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Pope Francis: The Pope Who Dares to 'Live the Questions'

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*“..... the point is to live everything
Live the questions now, perhaps you will then,
gradually, without noticing it,
live along some distant day, into the answer.”
Rainer Maria Rilke*

Pope Francis is a man who all his life has lived his faith, questions and all.

For many people, Catholics and otherwise, who Francis is, and what he stands for as a person, is perhaps epitomised in a single statement: “Who am I to judge?” That remark has also generated a backlash, both inside the Church and outside. Moral relativism is, and always has been, a bugbear for established religion. If Francis is to be judged guilty on this count, then he could probably find solace in the thought that he would be in the same boat as Jesus, who when challenged by a clear and unequivocal statement of law, countered with an ad hominem answer – “Let him who is without sin throw the first stone!” The Catholic Church, through the centuries, has tried to deal with the ambivalence in applying absolute standards to specific actions and people, and the distinction between dogmatic and pastoral theology is of good standing. What is new perhaps, is that

the Pope himself has given a clear and unequivocal priority to mercy.

Another extraordinary characteristic of Francis is that he is apparently impervious to the temptation of power and its trappings. He wears those words of Rudyard Kipling well and has shown that he

*can talk with crowds and keep (his) virtue,
or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch.*

He has held high office from his thirties. Yet even as he walked through the corridors of power as Novice Master, Provincial, Archbishop, Cardinal and Pope, Francis has retained a simplicity and sense of equality that perhaps can only be compared to someone like Mahatma Gandhi. The saying of Lord Acton, himself a committed Catholic, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” was originally made in a context of the Papacy and the Inquisition. Francis though, even in the Vatican is a blithe spirit sailing serenely through perilous shoals!

In many ways he is a conservative but in a way that is anathema to many Catholic conservatives. He is a liberal in most things, and yet on the issue of clerical sexual abuses, some of his actions are more conservative than those of his arch-conservative predecessor.

When all is said and done, Pope Francis was, and is an enigma. As Jesuit Provincial he walked a tightrope dealing with Jesuit activists in Argentina. He was accused of collaboration with the authorities and yet as Bishop he risked his own life to stand in solidarity with some of his priests under threat on the same score. He was accused of abandoning two Jesuits when they were imprisoned and tortured, yet, he also gave his own identification papers to a man who was in danger and even drove him to a border post to help him es-

cape. One might disagree with him but cannot fault his integrity. Once again in Kipling's definition., he was a 'man'

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...
Then you'll be a Man....*

By this yardstick, and on all counts, Pope Francis is a man.

But a Man Born After His Time?

One can only wonder what the Church and the world would have been if Francis had become Pope after John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. The world was in ferment and youth all over the world were looking for meaning and purpose. They had many questions and they did begin by seeking for answers within their Christian heritage. Musicals like Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell (in modern parlance) went viral. What the world needed then was a Pastoral Pope, a People's Pope, a Pope who was not afraid of living the questions people were asking. What they got instead was a Dogmatic Pope. Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini in the early days of Vatican II was part of the vanguard looking for change, but reportedly was terrified by the implications of the student revolts of 1968 which changed his thinking radically. As Paul VI he continually provided old answers to vital new questions especially regarding contraception. Contrast this with Pope Francis and his *insistence that the Church is too focused on matters of sex and not on people*. Paul VI's successor Pope John Paul II continued along the same dogmatic lines but also distinguished himself as a Political Pope. Carol Wojtyla was undoubtedly a great man and probably should share credit for the dismembering of the Communist monolith. He could well take his place with other political Popes like

Leo I who dealt with an earlier threat from the East by talking down Atilla the Hun when he threatened to lay waste to the European heartland. But he could also be compared to Julius II, the warrior Pope who donned armour and wielded the sword in defence of the Faith – and the Papal States. It is difficult to see how Pope Francis fits in with this tradition....

This is perhaps *the* question which Pope Francis should not, and in fact cannot, continue to live. And the question is whether he can be the kind of Pope he would like to be, as long as he is a prisoner of the Vatican. Pius IX, another political Pope was considered to be a prisoner in the Vatican. Today Popes are no longer physically imprisoned (again by virtue of the Lateran Treaty, a pact between two political entities) but they are still prisoners of a mentality that persists through Leo I and Leo III, through Gregory VII and Julius II, and finally in John Paul II, a mentality that seeks a role for the Church in the political processes of power.

Pope Francis has always managed to be himself throughout his religious and ecclesiastical journey. But one can believe that was because of his ability to keep a clear separation between state and religion, between politics and religious structures. His approach is like that of Jesus “to render unto Caesar the things that are of Caesar and to God the things that are of God”. Can he still be himself as head of the Vatican State and a member of the European Union ?

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky has an interesting story about the Jesus’ second coming. Today perhaps that same plot would have a different twist:

Jesus came back to earth and “went about doing good, healing those who were oppressed by the devil”. And wherever he went people flocked to listen to him and he listened

to them and he answered their questions about life and love and he shared the good news that the kingdom of God was in their midst. And he was tired because the people were round him continually. So he went to Rome and he rested for a while with his friend Francis. And Francis asked him what he should say to his flock. And Jesus answered: "Tell them what you learnt from me, that I desire mercy." And Francis asked him another question: "What should I say to Government Leaders when they visit me?" So Jesus asked for a coin and he brought one to him. And Jesus asked Francis, 'Whose face is that ? And he answered 'mine', for it was a Euro coin of the Vatican State. And Jesus was silent and walked away sad. For he loved Francis greatly.

"All major religious traditions carry basically the same message, that is love, compassion and forgiveness ... the important thing is they should be part of our daily lives." —Dalai Lama

"You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection." —Buddha

"Blessed are those who can give without remembering and take without forgetting." —Elizabeth Bibesco

"To love yourself right now, just as you are, is to give yourself heaven. Don't wait until you die. If you wait, you die now. If you love, you live now."

—Alan Cohen