

# POPE FRANCIS' SPIRITUALITY and Our Story

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# Introduction

## Story: Divine and Human

MY reflections in this book are personal but I hope not private. As I try to share my reflections on God's gift of story I am hoping that they will be as meaningful and important to readers as they are to me. The chapters on "The Power of Story" and "God in Film" have grown out of my experience in the last fifty years of being profoundly influenced by Catholic novels and by films that either directly or indirectly reveal the mystery of God. In the last fifty years I have read or re-read over one hundred and fifty Catholic novels for an adult education course that I teach, and have viewed more than two hundred and fifty classic or near classic films because of film festivals that I have conducted. Chapters Four and Five are intended to speak both to those familiar with Catholic novels and those who are lovers of movies, but also, to introduce others to the mystery and marvel of great stories, whether they appear on the written page or on a movie screen. Pope Francis has written the following:

*"Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their opinion and their proposals. Dialogue entails a warm reception and not a preemptive con-*

*demnation. To dialogue, one must know how to lower the defenses, to open the doors of one's home and to offer warmth."*<sup>1</sup>

This book is an attempt at dialogue. In writing it, I have tried to dialogue with some contemporary theologians and philosophers and with Pope Francis. I am hoping that my efforts in writing this book might help others in their dialogue with God. I do not know Pope Francis personally but from the moment of the announcement of his election on Wednesday, March 13, 2013, I have followed his papacy closely. I cannot recall anyone making such a strong impression on so many in such a short time. It is easy to chronicle events in the opening days of his papacy. In the foreword to Matthew Bunson's *Pope Francis*, Greg Erlandson writes the following:

*"His first words were softly enunciated: 'Buona sera' ('Good Evening'). It was almost casual, certainly informal, yet a small sign that we were about to meet a man quite different from some of our expectations. Think of those first moments and the other spontaneous signs he gave that revealed to us evidence of his character: He prayed for his predecessor, Benedict, 'the emeritus bishop of Rome,' using the basic prayers of our Catholic faith. He asked us to bless him before he blessed us. He refused to wear the more ornate papal vestments. And he insistently presented himself as the bishop and pastor of Rome.*

*"There was humility to his very first words and actions that not only captured the imagination of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka. *On Heaven and Earth*. Translated by Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman. (New York: Image, 2013), p. XIV.

*crowd in the Saint Peter's Square, but also the tens of millions watching on television. In the days that followed, he did not so much outline a program as reveal aspects of his character. Some of these gestures—blessing a pregnant woman outside of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, paying his own bill at the hotel where he had been staying, embracing the crippled man in Saint Peter's Square, choosing to celebrate Holy Thursday with young people in a juvenile detention center—dramatically attracted the attention of the world. It is not as if no pope had ever done these things. Yet the fact that he was at once both forceful and humble—insisting that he be able to do these things from the very beginning—entranced the media and fed the popular imagination. At the same time, if we focus only on the empathetic gesture and the sympathetic act, we only understand part of Pope Francis. While he has not laid out his program yet—and may not for some time as he adjusts to both the Vatican and the global complexities of a world Church—there are clues to who the man is and what he considers priorities.”<sup>2</sup>*

Father Mitch Pacwa, S.J., expressing his joy that a fellow Jesuit had become the first member of the Society of Jesus to be elected Pope, after commenting on the Pope's remarks from the balcony mentions the following:

*“This moment was followed by many small moments of making ordinary actions quite uncommon—riding a bus with the cardinals, praying*

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Erlandson, Foreword to Matthew Bunson, *Pope Francis*, (Huntington Indiana, 2013), pp. 11-12.

*alone at Saint Mary Major, stopping to pay his bill in person at a Rome hotel for priests, calling the man who delivered his papers in Buenos Aires to cancel the subscription, meeting with the Jesuit Father General Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., to accept his offer of Jesuit support to the new pope, and the Pope's extension of his apostolic blessing to all Jesuits and those who work with them. These moments stream forth from him, making his office yet more amazing."*<sup>3</sup>

In writing the stories of our life, we can be helped or hindered by others. I believe that Pope Francis is a prophetic powerful witness to the deepest meaning of the human story, a voice that can challenge us and remind us of the most important truths about God and about ourselves. By his words and actions before and since becoming the Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis has delivered a unified message. Most of the Pope's statements referred to in this book were made before he was elected Pope, but the vision in them corresponds to what he has said since his election. For example, his first encyclical is an inspiring example of the Pope's vision of the poverty of the human person, a poverty enriched by a relationship with Christ. A spirituality has been revealed.

The following lines from the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* could serve as a summary statement of the Pope's vision:

*"In God's gift of faith, a supernatural infused virtue, we realize that a great love has been offered*

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<sup>3</sup> Mitch Pacwa, Foreword in Andrea Tornelli, *Francis: Pope of a New World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), p. xii.

*us, a good word has been spoken to us, and that when we welcome that word, Jesus Christ the Word made flesh, the Holy Spirit transforms us, lights up our way to the future and enables us joyfully to advance along that way on wings of hope. Thus wonderfully interwoven, faith, hope and charity are the driving force of the Christian life as it advances towards full communion with God."*<sup>4</sup>

One senses a kind of urgency in The Holy Father's encyclical. Pope Francis wants culture to be transformed.

*"Our culture has lost its sense of God's tangible presence and activity in our world. We think that God is to be found in the beyond, on another level of reality, far removed from our everyday relationships. But if this were the case, if God could not act in the world, His love would not be truly powerful, truly real, and thus not even true, a love capable of delivering the bliss that it promises. It would make no difference at all whether we believed in Him or not. Christians, on the contrary, profess their faith in God's tangible and powerful love which really does act in history and determines its final destiny: a love that can be encountered, a love fully revealed in Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection."*<sup>5</sup>

The Holy Father believes deeply in the presence of the Holy Spirit in everyone's life.

*"Because faith is a way, it also has to do with the lives of those men and women who, though not*

<sup>4</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Lumen Fidei*. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), section 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, section 17.

*believers, nonetheless desire to believe and continue to seek. To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith. They strive to act as if God existed, at times because they realize how important He is for finding a sure compass for our life in common or because they experience a desire for light amid darkness, but also because in perceiving life's grandeur and beauty they intuit that the presence of God would make it all the more beautiful. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons tells how Abraham, before hearing God's voice, had already sought Him 'in the ardent desire of his heart' and 'went throughout the whole world, asking himself where God was to be found,' until 'God had pity on him who, all alone, had sought Him in silence.' Anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God, is already sustained by His help, for it is characteristic of the Divine Light to brighten our eyes whenever we walk towards the fullness of love."*<sup>6</sup>

In this book, I attempt to use Pope Francis' spirituality to emphasize and highlight the meaning and mystery of the human story, the gifts that God has given us to live unselfishly, perhaps even heroically.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, section 35.



# Chapter 1

## God: Giver of Gifts

I AM starting to write this book shortly after engaging in centering prayer. Part of centering prayer is being silent with God, giving God time to speak to you. I now feel compelled to try to say what I mean by urging people to listen to God. Often centering prayer ends with the person just enjoying God's presence. While the person praying may be silent, I believe that God is speaking.

In recent years, I have become very aware of people not listening. I am surprised how often people interrupt one another. Just a few days ago, I gave a lecture and I said something that apparently disturbed someone in the audience. When the person publicly disagreed with what she thought I had said, I tried to explain what I meant. Each time I tried, the person interrupted. She seemed unable to listen to me. She thought she knew what my statement meant and though I tried to explain to her that it did not mean what she thought it meant, my effort was in vain. This is not an isolated incident in my experience. Often I find that in a private conversation I am interrupted in the middle of some statement that I am trying to make. Whether others have the same experience of being

interrupted in conversations I do not know, but I wonder if one of the reasons that people might have for not listening is that all of us are under various pressures and many of us live at a very hectic pace.

The importance of listening to God has become more central in my own understanding of the Christian life. Reading a number of contemporary theologians has also convinced me that one of the problems that makes religion irrelevant to many people today is that people cannot be still, cannot reflect on what is most important in life. Though I can try to help students at St. John's University to be more reflective through the study of philosophy, and though I can try in homilies and columns in the Catholic press to call people to personal reflection, I keep hoping for some magical solution that will impress upon some of my contemporaries the importance of living an examined life, the importance of personal reflection upon how and why they are living as they are. Of course I also have to remind myself to be more reflective. Pope Francis has said:

*"What every person must be told is to look inside himself. Distraction is an interior fracture. It will never lead the person to encounter himself for it impedes him from looking in the mirror of his heart."*<sup>7</sup>

When I say that at times when we are praying we should be silent and listen to God I do not mean that we are going to hear a voice. That has never happened to me. What I mean when I say that God will speak to us is that in our silence God will communicate with us. In centering prayer we are not present to God to make petitions nor

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<sup>7</sup> Bergoglio and Skorka, op. cit., p.3.

are we present to God to tell God our problems. In centering prayer we try to be present to God Who is always present to us in a way similar to how two friends might be present to one another.

One of the problems that I have had in praying is that I have tended to think of God as statically present to me, almost like an observer, a disinterested onlooker. I tend to think of God as an onlooker. Of course this is a false view of God. In our lives God is actively present. When we pray God is not just a listener. In fact we could not even pray except that God calls us, touches us, invites us. The gift of grace enables us to turn to God. So God is active even before we become active, even before we raise our minds and hearts toward God.

I believe that God wants all of us to enter more deeply into the love relationship that God has initiated with us. Perhaps if we are silent in the presence of God, we will be able to hear how this God is calling us into this deeper relationship. It might be through some insight we receive into ourselves when we are silent before God, or it might be through some insight we receive into the mystery of God when we are silent in God's presence. I cannot predict how God will communicate with any of us, not even with me, but though I cannot predict how God will communicate in our silence, I believe we should be very confident that God will communicate.

When I studied undergraduate philosophy many years ago as a seminarian, though I was very interested in the subject, much of what was taught went over my head. It was years later when I studied theology and still later when I did graduate studies in philosophy that some of what had been taught to me when I was an undergradu-