

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
“UNDERSTANDING THE THOUGHT OF POPE FRANCIS”
INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM “DISCOVERING POPE FRANCIS”
SACRED HEART SEMINARY AND SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, FRANKLIN, WISCONSIN
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s representative to the United States, I want to express His Holiness’ spiritual closeness and paternal affection as we gather during these days to deepen our understanding of the theological, philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of Pope Francis, who has guided the Church for more than five years. I am particularly grateful to Father Tom Knoebel, the President and Rector here at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology, as well as to the outstanding faculty and staff here. This symposium had its origins during my visit here in November 2017 to give the DeHon Lecture. At that time, I began speaking with the faculty about how few people really understood the thought of Pope Francis and how necessary it was for the Church in the United States to grasp this for the mission of evangelization. Nearly a year later, I am pleased to see the hard work of so many come to fruition in this symposium, which features many of the world’s leading experts in the thought of Pope Francis.

As I have traveled around the United States over the last two years, many people have described the Pope as one who doesn’t leave us indifferent. By his words and gestures, Pope Francis conveys to many the tenderness and mercy of God. His charisma and his attentiveness, not just to the small things in life, but also to people at the margins have left a lasting impression upon the people of this country and the world.

Nevertheless, many people have asked, “Who is Pope Francis?” Some answers were obvious. He is a Jesuit. He is a Latin American Pope, the former-archbishop of Buenos Aires. He is a pastor. However, in saying that he is a pastor, there is a temptation to dismiss him as being pastoral but without the intellectual sophistication of John Paul II or Benedict XVI. Certainly, critics of the Pope have opposed him on these grounds, demanding greater clarity and precision in his thought. Others oppose the Holy Father and his call for pastoral conversion for ideological reasons or simply because they do not understand him.

This symposium is both timely and necessary, for it allows us to explore the depths of the Holy Father’s thought in a scholarly and non-ideological way. To date, I have attended or read about different conferences on the Holy Father, but often they have remained at a superficial level: “I like Pope Francis, and so I agree with him.”; “Pope Francis is a reformer and previous Popes were obstructionists.”; “Pope Francis is on the side of the poor and those at the margins and agrees with our politics.”

These attitudes do not do justice to what the Holy Father offers to the universal Church and certainly will not help persuade or convince others of the Holy Father’s approach to theology and pastoral activity. Something more is needed; this symposium provides that something more. Just as Austin Ivereigh’s book *The Great Reformer* provided a comprehensive examination of the essential biographical elements to the Pope’s life and pastoral activity (and we heard from him yesterday evening), so too last year I began reading the Italian version of the book of Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey*, now

translated into English. It opened my eyes to a new world or, rather, it helped me realize why the Holy Father's words and actions spoke directly to my heart.

In 1969, I arrived at the Catholic University of Paris to begin my Master in Theology. It was a two-year program that involved studies in theology, philosophy, history, and scripture. Father Kowalski, my advisor, suggested to me that in theology I should study Hans Urs von Balthasar. At that time, only the first volume of the *Herrlichkeit* had been translated into French. Forty years later, I am still reading Balthasar; he has helped me throughout my priesthood –theologically, spiritually, and even pastorally.

My philosophy advisor, Claude Bruaire, thought that I should take up the philosophy of Gaston Fessard, who was still alive. I began reading works like *La Mystère de la Société* and *La dialectique des exercices spirituels de saint Ignace de Loyola*, exploring the philosophy of Fessard but also of Hegel. In the field of history, I was directed toward Maurice Blondel, Paul Ricoeur and Henri de Lubac. At the time, I did not understand why they were directing me to these authors, but they were obviously preparing me for the future – for life in the Church and in the world, a rapidly changing Church and world. Later, during my diplomatic missions, I also encountered the movement Communion and Liberation and the thought of Luigi Giussani. These authors have been a part of my intellectual formation and have shaped and formed my pastoral activity in my service to the Holy See.

When I arrived in Mexico in 2007 to begin my diplomatic mission, it was the time of Aparecida, when the Latin American bishops had to confront epochal change and the challenges it was posing to the transmission of the faith and evangelization. The approach to evangelization, articulated by the Aparecida document, whose ghostwriter was Cardinal Bergoglio, immediately resonated with me, but I never understood exactly why until I read the work of Massimo Borghesi.

His work explores how the Holy Father's pastoral activity, his words, and gestures have been influenced by the theologians and philosophers whom he has studied and appropriated over the years, including Fessard, Guardini, Balthasar, De Lubac, and Giussani – the same authors whom I had studied! The Pope's ability to synthesize many great thinkers allows him not only to touch the reality of people's concrete situations and circumstances but also provides him with an instrument for dialogue with today's culture. It is my sincere hope that this conference will help scholars and pastoral ministers understand these theologians and philosophers who have influenced the Holy Father, so that they too can share in his vision for pastoral ministry and in the work of evangelization.

The scholars who will be presenting will help participants better understand the Holy Father's Latin American background, including the decisive role played by the Holy Father at Aparecida and why Aparecida is so pivotal for evangelization. To understand the Holy Father in that context helps us better understand him now in the post-Aparecida context. The symposium will also broaden the perspective of English-speakers, exposing them to the thinking of men and women like Alberto Methol Ferré and Amelia Podetti, philosophers from Latin America, who deeply influenced Pope Francis and his ideas about the holy, faithful, People of God and about listening to those at the peripheries. When Pope Francis is accused of not being a Thomist, one will be able to point to the existential Thomism of Methol Ferré and to see how the Holy Father has appropriated it. When critics unfairly call the Holy Father a Marxist or a Marxist-liberation theologian, you will be able to distinguish the elements of liberation theology from the Holy Father's 'Theology of the People.'

In addition to understanding the Holy Father's Latin American background, the symposium will also highlight the fact that Pope Francis was formed thoroughly in the spiritual tradition of the Jesuits, with its emphasis on discernment and engagement with reality. The vision of Pope Francis goes beyond abstract ideas to see the concrete reality of life – of persons, cultures and the conditions of our world. In his exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes:

There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric ...Realities are greater than ideas. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 231)

The vision of the Pope requires seeing people and their situations for what they truly are. In considering the vision of Pope Francis, one must remember his Jesuitical training. Father Antonio Spadaro, SJ, editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, has described the pope as a Jesuit – a man with an “incomplete thought.” In academics, when writing an essay, if a thought is incomplete, a professor might count this against a student. However, by “incomplete” thought, I mean an “open thought”, one that is in continuous development. This is how the mind of Jesuit works: to reflect upon reality to discern the will of God. Just as the Holy Father wants to bring the approach to evangelization of Aparecida to the whole Church with his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, so too we see him bringing the Ignatian approach to spirituality to the universal Church, envisioning himself as the “world’s spiritual director.”

The bulk of the symposium's speeches will treat Pope Francis' intellectual formation, including the influence of Balthasar, Methol Ferré and Podetti, and importantly Romano Guardini and Gaston Fessard. The idea of polarity in Guardini and Fessard is particularly significant. I think there are many theologians who want everything to be simply black and white. Pope Francis is a man for whom, in many matters, discernment is essential. We must be able to live in tension – between the poles – and from a creative tension, in openness to the Spirit, to find a path forward to many of the world's problems. In a sense, this polarity affords us the opportunity to dialogue and through dialogue to discover the Truth.

While Pope Francis has not elaborated a systematic theology, he has studied and been formed in the Catholic intellectual tradition. He is well-aware of the intellectual challenges of our times. He has contemplated ideas and made his own personal synthesis of some of these ideas, applying them to reality in a pastorally effective way. We are the beneficiaries of this synthesis, and this symposium, I believe, will be a major step in equipping the Church in the United States to understand, receive and defend the magisterium of Pope Francis and to meet the challenges of our day. Once more, I thank Fr. Knoebel and all at Sacred Heart for organizing this conference, and I thank you for your interest and presence.