

Journeying together

At the heart of synodality is the defining theme of this papacy – encounter. It represents a change of direction for the Church, working through our differences in a peaceful and constructive way / By **THOMAS BANCHOFF**

OPENING THE global Synod on Synodality in October 2021, Pope Francis reminded Catholics that “we are called to become experts in the *art of encounter*. Not so much by organising events or theorising about problems, as in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another.”

For Francis, synodality is about encounter, about coming together, acknowledging differences and seeking ways forward. While the openness of the synod has drawn criticism, its focus on process over outcomes is intentional. Never before has the global Church engaged in an extended conversation drawing on diverse voices from dioceses and countries around the world. And never before have bishops and laypeople come together from the far reaches of the Earth to engage in such a conversation.

Encounter is perhaps the central theme of Francis’ pontificate. The synod working document, or *Instrumentum Laboris*, mentions “encounter” 17 times. His 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* includes 49 mentions in a wide variety of contexts ranging from the interpersonal to the international. And of course Francis has *practised* encounter in myriad ways over the past decade, engaging people from all walks of life in his global ministry. His focus on encounter is more than a choice of vocabulary or an expression of a pastoral style. It represents an important development of Catholic Social Thought and practice in a world marked by deep division and polarisation. Since the publication in 1891 of Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, CST has been organised around core principles including human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity and the universal destination of goods. The decades since Vatican II have seen greater attention to solidarity and the preferential option for the poor, and under Francis the principle of care for our common home has rounded out the catalogue. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Pope dedicated a series of general audiences to these seven principles and their contemporary relevance.

FOR FRANCIS, encounter is not just another principle. It is rather a means of advancing the others in practice, a way of proceeding in a world of irreducible pluralism and endemic conflict. The word “encounter” includes the Latin root *contra* (against/opposite). It implies meeting others where they are, in their difference and individuality, and working through inevitable disagreements in a peaceful and constructive way. Encounter, for Francis,



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encompasses but goes beyond dialogue to action. Building a “culture of encounter” – one of his central aspirations – “means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone” (*Fratelli Tutti*).

Rerum Novarum, indebted to neo-scholasticism and its organic, hierarchical conception of society, left little space for the idea or practice of encounter. Thomas Aquinas conceived of society as an ordered whole in which citizens, equal in dignity before God, inhabited defined positions in a stable hierarchy. Leo, and Pius XI – author of *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) – rejected liberalism and socialism, the dominant ideologies of the day, not just for their materialism but also for their emphases on market competition and class conflict. The ideal remained a well-ordered society that advanced human dignity and the common good – in which the Church enjoyed a privileged status. Catholic Social Teaching before Vatican II did not rule out encounter with those who think and act differently. But

For a decade Pope Francis has engaged with people from all walks of life, young and old.

it was largely subsumed under the evangelical mission to spread the truth of the Gospel to others.

In embracing religious freedom and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, at Vatican II the Church accepted political, cultural and religious pluralism as a distinguishing characteristic of modernity, and abandoned its traditional claims to authoritative status in state and society. John XXIII and Paul VI presented the Church to the world as a partner and not just as a teacher – in possession of the truth of the Gospel, to be sure, but also open to listening to and learning from others to advance the common good. While the term “encounter” was not used at the time to express the idea, the council’s culminating document, *Gaudium et Spes*, insisted that “respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters”. Such openness was vitally important in a world growing

closer together, “for political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes”.

John Paul II and Benedict XVI cautiously pursued encounter during their pontificates, engaging in ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural dialogue while placing a strong emphasis on the Church and its Magisterium as authoritative interpreters of the Gospel. Without returning to the hierarchical social and political model of the pre-Vatican II era, they adopted a more critical stance towards secular modernity. The Church’s teaching was to be communicated confidently with the world. Dialogue and encounter, for both John Paul and Benedict, were more about sharing the truth than about mutual learning.

Francis’ emphasis on encounter marks a new direction. He has maintained his predecessors’ focus on the centrality of the Gospel and Christian witness to the world, while encouraging humble, generous and patient engagement with the other – inside as well as outside the Church – as a way to address the divides that plague our political, social, and ecclesial life.

DRAWING ON HIS JESUIT training, theological studies and pastoral experience, Jorge Mario Bergoglio first developed his approach to encounter as Archbishop of Buenos Aires from 1998 to 2013. He turned to the *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* and its central theme of the encounter between God and humanity in the person of Jesus. He took up Romano Guardini’s idea of “reconciled diversity” – that interacting forces can produce mutual adaptation rather than some prevailing over others. And early in his tenure as archbishop, he advocated encounter as a way to address the deep social and political polarisation in his native Argentina. “We need to generate a culture of encounter,” he wrote to business leaders in 1999. “More is demanded of us in difficult times.”

Francis has never formally elaborated what he means by encounter. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the 2013 apostolic exhortation that set out the programme for his pontificate, he called for “the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter”. He described “four specific principles which can guide the development of life in society and the building of a people where differences are harmonised within a shared pursuit”. His first principle is “time is greater than space”. For Francis, space evokes the impatient human desire to solve problems and resolve conflicts in the here and now, “madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion”. The illusion of control precludes the careful listening and incremental trust-building that are best suited to engaging differences over the long term. Instead we

need to “work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results” and “patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations”. Through patient encounters over time, we “give priority to actions which 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”.

The second principle, “unity prevails over conflict”, reinforces the importance of process in Francis’ thinking. While conflict is inevitable in human interactions, given our different identities, interests and resources, it need not be the final word. Through a process of encounter over time “it becomes possible to build communion amid disagreement”. Without eliding

differences, people are called “to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity”. Over time, “conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity”. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis referred to the goal as “the growth of a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions”.

His third principle is “realities are more important than ideas”. For Francis, encounter involves grappling with hard realities – in two related senses. First, because diverse views and unequal power relations make clashes inevitable, “conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced.” Effective encounter does not ignore deep divides or aspire to quick and simple solutions. The necessary realism of encounter has a second, related dimension: it must go beyond dialogue to engage concrete problems. Because, for Francis, realities are more important than ideas, it is “dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric”. As he puts it: “Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action.”

Francis’ fourth principle, “the whole is greater than the part”, places encounter in a global context. We are called to break out of our isolation, to connect our local circumstances with our universal human reality. “We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all,” he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*. “We can work on a small scale,” he insists, “but with a larger perspective.” For Francis, encounter facilitates “the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality”. Globalisation should not drive homogenisation; the cross-border dynamics should generate encounters, not impersonal transactions. Francis famously rejects the image of a sphere with a uniform surface in favour of that of a polyhedron with sides made up of different shapes, a unity “which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness”.

Francis’ open and evocative reflections

about encounter mark a shift of emphasis from the theological style and substance of Benedict and John Paul. Rather than focus on a synthesis of faith and reason as it relates to social reality, he emphasises our encounter with the living God – active both inside and outside the Church – as a source of love, mercy, hope and peace that can nourish our encounters with all of God’s children, wherever they are. Time is greater than space because the Kingdom of God is unfolding. Unity prevails over conflict and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts because God is at work in history. Realities are more ultimately important than ideas because God is really present among us in the person of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Without God’s presence and the joy of the Gospel, Francis insists, we will never be able to bridge our differences and build truly just societies, from the local to the global level. Encounter, for Francis, is more than an ethical imperative. It is central to his theology of practice.

POPE FRANCIS’ understanding of encounter as the humble, generous and patient engagement with difference speaks to our current global moment with its deep divisions. Particularly striking about encounter and Francis’ other major developments of Catholic Social Teaching – his call for “care for our common home” in *Laudato Si’* and for “fraternity and social friendship” in *Fratelli Tutti* – is their strong action orientation. Francis exhorts us to advance established CST principles in new ways for the challenges of today. And he puts his own words into practice, tirelessly engaging people from all strata of society in an effort to promote the common good of people and the planet. Given the threats facing humanity – from war and pandemics to climate change and the artificial intelligence revolution – deepening the practice of encounter represents a necessary path forward.

With the Synod on Synodality, Francis is encouraging a culture of encounter within the Church itself. According to the working document for the gathering in October, “the synodal process offers an opportunity for an encounter in faith” that furthers “the bond with the Lord, fraternity between people and love for the Church”. Critics, of course, see things differently. They point to deep divisions in the Church – between conservatives and progressives, for example, or between the wealthy West and the global South – as signs of weakness and decay. But the Church has always been diverse and internally divided. Today the question is not whether or not to impose unity – an impossible task – but whether the People of God can walk forward together in respectful dialogue and fruitful encounter with those who live and think differently.

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