

ROBERTO CATALANO

Istituto Universitario Sophia

Figline e Incisa Valdarno, Toscana

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7441-0219>

## **POPE FRANCIS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: NOVELTY IN CONTINUITY. FROM VATICAN COUNCIL II THROUGH PAUL VI, JOHN PAUL II AND BENEDICT XVI**

**PAPIEŻ FRANCISZEK I DIALOG MIĘDZYRELIGIJNY:  
NOWOŚĆ W CIĄGŁOŚCI.  
OD SOBORU WATYKAŃSKIEGO II PRZEZ PAWŁA VI  
DO JANA PAWŁA II I BENEDYKTA XVI**

### **ABSTRACT:**

Papież Franciszek bywa często określany jako „papież pierwszych wieków”. Niezliczone są podjęte przez niego inicjatywy, których próżno szukać u kogoś z poprzedników. Dotyczy to zwłaszcza dialogu z ludźmi o różnych tradycjach religijnych. Jednak on sam często przypominał osobom, które namawiały go do tego konkretnego aspektu jego pontyfikatu, że wiele z jego – czasami odważnych – inicjatyw nie byłoby możliwych bez Soboru Watykańskiego II lub przed tym soborem i niektórymi poprzednikami, takimi jak Paweł VI, Jan Paweł II i Benedykt XVI. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę dogłębnej analizy ciągłości obecnego pontyfikatu w odniesieniu zarówno do wspomnianego soboru, jak i poprzedników Bergoglio. Jednocześnie stara się nie ignorować sensu i znaczenia wydarzeń lub aktów, które stanowiły wyjątkową nowość w aktywności argentyńskiego papieża.

Pope Francis has been often defined as the ‘pope of the first times’. The initiatives that he has taken without having anyone of his predecessors to have done the same are numberless. This is true especially in the field on dialogue with people of different religious traditions. Yet, he himself has often reminded people who have prompted him on this specific aspect of his papacy that much of his – at times daring – initiatives would not have been possible without or before the Second Vatican Council and some of his predecessors, like Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. This paper attempts an in-depth study on the continuity the present papacy present respect both Council and Bergoglio’s predecessors. At the same time, it tries not to ignore the sense and meaning of events or acts which have represented a unique novelty of the Argentinean pope.

## **1. Introduction**

From the very first days of his election, Jorge Maria Bergoglio left no doubt as to certain choices that have since then proved to be the hallmark of his pontificate.

Among these, dialogue – more specifically inter-religious dialogue – immediately played and continues to play a fundamental role. On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013, exactly one week after his election, his agenda already included a meeting with people of other religious traditions. On that occasion, he clearly stated, “*the Catholic Church is aware of the importance of promoting friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions*”<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, the confirmation of this priority within the pontificate has clearly emerged from papal trips to countries with a Muslim majority as well as within the Buddhist world. Further, Pope Francis granted many audiences to groups of different faiths as well as to interreligious organizations. Later, he acted in a way, which has left a deep mark, such as the signing, together with Sheik Ahmad al-Tayyib of al-Azhar, of the *Document on Human Brotherhood for Peace and Common Coexistence*, which took place at Abu Dhabi on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2019. This perspective has not remained one-sided. From the very first meetings with people of other faiths, Bergoglio has aroused sympathy, a sense of openness, sincere friendship, and above all credibility. Moreover, in these ten years, Pope Francis has been able to involve religions and their followers, in the concrete proposals that he has had the courage and perseverance to present to the world. They cover all great issues that humanity is facing today: peace, the climate crisis, migration, the educational emergency and the challenges of globalization that have created what he has called a ‘culture of waste’. Furthermore, all this has contributed to creating a vast network of friendly relationships modelled on the experience Bergoglio had during his episcopate in Buenos Aires. He has shown what it means, day after day and year after year, to build what he calls ‘the culture of dialogue’ and the ‘culture of friendship’. All this appears perfectly in line with what he wrote in the programmatic document of his papacy, – *Evangelii Gaudium* – where he speaks of inter-religious dialogue, as “*a necessary condition for peace in the world, and therefore it is a duty for Christians, as for other religious communities*” (EG 250).<sup>2</sup> For Pope Francis dialogue appears to be a fundamental choice without which religious and human commitment would be meaningless.

## 2. Pope Francis: novelty in continuity

### 2.1. Second Vatican Council and Paul VI

A first aspect of fundamental importance, which Pope Francis himself often refers to, concerns the continuity in which his pontificate stands within the Catholic Church. Often, the reactions from outside – particularly from other cultures and religions – emphasize the novelty that the first pope from a continent other than

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to Representatives of Different Churches, Jewish community and Other Religions*, Vatican City, 20.03.13.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican City, 24.10.2013.

Europe or the Middle East has brought into the Catholic Church. While one must recognize the specific and very personal contribution that Jorge Maria Bergoglio is bringing to the Church and humanity, we should not underestimate that his papacy is clearly within the tradition of the Catholic Church and, with regard to interreligious dialogue, in continuity with the Second Vatican Council. He himself has made this clear on several occasions, particularly after the joint signing with Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib of al-Azhar of the *Document on Human Brotherhood for Peace and Common Coexistence*.

I openly reaffirm this: from the Catholic point of view, the *Document* does not move one millimeter away from the Second Vatican Council. It is even cited, several times. The *Document* was crafted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. It was my wish [...] to have it read over by some theologians, [...]. If someone feels uncomfortable, I understand this: [...] it is a step forward, but one that comes after 50 years, from the Council, which must be developed. Historians say that for a Council to sink its roots in the Church it takes 100 years. We are halfway there. This can create uncertainty, even for me. I will tell you, I saw a phrase [in the *Document*] and I said to myself: “But this phrase, I am not sure if it is certain...” It was a phrase of the Council! Yet, it surprised me too!<sup>3</sup>

Already *Evangelii Gaudium* offered clear evidence of the line of continuity on which Bergoglio places himself with respect to the Second Vatican Council, but also to the ecclesial magisterium, especially that of Paul VI, the discreet but prophetic protagonist of the openness to dialogue with the followers of other faiths. The Italian pope had foretold this in *Ecclesiam Suam* where he was not afraid to emphasize, “*the conviction that dialogue must characterize our apostolic office*” (ES 69). Paul VI bore witness to this by welcoming, from the very beginning of his papacy, groups of representatives coming from countries where the great religions were a majority. The first group to visit him was from Japan in November 1966 and the last one, a few days before his death, was again from that Asian country. Paul VI had a great love and appreciation for other religious traditions, as it clearly appears from his first meeting with leaders of other faiths in Mumbai in 1964.

This visit to India is the fulfilment of a long cherished desire. Yours is a land of ancient culture, the cradle of great religions, the home of a nation that has sought God with a relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence, and in hymns of fervent prayer. Rarely has this longing for God been expressed in such words [...].<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, he identified peace as the goal of common work between believers of different faiths.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Press Conference on the Flight Abu Dhabi-Rome*, 05.02.2019.

<sup>4</sup> Paul VI, *Address to the Representatives of Different Religions*, Bombay 03.12.1964.

Today, peace in the world is threatened. We therefore appeal to all men of religion to play an important role in achieving a favorable environment in which the peace so longed for by humanity can flourish.<sup>5</sup>

Another fundamental decision taken by Paul VI was the creation, on 19 May 1964, of the *Secretariat for Non-Christians*, which John Paul II renamed as the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*. Yet, in order to work towards such a challenging end, it was necessary to have the right spirit of charity, which the Italian Pope showed in different shades and expressions. Moreover, one should not miss the many similarities that *Evangelii Gaudium* reveals with *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that Montini published in 1974 as the concluding document of the Synod on Evangelization. The Bergoglian Apostolic Letter, which stands as the *magna charta* of the current pontificate, emphasizes, in fact, the priority of evangelization within the life of the Catholic Church, the need to spread the Gospel more and more together with a progressive intra-ecclesial renewal and, at the same time, highlights the compatibility of this dimension with that of dialogue. These are two calls – evangelization and dialogue – that are specific and inescapable to today’s Church and Christian life. Moreover, dialogue already appears in that document clearly aimed at the common good and peace.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2. John Paul II and the Assisi event in 1986

Pope Francis’ commitment directly connects with the historic intuition by Pope John Paul II, who made history with some unforgettable initiatives. Among them, the *Prayer Meeting for Peace with Leaders of different religions*, held in Assisi on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1986, remains a landmark for everyone. An Italian theologian assessed that event by describing it in the following words.

John Paul’s initiative [...] cannot be easily framed in the context of any of the then existing theologies of religions. That gesture stands until today as something unique [...] and no theology of religion is equipped to comprehend the richness of that event.<sup>7</sup> It was not a World Parliament of Religions, which was celebrated for the first time in 1893, [...]. It was the witness that one’s own identity can welcome the *other*. [...] religious difference was celebrated in common as a practical commitment to peace.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, in the heart of the Cold War, the Polish pope had sensed the role that religions could play for peace and was not afraid to defy heavy criticism in order to

<sup>5</sup> Paul VI, *Address to Representatives of Japanese Buddhism*, Rome, 07.11.1966 in Pontificio Consiglio per il Dialogo Interreligioso, *Dialogo Interreligioso*. 199.

<sup>6</sup> See S.B. Roberts, «Is the pope Catholic? A Question of Identity in Pope Francis’s Practical Theology of Interreligious Dialogue» in A. Kasimov and A. Race (edited by), *Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue. Religious Thinkers Engage with Recent Papal Initiatives*, Palgrave MacMillan, Springer Nature, Cham (Switzerland), 2018, 129-145, 130.

<sup>7</sup> G. Ruggieri, *Ritrovare il Concilio*, Einaudi, Torino, 2012. 108-110. (Translation from Italian s mine).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 110.

make a prophetic gesture. Well aware of the resistance expressed by many within the inner circle of his collaborators to the Assisi event, the Polish pope returned to the subject during the traditional meeting with the Curia for Christmas greetings. On the one hand, John Paul II emphasized how that day in the land of Francis had strengthened ecclesial identity.

[...] the very identity of the Catholic Church and its self-awareness were strengthened in Assisi. In fact, the Church, that is, we ourselves, have better understood, in the light of the event, what is the true meaning of the mystery of unity and reconciliation that the Lord has entrusted to us. He himself first exercised it, when he offered his life “not only for the people, but also to unite the children of God who were scattered” (Jn 11:52).<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, however, he was keen to underline that the event had shown how religions have the potential to unite men and women.

They had come together in Assisi to pray, fast and walk in silence for the sake of peace that is always fragile and always threatened – perhaps today more than ever. This was like a clear sign of the profound unity of those who seek in religion spiritual and transcendent values in response to the great questions of the human heart, despite concrete divisions.<sup>10</sup>

If there were not a few who, in some ecclesial sectors – especially traditionalists – accused Pope Wojtyła of syncretism, similar criticisms, in recent times, have been addressed at Pope Francis, who, in this too, stands in line with his predecessors. This issue is not at all a marginal one. Some critics and sceptics have gone so far as to cast doubt on whether the current pope is truly Catholic.<sup>11</sup> Yet, John Paul II's commitment to interreligious dialogue did not end with the Assisi event, which he repeated twice more, notably in February 2002 after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York that seemed to have proved the “clash of civilisations” theory right. Other moments of John Paul II's life made history in interfaith dialogue. It is enough to remember his visit to the Rome Synagogue, the inserting into the Western Wall of Jerusalem of a folded paper containing the apologies of Catholic Church towards the Jews, the Vigil celebrated together with representatives of other traditions in St. Peter's Square during the Holy Year 2000 and many others. Particularly important was Wojtyła's acceptance of the invitation of the ruler of Morocco to speak to thousands of young Muslims. On that occasion, the pope clearly opened his heart and mind to Islam without compromising and without discounting what had happened in the past, but opening up to a future of optimism and shared mutual commitment.

In a world which desires unity and peace, and which however experiences a thousand tensions and conflicts, should not believers favor friendship between

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Address to the Roman Curia for Exchange of Christmas Greetings*, Vatican City, 22.12.1986.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. S.B. Roberts, «Is the pope Catholic? A Question of Identity in Pope Francis's Practical Theology of Interreligious Dialogue», 129.

the men and the peoples who form one single community on earth? We know that they have the same origin and the same end: the God who made them and who waits for them, because he will gather them together. [...] The Church shows particular attention to the believing Muslims, given their faith in the one God, their sense of prayer, and their esteem for the moral life. It desires that Christians and Muslims together “promote harmony for all men, social justice, moral values, peace and liberty”. Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more necessary than ever [...] in a world ever more secularized and at times even atheistic. [...] Today we should *witness* to the spiritual values of which the world has need. The first is *our faith in God*. [...] we, Christians and Muslims, must recognize with joy the religious values that we have in common [...] Both of us believe in one God the only God, who is all Justice and all Mercy. We believe in the importance of prayer, of fasting, of almsgiving, of repentance and of pardon. We believe that God will be a merciful judge to us at the end of time, [...] Christians and Muslims, in general, we have badly understood each other, and sometimes, in the past, we have opposed and even exhausted each other in polemics and in wars. I believe that, today, God invites us *to change our old practices*. We must respect each other, and we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.3. Benedict XVI’s vision of interfaith dialogue

Wojtyła’s successor was his closest collaborator as a Prefect of the *Congregation for Doctrine of Faith*, Card. Joseph Ratzinger, who was considered a traditionalist and was known for having attempted to discourage Pope John Paul II from holding the Assisi event. An approach to Ratzinger theology of religion would take us too far from the purpose of our lecture today. I would rather concentrate on some aspects, which emerged towards the end of his pontificate on our subject. Traditionally, in the address to the Roma Curia at the end of the year, the pope offers an evaluation of the events, which have characterized the Church in the earlier twelve months. These texts, therefore, offer a precious possibility of reading through the pope’s eyes.

In December 2011, Benedict XVI devoted a considerable part of his speech to the Roman Curia to what he defined as a “*major theme, which runs through the whole of the past year from Assisi*<sup>13</sup> *to the Synod on the New Evangelisation: the question of dialogue and proclamation*”<sup>14</sup>. The pope speaks of three principal areas of dialogue, “*in which [the Church] must be present in the struggle for man and his humanity: dialogue with states, dialogue with society [...] and finally dialogue*

<sup>12</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address to Young Muslims*, Casablanca, 19.08.1985.

<sup>13</sup> Here Benedict XVI refers to his trip to Assisi to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event held by John Paul II. Even, Benedict XVI met with strong criticism when he decided to take part in this event.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2012.

with religions”<sup>15</sup>. Benedict XVI speaks of dialogue of religions as “*a necessary condition for peace in the world*”<sup>16</sup> and he presents it as “*a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities*”.<sup>17</sup> I would like to draw our attention on the word ‘*duty*’, which seems to me crucial. Pope Ratzinger, in fact, has often been wrongly depicted as contrary to dialogue among people of different religions. Here he proves wrong all those who think in these terms. From what he states, in fact, it appears clear that dialogue among people of different faiths is not an option but a duty, and not only for Catholics or Christians but for all men and women, with a specific goal: to preserve and to contribute to peace. Pope Benedict continues by spelling out different forms of dialogue, which had already been summarized in a similar way by John Paul II, and other documents of the Catholic Church.

First, there is a *dialogue of life*, which he meaningfully also calls ‘*a dialogue of being together*’. This form of dialogue does not involve «*discussing the great themes of faith – whether God is Trinitarian or how the inspiration of the sacred Scriptures is to be understood, and so on*»<sup>18</sup>. Rather, it is a dialogue that revolves around «*the concrete problems of coexistence and shared responsibility for society, for the state and for humanity*».<sup>19</sup> The condition, or even better, the attitude, required by this kind of dialogue is the engagement «*to learn to accept the other in his otherness and the otherness of his thinking*». Finally, the guideline for dialogue of being together is «*the shared responsibility for justice and peace*»<sup>20</sup>. When dialoguing with those who believe differently from us about peace and justice, we move on to another form of dialogue, which is not only one of conversation or action but also an «*ethical struggle for the truth and for the human being*». We pass, therefore, from «*what began as a purely practical dialogue [...] [to] a quest for the right way to live as a human being*». In addition, this ethical form of dialogue has certain conditions. “*Listening to the other*” is required. When we both have this attitude, we can obtain purification and enrichment and – here we come to an aspect, which is typical of the present pope – we take “*common steps towards the one truth*”<sup>21</sup>. Looking at interfaith and intercultural dialogue as a common pilgrimage towards the Truth is the main and most significant contribution to dialogue offered by Benedict XVI. Yet, a fundamental clarification is needed. In fact, in no way, this means a change of religion or an effort aiming at converting the other: our “*fundamental choices remain unaltered*”. The pope highlights two rules, which he considers fundamental for interfaith dialogue: aiming at understanding rather than at converting and remaining consciously within our own identity, which the dialogue does not call into question. Benedict XVI at this point sets a road map for interfaith dialogue by underlying, as he has done on other occasions that dialogue must help

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

us draw closer to the truth. “Both sides in this piece-by-piece approach to truth are therefore on the path that leads forward and towards greater commonality, brought about by the oneness of the truth”<sup>22</sup>. Here the problem of identity comes to the fore. Many Christians are afraid that dialogue may put their identity in danger. The pope has a clear answer to this fear. “Christians can [...] venture freely into the open sea of the truth, without having to fear for their Christian identity”. The truth, in fact, is none’s possession. Rather, “the truth possesses us”<sup>23</sup>. The conclusion of the pope gives us hope and courage.

Christ, who is the truth, has taken us by the hand, [...] being inwardly held by the hand of Christ makes us free [...] because if we are held by him, we can enter openly and fearlessly into any dialogue; safe – because he does not let go of us, unless we cut ourselves off from him.<sup>24</sup>

Precisely in the light of this, we can understand some of the statements Benedict XVI made in the weeks when he took leave of various communities after his resignation. Particularly important was his address to the priests of the diocese of Rome in which he affirmed the importance of the conciliar documents that spoke of dialogue and human dignity.

Therefore, these two documents, on religious freedom and *Nostra Aetate*, linked to *Gaudium et Spes*, make a very important trilogy whose importance has been demonstrated only after decades. Yet, we are still working to understand better the interlinked realities of the unicity of God’s revelation, the unicity of the one God incarnate in Christ, and the multiplicity of religions, by which we seek peace and also hearts that are open to the light of the Holy Spirit, who illumines and leads to Christ.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Dialogical attitudes typical of Pope Francis

It is fundamental to recognize that the positive image that believers of other religions have developed regarding Jorge Maria Bergoglio is fundamentally linked to the credibility that he has engendered with typical attitudes during these years in which he has been constantly in the eyes of the world. Let us examine some of them that we can consider as particularly significant.

Firstly, the figure of the current pope appears to be characterised by a ‘well-grounded openness’. The concept and attitude can be explained in the very words Pope Francis used to appreciate the culture of Azerbaijan: “[...] one wishes to preserve the great heritage of religions and at the same time seek greater and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to Parish Priests and Priests of Rome*, Vatican City, 11.02.2013.



*more fruitful openness*”.<sup>26</sup> The idea behind this statement can be summed up with the term ‘identity’, a word the pontiff uses very often when reflecting on issues relevant to dialogue. Indeed, he is deeply convinced that any dialogue requires precise and profound identities, without which not only is dialogue not possible, but one runs the risk of entering dangerous terrain. Several times, he has warned that dialogue, to be authentic and effective, presupposes a formed identity: without a formed identity, dialogue is useless or harmful.<sup>27</sup> A formed and rooted identity helps not to dilute faith and not to concede compromises for an encounter on neutral ground and in a context, which may appeared foggy and blurred.

Dialogue does not mean renouncing one’s own identity when it goes against another’s, nor does it mean compromising Christian faith and morals. To the contrary, “true openness involves remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one’s own identity” and therefore open to understanding the religions of another, capable of respectful human relationships, convinced that the encounter with someone different than ourselves can be an occasion of growth in a spirit of fraternity, of enrichment and of witness.<sup>28</sup>

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pontiff states that “*true openness implies remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, with a clear and joyful identity*” (EG 251). However, this identity root, though deep, must remain open and avoid exclusivism. Moreover, it is precisely this openness to others and to what humanity is experiencing today that makes us aware that dialogue is ‘not a luxury’. It is not something additional or optional, but it is essential, it is something that our world, wounded by conflicts and divisions, needs more and more”. This openness implies the need and ability to ‘go out’, a fundamental verb in Bergoglian life and magisterium. This is effectively stated in the *Aparecida Document*<sup>29</sup>, to which the then Cardinal of Buenos Aires made a decisive contribution, emphasizing that in order to effectively proclaim the Gospel it is necessary to ‘go out’ to find and meet people. It is unthinkable for the Argentine Pope to wait for people to come to us. Often, over the years, Bergoglio has reminded bishops, priests and consecrated men and women how essential this ‘going out’ is that allows those who are Christians to remain faithful to the Gospel, and thus to be rooted in their own specific identity.<sup>30</sup> Openness and awareness of *the need to reach out to ‘others’* should not be limited to those who believe differently or even those who do not profess a faith, but to all those who pass us by, especially the poor and those who are victims of society

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to Sheik of Muslims in the Caucaus Region and Faithful of other religions*, Aliyev Mosque, Baku, 02.10.2016.

<sup>27</sup> See Pope Francis, *Address to the Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting*, Sarajevo, 25.09.2015.

<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the Plenary Assembly of Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, Vatican City, 28. 11.2013.

<sup>29</sup> The *Document of Aparecida* is the final statement, which was produced by participants at the CELAM Assembly held at Aparecida in 2007. Bergoglio was a protagonist of the event and one of the main authors of the final document.

<sup>30</sup> See P. Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots*, Bloomsbury, Londra, 2013, 123.

and of what he defines as ‘culture of waste’. This was Bergoglio’s experience in Argentina, where in his engagement with the people of the ‘*villas*’ he developed a great capacity for listening and caring and, at the same time, for *knowing how to spend time with people*. In addition, this is a third fundamental element of the current pontiff’s personality that favors and contributes to dialogue. This resounds of Martin Buber’s conviction that only by spending time with people can we become capable of facing the challenges of our time. In this sense, Bergoglio is constantly looking for sincere conversations of a spiritual nature and, as well, encounters that allow him to take those in front of him seriously. Herein lies the dimension of ‘diversity’ or ‘otherness’, an essential and inevitable aspect of the dialogical experience. Indeed, rooted identity requires, as we have seen, an openness to the ‘other’. At the same time, its diversity should not be perceived as a threat, but rather as an opportunity for common growth.<sup>31</sup>

In these three aspects of the current pope’s personality, just described, – the deep-rooted openness, the outgoing tension and the ability to spend time with the other – the category of ‘mercy’<sup>32</sup> emerges clearly. In fact, mercy, one of the fundamental themes of the Bible, present in the Gospels and in the magisterium of the pontiffs preceding Francis, is today anything but central in the life of the Church. Kasper, for example, recalls how it is only marginally mentioned in lexicons and manuals of dogmatic theology and calls for a rethinking of its role starting from its being one of God’s properties. Indeed, the message of God’s mercy should be presented as the proclamation of trust and hope. Pope Francis relies on the heart to show and express mercy and to overcome the barriers of a cold and distant neutrality. Moreover, by repeating this key word he has struck countless people, inside and outside the church, to the heart. Moreover, mercy is the lemma that comes closest to ‘compassion’, a term, in turn, fundamental in the interreligious encounter. In fact, this virtue particularly characterizes the religions of Asia (Buddhism in a very special way, but also Hinduism and Sikhism). At the same time, it is the dimension that leads to ‘empathy’ – feeling (*πάθειν*) in one (*εν*), according to the Greek root – an essential capacity in the experience of dialogue, intimately linked to silence and the ability to listen. All of this, starting with mercy, declined in its dimensions of compassion, listening, silence, humility and empathy, appears to be a precious heritage of Bergoglio, both as a man and as a leader of the Catholic Church and a spiritual and human reference on an international level. In addition, herein lies a fourth founding aspect of his dialogue dimension: *knowing how to offer time to the other*.

Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice,

<sup>31</sup> See Pope Francis, *Address to the Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting*, Sarajevo, 25.09.2015.

<sup>32</sup> *Mercy* along with *fraternity* can be considered the key word of Bergoglio’s pontificate. The present pope has dedicated an entire jubilee year of the Catholic Church to mercy.

we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say. This means cultivating an interior silence that makes it possible to listen to the other person without mental or emotional distractions. Do not be rushed, put aside all of your own needs and worries, and make space.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, it is the dimension that leads to ‘empathy’ an essential capacity in the experience of dialogue, intimately linked to silence and the ability to listen.

The same Spirit everywhere brings forth various forms of practical wisdom, which help people to bear suffering and to live in greater peace and harmony. As Christians, we can also benefit from these treasures built up over many centuries, which can help us better to live our own beliefs.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: From a theology for dialogue to a theology of dialogue

Indeed, the presence of other religions has always been a challenge for the Church, starting from the first Christian community and the controversy between Peter and Paul that led to the First Council of Jerusalem. The years preceding and immediately following the Second Vatican Council saw high profile theologians (Rahner, Congar, De Lubac, Schillebeeckx, Pannikar, Dupuis to name the best known) engaged in a fundamental reflection. They tried to find ways to get out of the great obstacle that had represented the quasi-dogma *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, which for more than a millennium had marked the relationship between the Church and the faithful of other traditions. *Nostra Aetate*, the conciliar document that opened up the Catholic Church to dialogue has, without a doubt, represented a decisive turning point, which proved to be only a starting point, but which opened up a debate that has progressively developed within the Catholic Church – and not only – over the last five decades. One could venture that the prophecy of two great thinkers who, already at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, before the Council opened, had foreseen a turning point that was unthinkable to most. The Belgian Dominican theologian Schillebeeckx, in 1959, stated, in fact, that “*the firm certainty of continuing to possess the truth while everyone is wrong is no longer a possibility*”.<sup>35</sup> For his part, the Canadian Protestant thinker Cantwell Smith, in the same years, foresaw how the religious life of humankind, if it was still to be lived, could only be lived in a context of religious pluralism.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Smith had foreseen the need even to overcome ‘*dialogue*’ with what he called ‘*colloquium*’ – a word dear to Paul VI who uses it in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* – and this not only because of the plural characterization this term carries with it. In fact, if dialogue places the protagonists one in front of the other, colloquy allows them to be one

<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Vatican City, 19.03.2016, n. 137.

<sup>34</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican City, 24.11.2013, n. 254.

<sup>35</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Umanità. La storia di Dio*, Queriniana, Brescia 1992, 77.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. W. Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Man*, Harper and Row, New York, 1962, 11.

beside the other. This is the position that recalls pilgrimage, an image dear to Pope Francis in defining interreligious dialogue, which opens up, among other things, the possibility that those who colloquies can look together at the problems of humanity that they want to tackle together.

Obviously, in the course of these decades, the theological reflection that had prepared and accompanied the opening of the Council has shown that it has reached an impasse, not least because dialogue is not only theology, but also above all an existential experience, a sharing of spiritual experiences and a collaboration to address together the great issues of humanity. Faced with this impasse, circles of common reflection have developed in recent years between Christian theologians and thinkers from other religious traditions, particularly Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. This has enabled the activation of a new process that makes it possible to take the first steps towards thinking the religiously 'other' not so much from one's own perspective – Catholic or Christian, for example – but from the specific perspective of the different religions to which one belongs. It is a matter of realising the intuition-auspice of Waldenfels, who had already indicated several decades ago how a true dialogical relationship implies looking at the other from his point of view. In *Veritatis Gaudium*, Pope Francis encourages such a collaboration. He invites

to foster dialogue with Christians belonging to other Churches and ecclesial communities and with those who adhere to other religious or humanistic convictions, [...] seeking “to understand and evaluate their statements well, and to judge them in the light of revealed truth”.<sup>37</sup>

This requires a dimension that is characteristic of the current pontiff and to which he has often referred 'incomplete thinking'. “*The good theologian and philosopher has an open, that is, incomplete thought, always open to the maius of God and truth, always developing*”.<sup>38</sup> This is an attitude that allows one to avoid a great danger that Bergoglio summarizes in *Veritatis Gaudium*: “*The theologian who rejoices in his complete and concluded thought is mediocre*”.<sup>39</sup> As far as the area of our interest is concerned, with such an attitude and in a closer and more collaborative confrontation between theologians of different cultures and religions, we could achieve what Michael Barnes calls a theology ‘of’ dialogue, rather than, as has been the case so far, a theology ‘for’ dialogue. Perhaps, right here lies one of the fundamental junctures for a common path also in the theological sphere, towards the Truth that no one can truly claim to possess. In fact, the Truth possesses us. This is one of the points where it is possible to grasp the continuity between Pope Francis and his immediate predecessor. Benedict XVI, in fact, towards the end of his pontificate, on several occasions emphasized precisely this element.

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<sup>37</sup> Papa Francesco, *Veritatis Gaudium*, Città del Vaticano, 27.12.2017.

<sup>38</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the Communities of the Pontifical Gregorian University, and to the Biblicum Institute and Oriental Institute*, Vatican City, 10.04.2014.

<sup>39</sup> Papa Francesco, *Veritatis Gaudium*, Città del Vaticano, 27.12.2017.

No one can say: I have the truth – this is the objection raised – and, rightly so, no one can have the truth. It is the truth that possesses us, it is a living thing! We do not possess it but are held by it. Only if we allow ourselves to be guided and moved by the truth, do we remain in it. Only if we are, with it and in it, pilgrims of truth, then it is in us and for us. I think that we need to learn anew about “not-having-the-truth”.<sup>40</sup>

Pope Francis has taken up Ratzinger’s bold statement from the early days of his pontificate. He has repeatedly added that it is necessary to remember that “*truth is not grasped as a thing, truth is encountered. It is not a possession; it is an encounter with a Person*”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Benedict XVI, *Homely during the Concluding Mss of ‘Ratzinger Schülerkreis*, Castelgandolfo (Roma), 02.09.2023.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** papież Franciszek, Paweł VI, Benedykt XVI, Sobór Watykański II, początki chrześcijaństwa, dialog z innymi religiami

**Keywords:** Pope Francis, Paul VI, Benedict VI, Second Vatican Council, first times, dialogue other religions