentina. The way we heard the story (also from some Argentinean Jesuits who passed through) was that there was more or less a civil war between two factions among Jesuits in Argentina, one of which was portrayed as “liberationist” and the other as “conservative.” Bergoglio was seen as the leader of the conservative faction.³

This impression was not improved by the final document of the Fifth Conference of CELAM, the Latin American Council of Bishops, which took place at the National Shrine of Aparecida, in the Brazilian state of São Paulo, in May 2007. Bergoglio was tasked with chairing the committee that was responsible for drafting the Conference’s final document. The Fourth Conference had taken place fifteen years previously in 1992 in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, to mark the five-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Europeans in the Americas and had been seen as a threat to liberation theology.⁴ Thus when the Fifth Conference decided to abandon the See—Judge—Act methodology, there were grave fears that this was another attack on liberation theology.⁵

Despite this, there were also some signs of hope. Bergoglio’s pastoral practice and obvious simplicity of lifestyle were welcomed and even before he spoke, his choice of the name Francis was an indication of change. As he himself recorded, when it became clear that he had been elected, his friend, Dom Claudio Hummes, then the Cardinal Archbishop of São

2. See Magister, “Quando Bergoglio,” for one account of how this distrust was expressed.

3. For what actually happened, I can best refer the reader to Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, especially chapter 5, “The Leader Expelled,” and within it, 191–97. He is admittedly very sympathetic to Francis, but his reading of the situation seems to me fair and not at odds with the few facts that I heard.

4. Cabestrero, “Santo Domingo.”

5. On this, see Libanio, “Conferencia de Aparecida.” But see also Brighenti, “Documento de Aparecida,” which compares the original final document produced at the CELAM conference in Aparecida, under the leadership of Cardinal Bergoglio, with that passed by those Brighenti calls “the censors” in Rome, and shows how Pope Francis has reaffirmed the original text in his writings as pope.

Paulo, had urged him “Don’t forget the poor.” From his very first encounter with the press, a couple of days after his election, it became clear that Francis was in fact speaking the same language as liberation theologians. He too desired, he said, “a church that is poor and for the poor.”⁶ Since then, his acceptance of the theology of liberation and more importantly of theologians of liberation has been notable. He has worked with Leonardo Boff on the text of his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, he has greeted and rehabilitated Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, both victims of attacks by the Vatican in the past. He also lifted the canonical suspension imposed on Ernesto Cardenal by Pope John Paul II. The cases of Gutiérrez and Sobrino both reveal a lot about how Francis acts.

As Pope, Francis first met with Gutiérrez in private in 2013, and again more publicly in 2014, as well as a brief meeting during the papal visit to Peru in January 2018. Later that year, on June 8, 2018, Gutiérrez celebrated his ninetieth birthday. Pope Francis sent him a letter in which he thanked him for his service to the church, continuing:

I join with your thanksgiving to God and I thank you for how much you have contributed to the Church and to humanity by your theological service and your preferential love for the poor and the discarded of society. Thank you for all your efforts and for the way you have challenged the conscience of each one, so that no one can remain indifferent to the drama of poverty and exclusion.⁷

With Sobrino, who, unlike Gutiérrez, was the subject of an official notification from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, there was also a brief but telling encounter. In October 2018 the canonization of Archbishop Oscar Romero took place in Rome. This in itself was a demonstration of Francis’s commitments and vision, the process having been stalled under his predecessors. After the canonization, there was a meeting in the Audience Hall for the more than 6,000 Salvadorans who had come to Rome for the event. A Salvadoran Jesuit prison

6. On this, see Sedmak, *Church of the Poor*. He quotes this remark and that of Cardinal Hummes on p. ix. See also Ilo, *Poor and Merciful Church*.

7. There are numerous sources of the text of the letter. See, for example, “Father Gustavo Gutiérrez.” The Spanish text reads: ““Me uno a tu acción de gracias a Dios, y también a ti te agradezco por cuanto has contribuido a la Iglesia y a la humanidad, a través de tu servicio teológico y de tu amor preferencial por los pobres y los descartados de la sociedad. Gracias por todos tus esfuerzos y por tu forma de interpelar la conciencia de cada uno, para que nadie quede indiferente ante el drama de la pobreza y la exclusión.”

chaplain, Javier Sánchez, recounted what happened as he, Sobrino, and another Salvadoran Jesuit stood in the hall:

When [Francis] was passing by and was already turning to people on the other side of the aisle, the [other] Salvadoran Jesuit said to the Pope: “Your Holiness, Jon Sobrino is here.” Francis’s face lit up and he smiled broadly, turned and gave the Jesuit theologian a warm embrace. This was the little dialogue between the two: “Ah, Jon” [said the pope. Sobrino replied]: “I’ve left a copy of the last book I published, called ‘Conversations.’ I guess they will give it to you” [The pope then said] “Thank you, Jon, for the book, but thank you most of all for your witness.” At this point other hands tugged at the Pope’s cassock and he moved on, but not without giving another sincere and grateful smile to the theologian.⁸

I mention both these stories, not only because they are beautiful in themselves, but because they sum up the kind of approach the pope has constantly favored. Inasmuch as it is an action-based demonstration of who God is for Francis, it is not impossible to speak of this as one element of his theology, which always focuses on what people do or do not do, rather than on what they say, and whether they tick the right boxes.⁹ Following his own four principles that I will examine shortly, he responds first to people and not to ideas, which is to say that he acts “graciously.” The gratuity of the embrace, the repeated use of the word “gracias,”¹⁰ none of these are accidental. This is not to say that they are carefully planned gestures designed to be noticed approvingly. It is simply that grace encounters grace and the recognition of goodness in others, of how people have sought to live their lives in fidelity first to God, second to God’s people, and especially to the loved of God, the poor and excluded, and finally, though not therefore least, in fidelity to the body of Christ, the people of God, namely the church.

To this end, Francis himself picks up on the words of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, who said “Being a Christian is not the result

8. The story is contained in a report by Vidal, “El Papa.”

9. The Czech theologian and religious commentator Tomáš Halík speaks of what he calls “Pseudoreligion F,” where F stands for fundamentalism, fanaticism, and Pharisaism (which in Czech also begins with F—*farizejství*). These latter are the kind of people who insist on the box-ticking approach to faith, and who are amongst the strongest opponents of Pope Francis within the Roman Catholic Church. See Halík, “Pseudonáboženství F”

10. Meaning “thank you,” of course, but also “graces.”

of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”¹¹ And this leads on to a particular theological perspective, to which I now turn.

The Theology of Francis

One of the features of Francis that the “box-tickers” have sometimes picked up on is the fact that he does not have a doctorate in theology. This, they imply, means that he is not competent to pass judgement on theological issues and that therefore anything he says that is even remotely theological can be safely ignored. But to say that there are various levels at which theology occurs is a commonplace and the task of the pope is not primarily to produce academic theology. Moreover, as a Brazilian writer on Francis’s theological method says: “There is no doubt that the teaching of the magisterium constitutes a theological teaching, given that it occurs through a discourse that thinks faith.”¹² Or as another author puts it, drawing on a distinction made by Thomas Aquinas between two *magisteria*, or two “*cathedrae*” within the church, the *cathedra pastoralis* and the *cathedra magistralis*: “Pope Francis . . . exercises the pastoral *cathedra*. . . . His engagement is not that of a professional academic theologian, but of a pastor who seeks above all else the spiritual well-being of the people of God.”¹³

None of this implies that his theology is therefore any less “theological” or less important. Indeed it could be argued that the opposite is true, that a theology that seeks to express the grace of God, the active and transformative presence of God at work in the world, based on the experience of that activity, is what is most central to the proclamation of the Christian gospel. It would also be unwise, and inaccurate, to write off Francis as theologically uneducated. Rather he draws on a rich tradition of European and Latin American theology, even if his “engagement with European Catholic theology was by no means an uncritical repetition of the thought of others, but a creative and inspired appropriation grounded in pastoral praxis, spiritual discernment, theological reflection, and an

11. Pope Francis, “Papal Foreword,” in Lee and Knoebel, *Discovering Pope Francis*, xiv. The Spanish original is also printed on the preceding pages, and the quotation is at xii. The reference is to Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 1.

12. Passos, *Método Teológico*, 9.

13. Codina, *Teología do Papa Francisco*, 8.

acute awareness of the concrete life of societies and the church.”¹⁴ This engagement with both Latin American and European theology provides key insights on the mutual relationship between Francis’s theology and ministry, in which each shapes the other.

Theology of the People

I want to begin by considering briefly some of the intellectual roots of that theology. The pastoral roots are both the most obvious and the hardest to capture in writing. In Francis’s case, these roots can be found especially in the parish that he established in the region around the Argentinian Jesuit study center, the Colegio Máximo. This vast parish¹⁵ was home to new internal migrants and as much as any books it was from these people that Francis also learned his theology. But in his contact with them, he also brought to bear his reading, both narrowly theological and, as has become clear in his pontificate, more broadly cultural.¹⁶

The first crucial influence on Francis in terms of the shape it gives to his theological thinking is the theology of the people (*teología del pueblo*). In one of the most acute analyses of Francis’s thought, the Argentinean theologian Emilce Cuda, says that “The first questions that arise in anyone who reads Francis are: ‘from which theology does he take the categorical *corpus* that is found as the basis of his discourse? Is his theology the Theology of Liberation? . . . Is the Argentinean version, called Theology of the People, part of liberation theology?”¹⁷ We will come to her answer to this question later, but first we need to look at the theology of

14. Bryan Lee and Thomas Knoebel, “The Story of a Symposium: Why We Need a Theological Understanding of Pope Francis’s Thought,” in Lee and Knoebel, *Discovering Pope Francis*, 7.

15. Containing some forty thousand people, spread over seven *barrios*, it continues to be a place where Jesuits in formation gain pastoral experience. See Austen Ivereigh, “Close and Concrete: Bergoglio’s Life Evangelizing a World in Flux,” in Lee and Knoebel, *Discovering Pope Francis*, 28. The size is not unusual. The community I participated in Brazil, in the area of Justinópolis, part of the municipality of Ribeirão das Neves on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte was at that time part of a parish that contained something like one hundred thousand people, with sixteen different church communities (and a couple of additional churches). It is now a separate parish, but the parishes remain very large.

16. The fact that Francis does not entirely distinguish between the two is an integral part of his theological method. See, for example, Passos, *Método Teológico*, 103.

17. Cuda, *Para leer*, 26.

the people,¹⁸ which prior to Francis tended to be largely ignored outside of Argentina.¹⁹

There were several important contributors to the foundation and development of the theology of the people. Among the most influential was the Argentinean priest Lucio Gera (1924–2012).²⁰ Like Bergoglio, his family was Italian, though, unlike the pope, he was himself born in Italy, moving to Argentina at the age of five. Ordained to the priesthood in 1947, he taught theology for over fifty years. He was present at the final session of the Second Vatican Council.²¹ After the Council he was an important member of the Episcopal Pastoral Commission (COEPAL), established by the Argentinean bishops to implement the pastoral insights of Vatican II. He was joined in this enterprise by others, such as Rafael Tello (1917–2002)²² and the Jesuit Juan Carlos Scannone (1931–2019). As a young theologian Scannone began his teaching career at the Jesuit theologate in Argentina at the same time as Jorge Mario Bergoglio was beginning his theological studies there, and he is often credited with having stimulated Bergoglio's interest in the nascent theology of the people, both then and later after Bergoglio's ordination, including when he was rector of the theologate.²³

The theology of the people was born, then, in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, and was a specifically Argentinean contribution to the attempt to contextualize the Council for Latin America, both contributing to, and later drawing on insights from, the CELAM conference in Medellín.²⁴ The designator “theology of the people” refers to two elements, one of which is theology, the other being the people. Leaving aside, for now, what is meant by “theology,” the first question to ask is

18. I will use the English translation, but I think there are overtones to the word “pueblo” or “povo” that can be lost in the English word “people,” as I explain below.

19. There were some exceptions. One of its principal claims, about the centrality of the people, was examined, for example, by Fernández Beret, *El Pueblo*. But the literature outside of Argentina is very scarce before the election of Francis.

20. On Gera, see briefly Albado, “La Teología del Pueblo,” 39–46; Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 41–56. Further references to Gera's work are given below.

21. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 16. See also the entry on the website Cardijn Priests, that notes that Gera was there as an invitee, not a *peritus*; see “Gera, Lucio.”

22. For an introduction to Tello, see Albado, “La pastoral popular.”

23. See Lemna and Delaney, “Three Pathways,” 31.

24. Scannone, *La teología del pueblo*, 16–20.

what is meant by the word “*pueblo*,” “people.” In a lecture that he gave on popular religion, Lucio Gera asked:

What is the historical condition in which the people (*pueblo*) of Latin America, considered in relation to their religiosity, were and are with respect to the Christian faith? Considered in their particular religious behavior, are they a Christian people or not? We are interested in directly capturing the contemporary situation of these peoples (*pueblos*); nevertheless their current situation can only be understood if we know the process of the formation of these peoples (*pueblos*).²⁵

The first point to note is the sudden and unexplained move between “Latin American people” and “these peoples.” The use of the word “people” or “peoples” obviously takes us back to Laclau and Mouffe, both in their understanding of the centrality of the theme and in their recognition that a people is constructed rather than simply existing. Given a shared background, especially in regard to Peronism, this is not at all surprising.²⁶ But the differentiation between people and peoples points to a key element of the theology of the people, namely its insistence on the cultural setting. In this sense, of course, it is possible to speak of Latin American people and peoples,²⁷ though this already introduces an unresolved and generally unresolvable tension into the debate about culture and indeed religiosity.

Gera himself already understood this tension. In the article quoted above, he goes on to offer a brief definition of what he understands by “people.” For him, “a people is a collective subject, that is a specific form of community. It is, then, a plurality of individuals, a reduced multitude and a unity: unified and (relatively) totalized.”²⁸ The reference to the people as a “collective subject” immediately raises the question of the relationship to Marxism. Proponents of the theology of the people would

25. Gera, “Pueblo,” 102–3.

26. See Cuda, “Latinoamérica en el siglo XXI,” 60; Azcuy, “Introducción,” in Gera, *La teología argentina*, 10: “Above all it is necessary to mention the phenomenon of Peronism, with its populist roots, its political viewpoint and the strong antagonisms that this produced in the country, but also the ‘emerging of the popular’ that was perceived in this political movement by the representatives of the nascent theological-pastoral vision.”

27. On what “Latin American” means in liberation theologies, see Noble, “Singing.”

28. Lucio Gera, “Pueblo, religión del pueblo e Iglesia (1976),” 723, cited in Albado, “La Teología del Pueblo,” 41. Gera’s article, quoted above, was originally a lecture and first published as Gera, “Pueblo.”

argue that their theology is not Marxist in the way that they think liberation theology is.²⁹ A former rector of the Pontifical Argentinean Catholic University and now Archbishop of La Plata, Víctor Manuel Fernández, said that “the Theology of the People distinguishes itself from both Marxist analysis and from liberal visions. For this reason it does not fit well into either of these two perspectives, which it considers *populist*.”³⁰ In part, this may be to do with a struggle present within Marxism itself. As Emilce Cuda points out:

In the 1960s the Marxists in Argentina became post-Marxists and placed themselves under the title of national and popular thought. They justified this, criticizing the category of *class* and putting in its place that of *people*. In this way, the Argentinean critical thinking that defends the demands of the popular sectors for the basics of life is not called *Marxist* in Argentina but *populist*, and public opinion terms it “the left.”³¹

The theology of the people belongs more to what two Israeli authors have called a synthetic Marxist postmodernism, whose proponents

espouse a “dual perspective” that recognizes the simultaneous workings of two heuristically separate chains of hierarchy, namely, a hierarchy of classes and a hierarchy of identities. The first one creates material exploitation and inequality; the second one, symbolic underestimation or disrespect. The main point is that material and cultural inequalities cannot be reduced to each other, even if in real-life situations they are always intermingled.³²

This refusal to reduce the cultural to the material is a central point of theology of the people and for Pope Francis, though both also recognise that the two are not entirely separate. But theology of the people is also influenced by post-Marxists, such as Ernesto Laclau, and his reading is, like that of Gera, Tello, Scannone, and others, influenced by his experiences in Argentina. Classic liberation theology would probably be best classified, in these terms, as drawing on a Marxist Postmodernism,³³

29. For example, Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour, “The ‘Theology of the People’ in the Pastoral Theology of Jorge Mario Bergoglio,” in Lee and Knoebel, *Discovering Pope Francis*, 42–69; Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 27.

30. Fernández, *El programa*, 76, cited in Cuda, *Para leer a Francisco*, 52.

31. Cuda, “Latinoamérica en el siglo XXI,” 59.

32. Filc and Ram “Marxism after postmodernism,” 300.

33. Filc and Ram, “Marxism after postmodernism,” 299–300.

recognizing the validity of some aspects of post-modern thought, but insisting on the continuing centrality of the material (or for liberation theology more specifically the economic).

In other words, when it comes to distinguishing classic liberation theology and theology of the people, the use of language may frequently conceal as much as it reveals and, though there are clear differences, there is without doubt a kind of Wittgensteinian “family resemblance.” The degree, then, to which theology of the people differs from liberation theology elsewhere on the continent depends often on the context in which the distinction is being made and why. For my purposes here it is enough to say that, whilst recognizing differences in emphasis and even in methodology, there is a broadly shared focus,³⁴ especially, as is clear in Pope Francis, in making the poor a privileged *locus theologicus*.³⁵

The People in the Theology of the People

The importance of the theology of the people for Pope Francis is not measurable in terms of direct references to it.³⁶ Rather, it serves as a kind of theological *Sitz im Leben* for his theological approach, giving it a foundation and a context. It is therefore worth returning to look in more detail at how this theological tradition understands the “people,” given the importance of this term in understanding populism. In attempting to define who the “people” are, Juan Carlos Scannone is one of a number who have turned to Ernesto Laclau, to compare and contrast his understanding of the “popular,”³⁷ of the people, and of populism.

Scannone wants to distinguish the concept of “people” in Laclau and in the theology of the people, but he does say that Laclau’s use of the “empty signifier” could be analogically used to understand the unity

34. On this, see also Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 88–94.

35. See Cuda, *Para leer a Francisco*, 161–62. Scannone, “Situación,” 263–64, argues that the poor are not a *locus theologicus* in the way Melchior Cano used the term, but that they can be understood as a “hermeneutical locus.”

36. See Albado, “Teología del Pueblo,” 53–55, showing how Francis utilizes themes from the theology of the people, even if there are no direct references to Gera, Scannone, or Tello.

37. “Popular” in Spanish and Portuguese is most fundamentally the adjectival form of “pueblo” or “povo” and is perhaps best rendered in English as “people’s.” However to avoid excessive feats of grammatical gymnastics, I will translate it as “popular.” The problem of how to translate “pueblo” was noted by Scannone in an interview, as reported in San Martín, “Pope’s Late Teacher.”

of the people, even if he admits that his way of using this term is against Laclau. The example he uses is “justice”: “the signifier ‘justice’ is the same, even if not univocally so, but rather analogically, according to the type of injustice (economic, political, racial, gender, religious discrimination . . .) that is being fought against and what justice is claimed.”³⁸ However, despite Scannone’s own disclaimer, there are some overlaps between his thought and that of Laclau that can help us go deeper into the understanding of the “people.” For, as Emilce Cuda notes, “Ernesto Laclau . . . enables us to understand a little more the position of the theologians of the people towards the social problem.”³⁹

Scannone is one of a number of authors to speak of a “theology of the people or of culture.”⁴⁰ This relationship is developed by Rafael Tello:

The Church as People of God has to be incarnated in a temporal people. . . . And given that the people is constituted as a culture, it has to incarnate itself in a culture. The Church as People of God does not exist as a separate entity, but always—and this is its particular mission—becomes incarnate, and in becoming incarnate the People of God is realized in a concrete fashion, whilst transcending all particular ways. This leads to the people of God incarnated in diverse cultures being also diverse—whilst maintaining its unity—as the People of God. . . . That is to say, culture gives it an incarnated modality and the universal values of the people of God and thus multiplies it in space and time, without ever exhausting it.⁴¹

The emphasis and reminder that the theology of the people refers always to the people as culturally rooted is key, and explains, for example, the emphasis on popular religiosity.⁴² But culture is also a political reality,

38. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 90. This may be closer to Laclau’s concept of the equivalential relationship.

39. Cuda, *Para leer a Francisco*, 142.

40. Sometimes, they speak of theology of the people and of culture (Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, chapter 1, 15–40), sometimes as here of theology of the people or theology of the culture (see, for example, Cuda, *Para leer a Francisco*, 131), or sometimes of theology of culture or theology of the people (see, for example, Cuda, *Para leer a Francisco*, 67), or even theology of culture or of the people (Cuda, “Latinoamérica en el siglo XXI,” 61).

41. Rafael Tello, tape recording of the *Segundo encuentro de reflexión y diálogo sobre pastoral popular*, cited in this way in Fernández, “Con los pobres,” 188.

42. As just one example, see the article cited above, Gera, “Pueblo, religión del pueblo e Iglesia.” See also the story recounted in Albado, “Teología del Pueblo,” 34, on how observing people making the Stations of the Cross outside in a park inspired Gera in his reflections.

expressive of the way in which groups of people understand their place in a wider society, in what Laclau referred to as the “*populus*.” Culture is the self-understanding of a particular group. For theology of the people and Laclau, the particular interest is in the poor, the excluded, the oppressed, those Laclau terms the “plebs.” What happens, as we saw in chapter 2, is that there is a tension between “cultures,” between different totalizing hegemonic discourses. Cuda describes the roots of “the crisis that threatens the current global system” as lying “in an egoistic hegemonic culture, rather than in the social relations of production, since the latter are merely the effect of the former.”⁴³ Not all cultures are good, and not all cultures help construct a people that is good. That is the problem with theologies of entitlement, in Brazil, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere.

Rather than a clash of civilizations or a clash of economic models, then, what lies at the heart of most forms of current social malaise, according to this reading, is a hegemonic struggle between two cultures, which in the traditional language of liberation theology might be called cultures of death and cultures of life. For Cuda, at least, the theology of the people seeks to view this clash from a post-Marxist perspective, in that Marxist readings have tended to focus too strongly on the global economic context at the expense of a more focused reading of particular groups.⁴⁴ The struggle is how to allow for a focused engagement with the life of the community.

Francis takes this emphasis on the people from the theology of the people, but “the people” is not simply a synonym for everyone. To understand more of what the pope understands by the term, we can turn to his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. In the second and third sections of this document (paras. 186–238) he looks at the inclusion of the poor in society and then at the common good and peace in society. As is suggested by the genre of the document (Exhortation), such publications are meant to encourage, and in this case specifically to encourage people to a re-orientation or, more theologically, to conversion. But for Francis and for theologians more generally in Latin America this conversion is never individual (although it will be personal, in the sense we saw in the previous chapter). The task is to include the excluded (the poor) in society, and to speak of the common good is already necessarily to turn to society.

43. Cuda, “Latinoamérica en el siglo XXI,” 61.

44. Cuda, “Latinoamérica en el siglo XXI,” 61–63.

Notably, Francis begins with the place of the poor. A people can only be fully constructed if the poor are part of that people. The realization that this is the case is, says Francis, “born of the liberating action of grace within each of us” (EG, 188).⁴⁵ Liberating grace is what makes it possible in the first place to hear with the ears of God, to hear the cry of the poor and to respond. It enables solidarity, something that “presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few” (EG, 188). Here already we see one of the four central pillars of Francis’s approach, to which I will return soon, namely the superiority of the whole over the parts.

For Francis, too, the option for the poor⁴⁶ remains crucial. It is “primarily a theological category” (EG, 198), since in the first place it says something about God. This is important to recognize. It is not an economic, cultural, or political choice, and in this sense, at least in principle, it refuses to engage in the establishment of a hegemonic discourse. In practice, of course, the option for the poor also includes concrete choices about the way in which society should be structured that have a clear and necessary political dimension. But such choices are a secondary element of the option for the poor. Primarily it is a theological statement, and the socio-political engagement is secondary both chronologically and in the hierarchy of truths. “Secondary” does not mean that political choices are unimportant, but it is a reminder that they are at the service of faith.

45. Numbers refer to paragraph numbers of *Evangelii gaudium* (EG). The Spanish and Italian versions speak of the “liberating work of grace” (*obra liberadora, opera liberatrice*). See also Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 101: “[People] may choose to love and unite themselves with an oppressed class. . . . Such an encounter gives the lie to a different kind of encounter that is glorified in societies that are wrapped up in their own egoism. . . . They would evade the demands of Christian praxis as a love committed to the liberation of other human beings from inhuman and unjust conditions.” In other words, liberating grace is utterly different to the grace underlying theologies of entitlement, which are always egoistical.

46. Unlike his predecessors, Francis speaks not only of the “preferential option for the poor,” but also of “the option for the poor.” The difference/similarity between the two terms has given rise to much debate, with some claiming that “preferential option” marks a watering down of the original. Perhaps a more helpful approach is suggested by Rohan Curnow, who argues that there are two different and ultimately competing interpretations, one favored by liberation theology (and I would argue Pope Francis), the other by the Vatican, especially John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI. The liberation approach focuses, as does Francis, on the importance of conversion. See Curnow, “Which Preferential Option.” See also Sedmak, *Church of the Poor*, 89–97.

A Theology of, with, and for the Poor

There can be a danger in both the theology of the people and in other forms of liberation theology of a reductionist language about the poor or the people, who often seem to end up as an indiscriminate “they.” Pope Francis appears sometimes to give into this temptation too.⁴⁷ It is a challenge going back to the Medellín conference. The bishops at Medellín desired to serve the poor, but they could not claim to be poor, materially, educationally, or in terms of social status. However, even if the bishops or the pope cannot claim to be literally poor, Francis also realizes that this is not an excuse not to stand with the poor, in all their diversity. This is not because the poor are necessarily morally superior. Rather, as Gustavo Gutiérrez put it, “the option [for the poor] is not made because the poor are good, but because God is good. If the poor are not good, then it’s still the same. Many people became disappointed with the commitment [to the poor] because they believed the poor were good. If they had committed themselves because God is good, they would still be committed.”⁴⁸ Again we see that the option for the poor is a theological option, because of who God is and how God interacts with the world.

Nevertheless, neither Gutiérrez nor Pope Francis want to imply that there is no need to take concrete steps to change things. In *Evangelii gaudium* and, as we shall see, in *Fratelli tutti* Francis is clear that there also needs to be systemic change. It is one of the key claims of liberation theology that the poor are not poor because of some natural law or because God wants them to be poor: the poor are poor because they are made poor.⁴⁹ In other words, and here we cannot avoid hegemonic language, systems are set up in such a way that some are rich and many more are poor, and these same systems lead to the dehumanization of the poor (and ultimately of the rich).

The task of the church, then, for Francis, is to be with and of the poor. To do this is to reject the existing status quo. In the second chapter of *Evangelii gaudium* there are a series of rejections of what the pope calls

47. For example, in EG, 200, he writes: “The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith.” But precisely because he is talking about faith and the role of the church, it may be argued that the division is, if not justified, at least understandable.

48. Carrero, “Entrevista.”

49. See, for example, Gutiérrez, “The Liberation of the Poor: The Puebla Perspective,” in *The Power of the Poor*, 125–65; Zaffaroni, “Processos.”

“some challenges of today’s world.” These are outlined in four sections: “No to an economy of exclusion” (EG, 53–54); “No to the new idolatry of money” (EG, 55–56); “No to a financial system which rules rather than serves” (EG, 57–58); “No to the inequality which spawns violence” (EG, 59–60). Apart from the content, in full agreement with the language of liberation theology (the attack on unjust systems that kill), what is important to note here is that the pope is making a systemic point. The problem is not with individuals, or at least not primarily with individuals, even if it is true that systems function with the collaboration of people. But the systems create the parameters within which people act, and it is these parameters that need to change. The problem is structural sin.

These comments are predominantly theological. With liberation theology and the theology of the people, he wants to make a claim about who God is and how God acts (grace) and therefore who human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are called to be. Thus at an important level the rejection of the current *modus operandi* of the markets is not a political one, a battle between “right” and “left.” The struggle is not only between two political hegemonic discourses, but between what is in agreement with the will of God for his people and what is against it. The task of the church, “faced by a society that suffers so much and is so unjust, so lacking in meaning and values,” is “to manifest the *merciful face of God* . . . to be a place of welcome so that it can lead our contemporaries to an encounter with God in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰ The system is one that prevents this encounter, and thus it needs to be changed.

The precise relationship between those who are called “the poor” and the “people” is not made clear, either in Francis or in the theology of the people. Essentially, we can see the poor as “political and cultural subjects in the process of liberation.”⁵¹ The recognition of the poor as “subjects” is a complex and contested part of liberation theology. First emphasized in the early days of liberation theology by people like Hugo Assmann, the claim that the poor were subjects of their own liberation sought to highlight the fact that the poor were not simply a problem for other people to talk about, but that they themselves were the fashioners of their own future—hence the claim that the poor were “subjects of their own history.”⁵² The

50. Miranda, *Reforma de Francisco*, 91.

51. Passos, *Método Teológico*, 70. Passos uses this description in relation to the theology of the people.

52. One of the leading proponents in the first wave of liberation theology of the idea of the poor as subject of their own history was the Brazilian theologian Hugo

problem has always lain in the clash between desire and reality, since the poor are also those who are excluded and denied their subjectivity. Again Francis's approach is a theological one, recognizing that each person is a child of God, and that therefore, the status of poor people needs to be constantly reaffirmed, since the system denies it.⁵³

The emphasis on the poor as subjects comes also from the way in which, whatever the differences, they are also seen as part of the "people." As Juan Carlos Scannone explains, theology of the people "understands the people as the communal subject (*sujeto comunitario*) of a history and a culture."⁵⁴ There are links to the idea of a "nation," but as *ethnos* rather than as state.⁵⁵ A people shares a common experience of life and most importantly they share in the search for the common good. It is therefore the poor and the working class who "constitute the structuring axis of the people-nation."⁵⁶ Those who do not search for the common good exclude themselves and are the "anti-people."⁵⁷

Theology of liberation and of the people see in the people a particular expression of faithfulness.⁵⁸ This must be understood with care. Gutiérrez's warning needs to ring in our ears, for the claim is not that

Assmann. See, for example, Assmann, *Pueblo oprimido*. He would later come to criticize this emphasis. See Assmann, "Apuntes." For a brief but nuanced reading, see Bingemer, *Latin American Theology*, 55, 100.

53. In this, the argument would be similar to that of movements such as Black Lives Matter. The lives of the poor (and of course in Brazil and many other Latin American countries the poor are also those with African or indigenous forebears) cannot be objectified, but have to be recognized as having value simply as human lives

54. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 83 in a chapter entitled, in translation, "People' and 'Popular' in the Social Reality, in Pastoral Activity, and in Theological Reflection."

55. For a consideration of the biblical background of the term, and especially the concurrent use of all three "people" words in 1 Pet 2:9–10, see Horrell, "'Race,' 'Nation,' 'People.'" All three senses are present, it seems to me, in theology of the people, without sufficient distinction always being made.

56. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 84. Scannone refers to the "poor and workers' sectors" (*los sectores pobres y trabajadores*), so my translation is misleading if it seems that he ends up introducing classist language, which theology of the people wants to avoid because of its Marxist overtones.

57. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 84–85.

58. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 205–7. Scannone refers to EG, 95 and 96. The English version only has the phrase in the first of these paragraphs, which in Spanish speaks of the *Pueblo fiel de Dios*, "God's faithful people" in the English version. Paragraph 96 in Spanish speaks of the *la realidad sufrida de nuestro pueblo fiel*, which the English renders as "the real lives and difficulties of our people." The phrase is also not translated in paragraphs 120, 125, and 142.

simply by belonging to a particular group, there is a moral superiority to given individuals. Because the people is a construction, the way of life, the ethical attitude, the understanding of history come first, and it is those who are committed to this way of life who are the people. A clear sign of belonging to this group is faith, and faithfulness to God, which reminds us yet again that the people are in the first place a theological and not a socio-economic or even socio-cultural category. The references to the faithful people (of God) in *Evangelii gaudium* underline the way in which, despite the challenges and difficulties of life, the people do not give up on God, because they know that God does not give up on them.⁵⁹

The Four Theological Criteria of Pope Francis

None of this, however, can be taken for granted, which is why Pope Francis develops his famous four criteria, which he introduces in EG, 221:

Progress in building a people in peace, justice, and fraternity depends on four principles related to constant tensions present in every social reality. These derive from the pillars of the Church's social doctrine, which serve as "primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomena." In their light I would now like to set forth these four specific principles which can guide the development of life in society and the building of a people where differences are harmonized within a shared pursuit. I do so out of the conviction that their application can be a genuine path to peace within each nation and in the entire world.⁶⁰

Although introduced into the magisterium of the Catholic Church at this point, the principles themselves date from much earlier.⁶¹ They state that: i) time is superior to space; ii) unity prevails over conflict; iii) the reality is more important than the idea; iv) the whole is superior to the part.⁶²

59. See, apart from the references in the previous footnote, for example, EG, 14, 119, 130, 135, 144, 274.

60. The citation within the quotation is from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 161. The paragraph in question constitutes the preamble to the fourth chapter on the principles of the church's social doctrine.

61. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 256–57. See also Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 142–43.

62. This is the order in which they appear in *Evangelii gaudium*. In order of

Romano Guardini and the Need for Opposites

Before moving on to the principles themselves, I turn to a brief consideration of a key source for Francis's thinking here, namely Romano Guardini, on whose thought he had at one stage planned to write a doctoral dissertation. Guardini worked with a theory of polar opposites⁶³ and it is on this that Bergoglio drew, rather than on Hegelian dialectics.⁶⁴ What is meant by this theory is the necessary coexistence of two opposites, two poles of behavior or of existence that can neither be reduced one to the other or superseded by a synthesis.⁶⁵ Guardini sought in his teaching on opposites (*Gegensatzlehre*) to bring together distinct realities (life and faith, reflection and action, for example).⁶⁶ The provisional title of Bergoglio's proposed doctoral thesis, "Polar Opposition as Structure of Daily Thought and of Christian Proclamation," showed how he had planned to focus on precisely this aspect of Guardini's thinking.⁶⁷

Even though he barely managed to start, let alone complete, his doctoral thesis, he never lost interest in Guardini, nor in the theme, and it continued to inspire him. Indeed, as he himself noted, the section on the four principles was inspired by the work from the thesis.⁶⁸ For my

development in Bergoglio's thinking, however, the order is somewhat different: unity prevails over conflict, the whole is superior to the parts and time is superior to space, were the first three, with the principle of reality being superior to ideas coming only later. Apart from Scannone quoted in the previous footnote, see the (somewhat confusing) account in Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 57–60.

63. On polarity in Guardini, see Ghia, "La verità è polifonica." The musical imagery Ghia employs is suggestive, since it reinforces the need to maintain difference as constitutive of harmony. Ghia does not make this point, but it is also of course true that not all difference is harmonious and polyphony has its rules and structures too.

64. How present Hegel is in Latin American liberation theology is a debatable point. Certainly there are hints of a Hegelian approach in some Latin American philosophy, including among those linked to liberation theology such as Ignacio Ellacuría. On Ellacuría, see Schulz, "La presencia," 302–4.

65. Bergoglio's dialectics are discussed in more detail in Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 65–68. Borghesi offers a clear distinction between Bergoglio and Hegel. For a critical reading of the dialectical background of the four principles, pointing also to some of their problems, see Regan, "The Bergoglian Principles."

66. See Gorevan, "Only Connect." It is perhaps worth noting that Guardini speaks of *Gegensatz* and not *Widerspruch*. That is, opposition is something that is placed over against something else, rather than an opposition that sees some kind of resistance (speaking against); see Mikulášek, "I Dream," 66.

67. Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 104.

68. Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 103.

purposes, it is helpful to consider the approach adopted by Pope Francis in relation to that of Laclau and Mouffe, when they talk of antagonisms. These, it will be recalled, are incompatible and ultimately inimical positions, especially political positions. In this sense, they too are polar opposites, just as are the theologies of grace behind theologies and practices of entitlement on the one hand, and theologies of grace behind theologies and practices of liberation on the other. Guardini's oppositions as read by Francis are, however, very different, perhaps more akin to what Chantal Mouffe calls "agonistics." The approaches of both Francis and Mouffe reject compromise or a synthesis of the opposing views, to find some kind of "centrist" position. But Mouffe still sees agonistics as adversarial. Her view would be, I think, closer to what in the first principle Francis calls "space," the struggle for possession of (or hegemony over) the political.

On the other hand, the position of Francis is one that allows for the coexistence of both poles, because both are necessary. The obvious example is how political change often ends up only bringing the same problems (of oppression, of corruption, of neglect for the poor) that were there before, only under different slogans. In the Czech Republic the post-1989 politicians have generally not been able to escape the practices of the Communist period, whatever party they belong to, whatever apparent beliefs they hold. The practices of the Communists, and going further back of other powers, such as the Nazis or the Habsburgs, in their different ways have produced a way of doing politics that is agonistic, but whose shared ground allows no growth. For Francis, if the ground shifts, then the poles need be neither antagonistic nor even simply agonistic. They can also be complementary.⁶⁹

Time Is Superior to Space

The first of the principles, that time is superior to space, sounds at first in contradiction with a strong strand in contemporary theology and philosophy that has sought to emphasize the importance of place.⁷⁰

69. Complementary is not the same as a synthesis. The positions remain different (sweet and sour flavours in a sauce), but they complement each other, rather than destroy each other. This is in other words agonistics rather than antagonism, though Mouffe would hesitate to use a word like "complementary."

70. Because he would influence Pope Francis, we can take as one example the French Jesuit philosopher, Michel de Certeau (1925–86). See, for example, his influential essay "Walking in the City," in Certeau, *Practice*, 91–110. In fact, as Borghesi,

However, it is necessary first to distinguish carefully between “space” and “place.” Although the use of these two terms is complex and not always consistent,⁷¹ broadly speaking “space” is a more abstract term, the setting within which places are located. Thus Pope Francis is not diminishing the importance of place or of the local. Indeed his insistence on synodality as a form of ecclesial governance suggests that he wants to strengthen the role of place, which would fit in with the emphasis on culture in theology of the people. This, though, points to what is meant by space and time. A culture and a people can only be constructed over time. In the words of *Evangelii gaudium*, it is only thus that it becomes possible to “generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events” (EG, 223).

Francis draws also on the polarity between fullness and limit or, in Guardini’s expression, *Fülle-Form*. The theological emphasis here is on time understood in a broadly eschatological sense, as *pleroma*, the fullness of existence in God. Although the pope does not use the language of *theosis* (deification), his claim on the superiority of time can be understood as the journey of encounter in which God descends to humanity (the incarnation) and humanity ascends to God in Christ through the Spirit. Time is, then, about processes, or, in the language I am using in this book, about the ongoing experience of grace. *Evangelii gaudium* introduces this principle in the following way:

“time” has to do with fullness as an expression of the horizon which constantly opens before us, while each individual moment has to do with limitation as an expression of enclosure. People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself. (EG, 222)

There is a tension (for Guardini, and, following him, Francis, it is an inevitable tension) between time and space or moment. Time is the movement, the dynamic progress of humanity towards God. What he terms “space” is the moment, the pinpoints on the map of the journey. But, as

Mind of Pope Francis, 238–43, makes clear, Certeau’s major influence on Francis was through his work on Peter Faber (Pierre Favre), one of the founding members of the Society of Jesus, and one of the first saints to be canonized by Francis (in December 2013). For the influence of Certeau on the distinction between time and space, see Mikulášek, “I Dream,” 68–69.

71. On this, see Agnew, “Space and Place.”

Certeau argues in “Walking in the City,” these pinpoints are always records of what is not there.⁷² Spaces are about power and immediacy and we could say that, if allowed to dominate, they are always ultimately idolatrous, since they reduce to this moment and this space the fullness towards which we journey. In a document he produced when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis had already spoken of what he calls, echoing Guardini, “the bipolar tensions,” and he reflects that “one of the sins that sometimes occurs in socio-political activity is to privilege the spaces of power over the times of processes.”⁷³ Grace, in other words, becomes an entitlement to be seized now rather than a gift unveiled over time.

Unity Prevails over Conflict

The second principle referred to in *Evangelii gaudium* is that unity prevails over conflict. The use of words like “prevail” or “superior to” are clear reminders of the “bipolar tensions.” Because time is superior to space does not mean that space is unimportant, as we have just seen. And because unity prevails over conflict is not to say that conflict is unnecessary. Indeed Pope Francis begins this section of *Evangelii gaudium* by affirming that “conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced” (EG, 226). This is important to remember. Conflict will occur.⁷⁴ Francis lived through the most brutal years of the military dictatorship in Argentina, and is only too well aware of the reality of conflict. But conflict cannot be responded to, either, simply by being conflictual or by being, as he puts it “its prisoners” (EG, 227). The call instead is to be peacemakers, creating a people and a place of peace. Francis does not himself use the word “*shalom*,” but it is about being constructors or agents of *shalom*, in which conflict is not allowed to be the final word.

Acting in such a way,

72. Certeau, *Practice*, 97.

73. Bergoglio, *Nosotros como ciudadanos*, 4.1.1. The phrase “bipolar tensions” (*tensiones bipolares*) occurs for the first time on p. 13. “Bipolar” here is obviously not a medical reference, but a reference to two poles, two contradictory points, which have to coincide, something that Bergoglio, following the Orthodox tradition, tends to call antinomy; see the reference in Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 66–67.

74. In a fascinating essay “The Grace of Conflict,” Bradford Hinze draws on both Pope Francis’s account in *Evangelii gaudium* and on Michel de Certeau, to argue that in situations of conflict the “offer of God’s grace . . . can elicit an examination of conscience and a repudiation of prejudice and behavior that provide the conditions for conversion and transformation, repentance and healing” (42).

it becomes possible to build communion amid disagreement, but this can only be achieved by those great persons who are willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity. This requires acknowledging a principle indispensable to the building of friendship in society: namely, that unity is greater than conflict. Solidarity, in its deepest and most challenging sense, thus becomes a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions, and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity. This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides. (EG, 228)

I quote this paragraph more or less in full, because it seems to me to sum up very well the thought behind all of the principles. First, Pope Francis is realistic. It is possible to build communion amid disagreement, and it is possible because it has been done. But this does require special qualities in those who try to carry out this task, and even great people may not always succeed. An example would be the trip of Francis of Assisi to visit the Sultan,⁷⁵ where Francis succeeded neither in his initial desire of being martyred (something that the pope would, I think, consider as a temptation to prioritize space over time) nor in bringing the peace he wanted. But even those who are able to take the necessary steps must enter into solidarity, which involves making history, that is, entering into a constructive process that allows for opposites to bring life. The tensions are not resolved but the strengths of both are allowed to coexist, for the common good.

Francis is clear that what is needed is neither pure conflict—diversity without unity—nor pure unity without diversity.⁷⁶ In *Evangelii gaudium* he speaks of a reconciled diversity,⁷⁷ in which the differences are not destroyed but neither do they dominate. In fact, in EG, 230, he

75. For an engrossing account, see Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan*. Pope Francis comments on this story in *Fratelli tutti*, 3, though principally as a story of going out to the other.

76. See a sermon he gave on the Feast of Pentecost in 2017, cited in Massimo Borghesi, “The Polarity Model: The Influences of Gaston Fessard and Romano Guardini on Jorge Mario Bergoglio,” in Lee and Knoebel, *Discovering Pope Francis*, 112.

77. The phrase is used in EG, 230, in quotation marks. The concept of reconciled diversity, or more specifically “unity in reconciled diversity,” first entered the ecumenical dialogue in 1974 in a report prepared by the World Council of Churches after two meetings in Geneva. On this, see Meyer, “Einheit in versöhnter Verschiedenheit,” especially 99–100. See also Chapman, “Ecumenism and the Visible Unity of the Church.”

does speak of “a new and promising synthesis” that occurs because “the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity.” Diversity and conflict are not synonyms and conflict must be overcome but not at the expense of a diversity that is, as the final principle will remind us, part of a greater whole.

The Reality Is More Important Than the Idea

But before turning to that principle, the third principle, as enunciated in *Evangelii gaudium*, is that the reality is more important than the idea.⁷⁸ “Reality,” he writes, “simply is, the idea is elaborated” (EG, 231).⁷⁹ The emphasis on “reality” is a clear hint of the liberation theology influence on Pope Francis.⁸⁰ In this setting, there is an immediacy to reality that goes beyond discussions on competing hegemonies, be they antagonistic or agonistic. This is because God is both perceived and therefore understood as active in the world, the grace of God present in attempts to transform the reality as lived and experienced by the “people,” those who are poor, excluded, oppressed, be it materially, because of their gender, their beliefs, their sexual orientation, and so on.

Francis uses here a comparative adjective, “more important,” or elsewhere “superior” or, in the English translation, “greater.”⁸¹ It is not that the pope does not realize or appreciate the power of ideas, something that would be incongruous in a written document or indeed in the enunciation of sets of principles. Elsewhere the pope has expressed the same thought by saying that people concentrate too much on adjectives rather than on substantives. Although, as is often the case with Francis when he hits on a good line, he has returned to this on several occasions, he seems

78. In the Spanish of *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis always refers to the singular, *realidad*, reality, and mostly *idea*, idea, whereas the English translation favors the plural. The distinction is small but not insignificant, since, as the previous principle made clear, there are not ultimately conflicting realities, but one reality, one time, one eschatological *pleroma*. In terms of English style, the translation may be understandable, but it needs to be read with care.

79. This is an example of where the English text uses the plural: “Realities simply are, ideas are elaborated.” The Spanish reads: “La realidad simplemente es, la idea se elabora.” And where the Spanish refers to “una tensión bipolar,” the English text speaks of “a constant tension.”

80. See Regan, “The Bergoglian Principles,” 11.

81. EG, 231: “la realidad es superior a la idea;” “realities are greater than ideas.” This is also the form used in Bergoglio, *Nosotros como ciudadanos*, 4.2.1.

to have first made the remark in an address to the Vatican's Dicastery of Communication when he visited it in 2019. He said:

The third thing I take from what I said earlier, which I am slightly allergic to: "This is something *authentically* Christian", "this is *truly* so". We have fallen into the culture of adjectives and adverbs, and we have forgotten the strength of nouns. The communicator must make people understand the weight of the reality of nouns that reflect the reality of people. And this is a mission of communication: to communicate with reality, without sweetening with adjectives or adverbs. "This is a Christian thing": why say authentically Christian? It is Christian! The mere fact of the noun "Christian", "I am of Christ", is strong: it is an adjectival noun, yes, but it is a noun. To pass from the culture of the adjective to the theology of the noun. And you must communicate in this way. . . . Your communication should be austere but beautiful: beauty is not rococo art, beauty does not need these rococo things; beauty manifests itself from the noun itself, without strawberries on the cake! I think we need to learn this.⁸²

This passing "from the culture of the adjective to the theology of the noun" is what lies behind the claim that reality is superior to idea. Ideas are abstract and like adjectives they ultimately hide or obfuscate reality. In the Spanish text of EG, 231, the pope lists many "-isms,"⁸³ which prevent engagement with the person, with reality.

82. On the visit, the first official visit of the Pope to the Dicastery, which had been formed in 2015, there was a formal address that the pope encouraged people to read, and a more informal set of comments, from which this is taken. He also made a similar comment to a gay British comedian Stephen Amos, who in a private audience with the pope asked why people like him were excluded from the church. Pope Francis replied: "Giving more importance to the adjective than the noun. That is not good. We are all human beings and have dignity. It does not matter who you are or how you live your life, you do not lose your dignity. There are people that prefer to select or discard people, because of the adjective. These people don't have a human heart." See a report on Siedlecka, "Stephen K. Amos Meets Pope Francis."

83. The English translation retains some of these words, but not all really work in English, so some are changed. The Spanish text speaks of "*los purismos angélicos, los totalitarismos de lo relativo, los nominalismos declaracionistas, los proyectos más formales que reales, los fundamentalismos ahistóricos, los eticismos sin bondad, los intelectualismos sin sabiduría,*" which the English renders as "angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of ahistorical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom."

At the heart of liberation theology and indeed of theology of the people has been an emphasis on the primacy of praxis. In what remains the most influential work on methodology in liberation theology, Clodovis Boff, after a lengthy discussion of the relation between the two poles of theory and praxis, essentially argues for a priority of praxis.⁸⁴ In arguing for the superiority of reality, the pope is following a similar line. Ideas must be incarnated, must be practiced, or else they remain what at the beginning of his book Boff criticizes as “slogans,”⁸⁵ words that look good on a banner but that change nothing. Grace, in this perspective, is not a scheme or a program or a list of ideas, but something that is revealed in God’s ongoing action in the world and interaction with creation. It is this reality that is more important than the adherence to the law, as we saw in the previous chapter. Indeed, we could paraphrase this principle as “Grace is, the law is elaborated.”

The Whole Is Greater Than the Part

The final principle is that the whole is greater than the part, or as Scannone puts it, “the whole is greater than the part (and the mere sum of the parts).”⁸⁶ In many ways this principle ends up as a kind of summary of the others, offering “a practical implication of solidarity and subsidiarity.”⁸⁷ Throughout his teaching, Francis repeatedly refers to the classic principle of Catholic Social Teaching, the common good, and the common good is always precisely that, common, for all together. The same attention to the search for fullness exists as in the other principles, here expressed as a “bipolar tension” between globalization and localization (EG, 234).⁸⁸ The danger, as Bergoglio expressed it, is that people feel themselves caught between “a globalizing universalism [and] a folkloric or anarchic localism.”⁸⁹ The positive tension is one that is modelled on a polyhedron,⁹⁰ “which is the union of all the partialities that in that

84. See, for example, Boff, *Teologia e Pratica*, 328; Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 190.

85. See Boff, *Teologia e Pratica*, 22–23; Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxii.

86. Scannone, *Teología del pueblo*, 267. Again, “greater” translates “superior.”

87. Turner, “*Pacis Progressio*,” 123.

88. See also Bergoglio, *Nosotros como ciudadanos*, 4.3.

89. Bergoglio, *Nosotros como ciudadanos*, 4.3.

90. For those like me who need to picture something to understand mathematical shapes, an obvious example of polyhedrons would be dice.

unity conserve the originality of their partiality. It is, for example, the union of the peoples (*pueblos*) who, in the universal order, retain their particularity as people (*pueblo*); it is the union of persons in a society who seek the common good.”⁹¹

As with the other principles, here too it is necessary to avoid an exclusivist interpretation. It is not saying that the parts do not matter or do not exist. The people, as the quotation above makes clear, continue to exist, as do individual persons within the people. But the persons form a union to make a people, and the people unite with other people to make peoples. The polyhedron can only be such if it consists of multiple and diverse sides, but the two-dimensional sides only become three-dimensional (complete) when assembled into the polyhedron. The tension between the individual parts and the whole is not simply about the parts trying to break away from the whole, but the whole exists because of the tension.

Theology of Grace and the Four Principles

Before I turn to see how these principles are reflected in *Fratelli tutti*, it is worth reflecting on the theology of grace that underlies them. They stand first as an implicit critique of all theologies of entitlement, even if, because the polar tensions are not allowed to be reduced to one pole, they can accommodate the thought that such theologies may have something to contribute. As Francis says in EG, 236, “Even those who can be questioned because of their errors have something to offer that should not be lost.”⁹² But theologies of entitlement are always more interested in the immediate, in the gaining of goods now, rather than working towards the fullness of the Kingdom for all. God’s grace is reduced to the moment, to the space that can be captured. Similarly they over-emphasize conflict, against the devil, against the other who is different, even against God, who is to be berated if he does not keep his side of the bargain. Grace is here weaponized, as a means of gaining a foothold and of getting rid of the other. The idea of reward and of entitlement is also the driving force, rather than the reality of people’s lives. And finally the partial, the I, is at the center, as the donator and thus the recipient. Because these are polar tensions, these are

91. Bergoglio, *Nosotros como ciudadanos*, 4.3. He returns to the polyhedron in EG, 236, and in *Fratelli tutti*, 145, 215, as we will see in the next chapter.

92. I translate here from the Spanish: the English reads “Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked.”

not always simply bad behaviors, and it may be that there are situations where they are even necessary, as a protest against pushing God too far to an eschatological justification for violence. But they are in tension with something that is “more important,” “greater,” “superior.”

Although theologies of grace cannot simply be reduced to word-count, it is nevertheless noteworthy that in *Evangelii gaudium* Francis uses the word “grace” twenty-six times.⁹³ With reference to Thomas Aquinas, he writes that “Works of love directed to one’s neighbor are the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit: ‘The foundation of the New Law is in the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is manifested in the faith which works through love’” (EG, 37).⁹⁴ Grace is manifest, not in what God gives to us, but in what each person does in love for their neighbor. Because grace is of God, it is not up to the church to be its controller or arbiter, but rather its facilitator (EG, 47, and see also EG, 94).⁹⁵ The divine origin of grace gives it a primacy in all that the church does, including evangelizing: “The salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy. No human efforts, however good they may be, can enable us to merit so great a gift. God, by his sheer grace, draws us to himself and makes us one with him” (EG, 112). This insistence on the primacy of grace is a reminder of the liberating power of grace that comes from God, the “ambience” in which we live, the train, in Boff’s parable, on which we travel.

The pope also notes that “Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it” (EG, 115), a fundamental claim, as we have seen, of the theology of the people. Grace is manifest somewhere specific, in a given culture, and the giftedness of God is received and practiced in particular settings. The theme of culture has long been important for Bergoglio.⁹⁶ Already in 1985, as rector of the Colegio Máximo, the Jesuit study center outside of Buenos Aires, he convened a conference on the evangelization of culture and the inculturation

93. The number of times the word is used is roughly similar to the count for words like “sin(s),” “salvation,” or “hope,” but much less than the words “joy” or “love.”

94. The citation in the text is from *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.108.1.

95. See also Austen Ivereigh, “Close and Concrete: Bergoglio’s Life Evangelizing a World in Flux,” in Lee and Knoebel, *Discovering Pope Francis*, 39–40, where he speaks of the task of the church as “helping people open to the workings of grace in their lives.”

96. Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour, “The ‘Theology of the People’ in the Pastoral Theology of Jorge Mario Bergoglio,” in Lee and Knoebel, *Discovering Pope Francis*, 56.

of the gospel. Bergoglio gave a brief opening address to the conference in which he affirmed that “the diverse cultures, in their movement of ascent, are a reflection of the creative and perfective Wisdom of God. Cultures are the place where creation becomes aware of itself at the highest level.”⁹⁷ To see culture as “the privileged place for the mediation between the Gospel and human beings”⁹⁸ is to recognize that culture is the setting within which God’s grace is active.

But if that is the more general truth, it is not some abstract culture (the idea) that is most important. Rather it is specifically the reality, the “diverse cultures.” In EG, 116, Francis puts it like this: “In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the ‘beauty of her varied face.’”⁹⁹ The danger that underlies every turn to culture and inculturation is that the ambiguities of culture are ignored. The specific culture is never for Francis the yardstick by which to measure the gospel, but rather it is in the culture that the presence of God’s grace is found, it is “in the gestures and simplest [*más sencillos*] cultural values that the profound wisdom of the peoples [*pueblos*] is hidden.”¹⁰⁰ The hermeneutical key that is used to read culture and the gospel is a prophetic one,¹⁰¹ that seeks to discern what each culture contains and reveals of the gracious presence of God. As a Brazilian writer on Francis’s theology of culture has put it, “the task of a Theology of Culture according to Francis implies the recognition of the signs of the presence of grace, as the presence of the Kingdom in a globalized world, read in a Christological key.”¹⁰²

Grace, the liberating work of grace,¹⁰³ is thus a key element or even pre-supposition of Francis’s theology. Grace is connected with mercy, with justice, and with the possibility of change and transformation. It

97. Bergoglio, “Discurso inaugural,” 16. A version of this text and Bergoglio’s concluding remarks to the conference can also be found in Bergoglio, “Fe en Cristo,” 23.

98. Bergoglio, “Discurso inaugural,” 17 = Bergoglio, “Fe en Cristo,” 23.

99. The reference is to John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter marking the beginning of the new millennium and the end of the Great Jubilee: John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 40.

100. Bergoglio, “Discurso inaugural,” 17 = Bergoglio, “Fe en Cristo,” 23.

101. See Luciani, “La opción,” 83.

102. Villas Boas, “Francisco e Teologia da Cultura,” 781.

103. EG, 188. The Spanish “obra liberadora de la gracia” brings to mind the original title of Boff’s work on grace, *A graça libertadora*, though in fact the Spanish title from the beginning was *Gracia y experiencia humana*.

is what unites, what helps restore the inner union within people that both becomes and accompanies the inner union of the people, marked as they are by a shared world or culture, which necessarily includes the political and the social and the economic, but is not reduced to any single element, for indeed in culture as elsewhere the whole is greater than the parts or the mere sum of the parts. In looking at *Evangelii gaudium*, I have investigated what is generally seen as the programmatic statement of Pope Francis's vision for the church. Many of the themes are present in documents such as *Laudato si'*, *Amoris Laetitia*,¹⁰⁴ *Querida Amazonia*, and others. But now I turn to the 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, since in it the Pope considers whether and how unity might prevail over conflict.

104. This title is obviously very reminiscent of *Evangelii gaudium*. Both Spanish and English translations begin with the same words: "La alegría," "The joy."