

**LECTURE CARDINAL BERNARDIN TITLED
“POPE FRANCIS: DISCERNMENT AND THE DIALECTIC OF MERCY”
DELIVERED BY
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I have chosen to address in this lecture the theme of discernment and its relation to the dialectic of mercy in the thought of Pope Francis. Allow me to begin with a quick journey back to ancient Greece. Diogenes the Cynic was once found walking the crowded streets of Athens in broad daylight with a lit lantern. When asked about the meaning of his conduct, he replied, “I am looking for man.” Without delving into the merits or demerits of a controversial figure like Diogenes, his point is nonetheless well-taken. He meant to say that he was searching for the essence of the truly human, manifested in the man who has the courage to confront reality in its entirety, piercing the veil of societal conventions. Don Luigi Giussani, to whom I am particularly indebted for the understanding of ecclesial discernment, elaborates on this point most effectively. I quote from his book *The Religious Sense*:

Here is the alternative in which man risks himself, even if almost unconsciously: either you face reality wide open, loyally, with the bright eyes of a child, calling a spade a spade, embracing its entire presence, even its meaning; either this or you place yourself in front of reality, defend yourself against it, almost with your arms flung in front of your eyes to ward off unwelcomed and unexposed blows.

I thus begin from the conviction that today there is need for a mature and courageous reflection on the situation of man, of society, and of the Church. The pope is adamant in recommending that such examination not be postponed any longer, recognizing that confronting reality with honesty requires a pastoral conversion that prepares the Church for mission. As he writes in *Evangelii gaudium*:

I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. “Mere administration” can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be “permanently in a state of mission.”

The Church cannot leave things as they are in the face of ongoing change in the world around us. In a profound discourse to the Roman Curia in 2019, the pope emphasized that embracing change must become central to the Church’s identity, necessitating a genuine anthropological conversion. He remarks, the history of God’s people—the history of the Church—has always been marked by new beginnings, displacements and changes. This journey, of course, is not just geographical, but above all symbolic: it is

a summons to discover the movement of the heart, which, paradoxically, has to set out in order to remain, to change in order to be faithful. All of this has particular importance

for our time, because what we are experiencing is not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change.

The world has entered the era of a post-secularized society, and there is an urgent need to find a language that will enable the Church to proclaim the Good News in this challenging context. Our primary concern should not be to buttress the truth of our faith by adopting a defensive posture in the face of struggle. On the contrary, the pope urges the Church to muster the courage to engage with modernity. However, this necessitates a serious introspective analysis. It is not coincidental that the Holy Father describes it as a conversion. It entails more than just tweaking methods; rather, it involves recognizing that our struggle to effectively bring Christ to people today is not solely due to society's increasing skepticism and secularization, but also because we have strayed from a genuine missionary posture. Christ's message still holds the power to transform lives today, but it requires ministers who are confident in the One who sent them and willing to break free from ideological constraints.

I have witnessed ecclesial moments in which the Church demonstrated the courage to confront reality head-on and discern the path forward. One was the gathering of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean in Aparecida. Here, the bishops embarked on a synodal journey that yielded very fruitful results. The bishops' reflection was guided by a method of analysis that remains highly relevant to this day. I quote from the final document,

In continuity with the previous general conferences of Latin American Bishops, this document utilizes the see-judge-act method. This method entails viewing God with the eyes of faith through his revealed word and life-giving contact with the sacraments, so that in everyday life we may see the reality around us in the light of his providence, judge it according to Jesus Christ, Way, Truth and Life, and act from the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ and universal Sacrament of salvation, in spreading the kingdom of God, which is sown on this earth and fully bears fruit in Heaven.

The See-Judge-Act approach, when infused with a distinctive Christian perspective throughout all three stages, becomes a powerful tool for ecclesial discernment. It must consistently place Christ at its center as the hermeneutical key. Christ instructs us on how to interpret the signs of the times. He assists us in discerning the best course of action and equips the Church with the means to empower evangelization.

We should therefore turn to Christ and re-enter the school of the Gospel. Like Mary, the sister of Lazarus, we should sit at the feet of the Master and learn from him. I propose that we do precisely that. If we desire to learn how to engage in dialogue with

the world of today and how to evangelize, we should examine the manner in which Jesus did so.

Allow me to briefly recall a moment in the life of Jesus that I have always found most enlightening for understanding the heart of his ministry: the encounter with the Samaritan woman. This encounter epitomizes the confrontation with the contemporary world that the Church faces today. The woman is a Samaritan, which means she is part of a people that had embraced a syncretistic cult blending elements of Judaism with pagan beliefs and practices. Samaritans, moreover, were openly hostile to Jews, and the animosity between them was such that the Talmud forbade a Jew even the possibility of speaking to a Samaritan. Furthermore, Jesus dialogues with a woman alone, another taboo for a Jewish rabbi. Finally, she is a public sinner, an adulterous woman, a true outcast even among Samaritans.

Jesus crosses into enemy territory. The evangelist opens the narration with the Greek verb *ἔδει*, which expresses a strong sense of necessity. It was necessary for him to cross Samaria. Jesus was eager to meet this woman. He wasn't daunted by the hostility of her people or deterred by her sins and by societal conventions that might have hindered such an encounter. He knew she would have to undertake the tiresome journey every day to fetch water from a deep well, water that did not satisfy. Weary he sat by the well, meeting the weariness of her life on the same level. He probed the depths of her heart, addressing her objections and quenching her thirst through a dialogue that touched the core of her suffering. In response to the tragedy of her existence, he pronounced a sentence that opened up a completely new horizon in her life: "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The reflection of today's humanity can be discovered in the countenance of this woman and in her history. She is the offspring of a people clearly hostile toward those who are the depository of revelation. Today, this hostility is experienced at all levels of society, from politics to education, from the media to the movie industry. The idolatrous mingling of the true faith with the cult of other gods aptly describes the syncretistic society in which we live. Here, all beliefs are often flattened, rendering them inconsequential. Religion, at best, has been reduced to mere spirituality, and relativism has hollowed out the search for truth.

The woman lives a serious situation of sin, adultery, which compels her to repeatedly journey to places where no life can be found. Here, I think of the young, lured by the world's empty promises, drawing water from wells that are ever deeper, requiring great effort to fetch a drink that does not satisfy. Drugs, the virtual reality of social media, the fleeting promise of fulfillment through power and money—all are broken cisterns that hold no water.

Finally, the fatigue. She goes to the well at midday, when the journey becomes especially cumbersome due to the heat. But she is an outcast, and perhaps that is the only hour allotted to her. Tiredness is possibly the most striking indicator of the existential crisis experienced by contemporary men and women. It can be discerned on their faces as a pale reflection of an even deeper weariness of the heart—a profound sense of dissatisfaction that undermines the very purpose of living, creating a people of outcasts who survive on the margins of existence but are incapable of living life to the fullest.

For these reasons, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman can serve as a paradigm. We should carefully examine the way Jesus acts (the method), the path he takes to enter the woman's heart and address the root of the problem (the discernment), and the responses he provides to her existential situation (the action). I will adhere to this paradigm in presenting my reflections.

The Method

Christ is the one who initiated a true anthropological conversion. In every encounter, he consistently made the individual person the sole focus of his action. Whether it was the blind man, the leper, the disciple, the scholar of the law, or the woman at the well, he always began with the singular, never with general abstractions or systems of thought. He entered the existence of each specific person and initiated a process that led to the emergence of the Kingdom of God. This point is at the heart of the pope's message. As he remarked in a 2013 interview,

God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history. Time initiates processes and space crystalizes them. God is in history, in the processes. We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics.

We must acknowledge that if the Church struggles to evangelize today, if she cannot find the words to proclaim Christ, it is often because she has narrowed her focus to the occupation of spaces of authority. The institutional Church must guard against rigidity, against becoming crystallized in forms that obscure the discernment necessary for effective pastoral action. Consequently, the pope urges Christians to venture to the peripheries, not only out of concern for social justice but primarily because it is there that the Church historically realizes the immanence inherent in her incarnational nature, through a multitude of encounters. In these encounters, she continually experiences the power of grace, initiating processes of conversion and learning the language of mercy—

a language that holds universal validity. By saying “universal,” I mean the broadest sense of the word—a language that bridges the distances among peoples and cultures and is capable of addressing every situation of poverty, every existential circumstance, speaking to men and women of every age and social class.

The Church possesses a universal language of salvation, yet she learns to communicate it within the restricted spaces of the immanent. It is important to recover the perspective of the individual, because the particular is the forge of the universal and reform must emerge from the multitude of personal encounters that set history in motion. This unique approach lies at the core of Ignatian spirituality, as emphasized by the pope himself in a 2014 conversation with Antonio Spadaro:

I was always struck by a saying that describes the vision of Ignatius: *non coerceri a maximo, sed contineri a minimo divinum est* [“not to be limited by the greatest and yet to be contained in the tiniest—this is divine”]. I thought a lot about this phrase in connection with the issue of different roles in the government of the Church, about becoming a superior of somebody else: it is important not to be restricted by a larger space, and it is important to be able to stay in restricted spaces.... That means being able to appreciate the small things inside large horizons, those of the kingdom of God.

Here, we witness the dialectical mode of thinking characteristic of Ignatian spirituality. This approach acknowledges the existence of tensions but does not seek to resolve them in a quest for uniformity that ultimately flattens the horizon of possibilities. Instead, it maintains opposites in a dynamic confrontation that yields insights on the path of discernment. The pope continues,

The goal of drawing together all things in Christ—that is to say, in the universality of the Church—cannot be accomplished in the absence of a transcendence that paradoxically recognizes the topography of the various immanences called to be drawn together and transcended.

If the Church loses her familiarity with the small spaces and the topography of the peripheries, she forfeits the universality of her language. The tension between the particular and the universal, therefore, should not be resolved in favor of a process of abstraction that generates static forms of expression. The risk of this approach is that our language loses its dynamism, acquiring a more fixed and rarified character. This ultimately leads to the development of Christian ideologies. The Church has often witnessed the consequences of embarking on this path, which almost inevitably begets forms of extremism, whether liberal or conservative, on the ideological spectrum. Both are aberrations, as they lose contact with reality and become increasingly entrenched in forms of expression that generate division, as Pope Francis has often diagnosed. In a recent interview, he expressed it thus:

Within the Church there are often ideologies, which separate the Church from the life that comes from the root and goes upwards. They separate the Church from the influence of the Holy Spirit. An ideology is incapable of incarnation; it is only an idea.... In the Church too we must distinguish doctrine from ideology: true doctrine is never ideological, never. It is rooted in God's holy faithful people. Instead, ideology is detached from reality, detached from the people.

The antidote to this malady is to always keep alive the dynamic tension between the universal and the particular by remaining connected to the small places. Such tension must be assumed and lived as a way of being Church, thereby providing a reliable moral compass for discernment at both personal and ecclesial levels.

This raises a methodological question, a question that occupied the thoughts of a scholar who was influential in the formation of Pope Francis, and one that I also studied in my youth: the Jesuit priest Gaston Fessard. Reflecting on St. Ignatius's spiritual exercises, he asked how something that emerged from the particular and historically determined experience of one man could acquire validity as a universal method to bring people to Christ. He writes,

Because the singular from which Ignatius starts is his personal experience, his intimate history, more exactly still the different movement of his affectivity, therefore this history is what is most individual and most fluid about it. And the universal where it first raises itself is not the intemporal abstraction of a concept or a principle of morality. If...his intimate history can take on the value of a type in his eyes, it is because, even if he uses such principles he immediately goes beyond such stages to put them in relation with the universality of history. But in its turn, history, as soon as it is attained, does not remain in the state of impersonal generality. On the contrary, it appears to him as the place where the singularity of Divine Liberty is manifested, inaugurating in its turn an order of universal principles, or rather historically determining those that the opposite movement has already encountered in order that they may serve for a precise end: to allow for Ignatius's freedom to unite itself to Divine Freedom in the singularity of his choices, and by that fact to become the type of all freedom.

We don't need to delve deeply into Fessard's complex thought on this point, but we can unpack a few relevant elements. We are concerned with language because of the need to convey the transformative power of the Good News through preaching. The Good News, though, is primarily an event. It arises from an historical encounter where the person exercises her freedom, experiencing the indwelling of grace. In history, God's free election, the deepest act of love, intersects with the freedom of the individual. However, language requires the use of concepts with universal value. Such universality is achieved in the conversion experience, where the historical and the logical converge. The movement of grace that undergirds a person's response to God's call, in fact, enables an exercise of freedom that conforms the will of the individual to the divine will, generating a typology of all acts of freedom. Given that this election happens in

particular choices, the principles and concepts making this experience intelligible retain their historically determined nature as a mark of their authenticity.

The language of the Church remains effective because it is continually renewed, forged in a dynamic tension with the historical reality of conversion experiences. The Samaritan woman becomes an evangelizer after her encounter with Jesus. Her words resonate authentically because they spring from a deeply personal experience. She cannot proclaim Christ without referencing the transformative event that changed her life. She tells her fellow Samaritans, “Come see a man who told me everything I have done.” The evangelist reports that this message is effective: “Many of the Samaritans in that town began to believe in him because of the woman’s testimony: ‘He told me everything I ever did.’”

Similarly, when addressing the Pharisees, who had adopted a more ideological approach to religion, Jesus intimates, “Now go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, rather than sacrifice.’” The language of mercy must be continuously learned anew. I believe Jesus was inviting the Pharisees to an experience of mercy that would confer authority to their teaching by grounding it in the particularity of a personal encounter. This same invitation holds true for every Christian today.

The Discernment

Jesus, tired from the journey, sits by the well. This detail is not irrelevant. The weariness of the journey is a necessary condition to guide his discernment. As the pope reminds us, it is a matter of perspective:

It is so simple: if what you desire, or what you think travels down the road of the Incarnation of the Word, of the Lord who comes in the flesh, it means that it is of God. However, if it does not travel by that road, then it does not come from God. Essentially, it is a matter of recognizing the road traveled by God, who emptied himself, who humbled himself unto death on the Cross.

The path of the incarnation offers the right perspective, allowing Jesus to descend to the woman’s level. There he garners discernment through the lens of compassion. The letter to the Hebrews says it eloquently: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

Without an incarnational perspective, it is almost impossible to discern the root of the malaise affecting contemporary men and women. The traces of their existential tiredness, in fact, become readily apparent to those who adopt a synodal approach, who listen without prejudice, who encounter people by coming to their level. Jesus sees a woman coming to draw water, yet he discerns a weary soul. He knows that she could

find no answer to her thirst for meaning in human realities and addresses the heart of the matter by pointing out the issue of her five husbands, which symbolize the idols (the word “*baal*”, used to identify pagan gods, can also be translated as “lord” or “husband”). Similarly, today, Christians are called to engage in dialogue with a society in which men and women experience profound disillusionment and find no solace in the promises offered by the idols of this world.

However, disillusionment and a lack of hope can also be discerned within the Church. With this analysis, I do not intend to overlook the signs of vitality that are evident here in the Church of the United States and elsewhere. These signs are, in fact, a source of hope and testify to the effectiveness of the very dynamics that I am attempting to describe in these reflections. They are harbingers of a Church that finds renewal in the small places: the daily work of dedicated parish priests, the ministry to immigrant communities, the chaplaincies of universities, the gatherings of new movements, and many other expressions of an immanent Church that ignite histories of real conversion.

However, it would not be helpful to simply assert that everything is well. It is important to confront reality and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in the right direction. Many Christians are weary, there is stagnation in the work of evangelization, and discouragement in the face of opposition. We should carefully attend to this phenomenon, the tiredness affecting to a certain degree both priests and lay faithful, to identify its roots.

Fr. Tomáš Halík offers valuable insight in his recent book *The Afternoon of Christianity*, a term derived from the metaphor used by Carl Jung, who compared the various stages of a person’s life to different parts of the day. The “morning” of existence, corresponding to youth and early adulthood, is followed by the “crisis of midday,” which ushers in the afternoon of existence. Halík writes,

Then comes the crisis of the midday. It’s the meridian time of weariness, of torpor: we stop feeling pleasure for everything that previously satisfied us. This crisis, however, is at the same time an opportunity. In it, the part of ourselves that we don’t want to admit and recognize becomes known. The afternoon of existence (maturity and old age) has a different and more important task than that of midday: a spiritual journey, a descent into the depths. The afternoon of existence is the *kairos*, the appropriate moment for the development of inner life.

This perspective is enlightening. We are witnessing an advanced stage of secularization and are now in a better position to understand the transformation that Christianity has undergone in its confrontation with modernity. Halík continues:

Today, in a post-secular era—as we certainly see—mainly two forms of religion are proposed, which are the result and consequence of the transformation of religion in the

process of secularization: religion as justification of group identity (for example, national or ethnic) and religion as spirituality, separate from the Church and tradition.

Both approaches, I would like to suggest, are expressions of the tiredness of Christians. They are cisterns holding no water. A Christianity configured as a political ideology, focused mostly on the definition of moral norms and training “cultural warriors” for the defense of orthodoxy does not correspond to the aspirations of the human heart. Similarly, a spirituality that harbors moral laxity and projects an almost non-confessional outlook fails to fulfill the thirst for the divine. In both cases, the telling sign of the underlying ailment is the inability to announce the Good News. Our message becomes cloudy, centered on only certain aspects of the faith, and the core of the Christian experience is not effectively communicated. The pope clearly identified this danger. As he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*,

If we attempt to put all things in a missionary key, this will also affect the way we communicate the message. In today’s world of instant communication and occasionally biased media coverage, the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects. In this way certain issues which are part of the Church’s moral teaching are taken out of the context which gives them their meaning. The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ’s message.

Such, I believe, is the crisis of midday precipitated by the process of secularization. However, as Halík suggests, this is an opportune time for ecclesial renewal because it brings to light the root causes of the problem and affords discernment. It invites a reflection that will help the Church to enter a new stage of maturity. Out of the experience of tiredness, the Church can recover a language that speaks to the weariness of the world.

The Action

Si scire donum dei. It is impressive to hear these words spoken within the dialogue with the Samaritan woman. The answer to her thirst is neither found in moral instruction nor in a psychological analysis of her situation. It emerges from the knowledge of the One who offers the gift of water welling up to eternal life. “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

I am convinced that in the ongoing dialogue of Christ with his bride, this very sentence is intended to provide the Church with a path forward. Do we genuinely understand

who Christ is and the transformative power of the gift He offers? Is the Church effectively proclaiming Christ today in a manner that leads people to the realization of this gift? These are questions that Pope Francis is courageously inviting the Church to ask. He writes,

When preaching is faithful to the Gospel, the centrality of certain truths is evident and it becomes clear that Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love. If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church's moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk.... The message will run the risk of losing its freshness and will cease to have "the fragrance of the Gospel."

Confronted with the existential situation of men and women today, the Church is called to respond with an announcement that powerfully radiates an invitation to know Christ. This knowledge is the living water that the Church seeks in order to quench her own thirst and, in turn, to satisfy the thirst of the world. The hour of weariness we experience in this quest presents an opportune moment to lead us to an encounter with Christ and a renewed experience of his power. But how can this occur? How can our message regain the freshness of the Gospel and its universal value? Bernard of Clairvaux provides guidance on charting the path that lays ahead:

We seek the truth in ourselves, in others, in itself. In us, examining ourselves; in others, having compassion of their weakness; in itself, contemplating it with a pure heart.... Just as the pure truth is seen only by the pure heart, so the misery of a brother is felt more sincerely by the poor in spirit. But for you to have a merciful heart towards the misery of others, you must first know your own, to find within yourself the soul of your neighbor and learn in yourself how to help him: precisely according to the example of our Savior, who wanted to suffer so as to know how to pity, to become miserable in order to learn mercy.

The path to knowing Christ begins with introspection and extends to our relationships with our neighbors. An intimate knowledge of Christ is granted to those who embark on an inward journey, recalling the historical experiences that have shaped their faith. Within ourselves, we discover the words to aid our neighbors, etched along the path of our personal history where we have experienced Christ's mercy and responded to him in love. Once acquired, this language of mercy informs our preaching and enables us to bear witness to its transformative power in the lives of others. Pope Francis has urged the Church to rediscover the language of mercy, as it lies at the very core of the Church's message. Announcing the jubilee year of mercy in 2015, he wrote,

Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. The Church has an endless desire to show mercy.

The deepest longing of the human heart is indeed to love and to show mercy. Nothing else will truly satisfy. It is for this very reason that the Vicar of Christ fervently encourages the Church to return to the existential peripheries. In these places, we are continually reminded that each of us has dwelled in such peripheries, and it was there that we encountered the One who willingly endured weariness for our sake, so that we might find solace in his love. It was there that our hearts were healed by the proclamation of the Gospel. In the humble corners, in the realm of the immanent, the Church is perpetually rejuvenated, and the freshness of her message is preserved.

The Eucharist stands as the most eloquent expression of such dynamic. In this marvelous Sacrament, Christ makes himself of the "right size" to enter the intimate spaces of our hearts. From the Cross, he expressed his thirst for such close communion, and from the wound of his side, he provided the spiritual nourishment necessary to fulfill it. The Eucharist serves as the ecclesial compass that guides us toward the immanent, to the very place where the experience of every believer become the crucible of a universal message of salvation.

It is my hope that these reflections may serve as a catalyst for a renewed understanding of the Church's mission today. The path of the incarnation is not an easy one. Indeed, it traverses the narrow door, demanding a divesting from superstructures that may no longer serve a purpose. Nevertheless, it is the sole avenue leading to a Church presence that truly becomes universal, reaching every place, every person, and every existential situation. Quoting Giussani again,

The great abode of the Church is incarnated, is realized in capillary terms, so it becomes present in every place chosen by God's plan. The great abode of the Church is realized inside the houses, the dwellings, which indicate the condensing, the coagulation of her life in a dimension of space and time.

This capacity is bestowed upon the Church as a gift, arising from the experience of mercy that permeates the lives of every Christian and initiates journeys of conversion capable of reaching to the ends of the earth.
