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RELIGION, LITURGY AND ETHICS, AT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN
THEORY AND PRACTICE.
THE REVOLUTION OF POPE FRANCIS

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Abstract: The role of religion in the public space is a matter of debate. The public sphere understood as a space oriented to achieving interests of common concern, reaching social and political consensus by means of deliberation has relegated religion to the private sphere. The last decades have attested a revival of the public role of religion, a “de-privatization” of religion. This paper explores the contemporary influence of religious beliefs and liturgical practice on issues of public concern focusing on the statements and liturgical gestures of Pope Francis, notably regarding the disenfranchised and the refugees, as well as his engagement for the environment. The statements and liturgical gestures of Pope Francis have challenged the dissociation between religious practice and social ethics, and have returned religion to the forefront of public debates. A symbolic example is his unconventional practice of a traditional rite, that of the washing of the feet during liturgical celebrations on Holy Thursday. This classical liturgical rite, brought to public attention through the media, has become the vehicle of Francis’ social ethical views, and due to his involvement in the refugee-debate, a powerful political statement. Such statements are not limited to Catholics or individuals of other denominations, but contribute to the agenda of public discussions.

Key Words: religion, liturgy, ethics, public sphere, Pope Francis, Aparecida, refugees, feet washing.

The role of religion in the public space is a matter of debate. The public sphere understood as a space oriented to achieving interests of common concern, reaching social and political consensus by means of political debate and deliberation has inevitably relegated religion to the private sphere (Habermas 1990, 66-67, 86, 153-154, 163; Habermas 2011, 23-24). Yet, the last decades have attested a “de-privatization” of religion (Gabriel 2009, 11-26; Habermas 2011, 25-27). This paper explores the influence of religious beliefs and ritual on issues of public concern focusing on the case of Pope Francis. A controversial figure for traditionalist Catholics, this Latin-American Jesuit Pope has raised a new awareness about the ways religion may influence issues of public concern. Far from being a private matter, religion may have global implications, and may contribute to the achievement of common good. This effect does not result only from the impact of private religious convictions on the moral decisions of individuals, but it comes from a heightened public, even global awareness of ethical concerns.

The topic is addressed from the liturgist’s perspective. As Christian, notably Catholic and Orthodox identity is largely shaped by the cult, I shall argue that religious rites may become the source and powerful expression of social commitment. For that purpose, after some theoretical considerations regarding the link between liturgy and service, I turn to the religious and social convictions of Pope Francis and the symbolic-cultic gestures through which they are conveyed. The subtitle of this paper (“The Revolution of Pope Francis”) is inspired by the book of Walter Kasper (2015), and emphasises the novelty of Pope Francis’ discourse in the European context.

1. Introductory considerations: religion, liturgy and ethics

The link between liturgy and social commitment comes from the ancient Greek practice of *leitourgiai* as forms of financial, cultural or political service for the welfare of the city (Adam and Haunerland 2014, 19; Rhodes 1999). The public dimension was preserved after the religious appropriation of the term, at least in the sense that the liturgy was defined as an action directed to the (spiritual) benefit of the community, not as an act of private devotion.

The close tie between religious practice, social engagement and solidarity is not entirely novel in Catholic circles, but is grounded in communitarian definitions of religious practice. Theo Gunkel, the first principal of the Oratory of St Philip Neri (1930) at the Liebfrauen Church in Leipzig, struggling to open new paths for a minority Catholic community, has argued that Christian existence is deeply communitarian. He emphasized the intimate link between liturgy, fraternal community and solidarity. Celebration and worship were possible only in a community without destitute members. This required a change in

mentalities, including awareness of the link between worship and the ministry to those in need (Richter 1981, 71-73). The community continues today its social engagement on behalf of the refugees.

The social implications of worship came to the forefront of reflection notably with Vatican II, as indicated by the Liturgical Constitution (Constitution 1963, 9). The liturgical reform extended the perspective of the classical Catholic axiom on the unity of faith and liturgical celebration, the *lex orandi, lex credendi* (Prosperus Aquitanus 1861, 209) to comprise the unity between worship and life: *lex orandi – lex credendi – lex agendi* (Berger 1985, 425).

The liturgy is not only divine service, but also service to the indigent (*diakonia*). It becomes the source of social engagement due to its transformative effect, by shaping mentalities and behaviour (Mieth 2009, 94; Schmidt-Lauber 1996, 60; Wannenwetsch 1997, 35-37). Benedikt Kranemann speaks thus of the ethical dimension of the liturgical anamnesis: liturgy invites participants to commit to social justice and service (1998, 206). Practice itself becomes an act of worship (Richter 2009, 218), and the litmus test for the authenticity of worship. Worship comes to be conceived as a way of life. Divine service and social responsibility belong thus together (Richter 1981, 67-68).

Worship acquires in a certain sense even a political dimension. The issue at stake is no longer the lifestyle of individual members of a religious community. The interrelation between life and worship expresses the ethos of the community and invites a critical participation in it (Wannenwetsch 1997, 35-37). “Christian ethics begins when the people of God gather to worship” (Guroian 1985, 349; cf. Wannenwetsch 1997, 25). Participants in worship are citizens of the people of God, whose ethos is shaped by the law of Christ (Wannenwetsch 1997, 40). Liturgy creates and shapes the community; it transmits guidance, values, a sense of responsibility for society and for the environment.

The social, ethical and political dimension of the liturgy means that it takes more than praying for peace, for the poor, for the persecuted. The liturgical celebration has to lead to commitment on behalf of the sufferer (Richter 2009, 224; Richter 1981, 66; Zulehner 1999, 93). Otherwise religion is reduced to self-reassuring, empty ritualism (Richter 1981, 67-68). The separation between religion/liturgy and community service (*diakonia*) is a theological dead-end; it is in fact the end of religion.

In what follows I focus on the expressions of this link between religious convictions, liturgical practice and social sensitivity in the statements and liturgical gestures of Pope Francis. These awaken the moral responsibility of Christians and express the conviction that all humans, notably the poor and the marginalized are entitled to justice and compassion, regardless of their racial or religious belonging.

2. The revolution of Pope Francis

What moves Pope Francis in his social engagement and political statements? It may seem a commonplace, but it is the conviction that Christianity is not a system of doctrines, but is centred on the person of Christ, whom Francis describes as the face of the Father's mercy (Francis 2015b, 1). This perspective results in an ethos incompatible with aggressiveness, xenophobia, racial and religious exclusion, the dispossession of the poor and the arrogance of economic elites. This powerful message of a Pope called, in his own words, almost from the ends of the earth (Francis 2013e), has found a manifold expression in allocutions, homilies, encyclicals and symbolic gestures. This message has had a negative reception in traditionalist Catholic circles, which envisage the Church as an unchanging, sacred institution with little to do with "the world", with no interest for other denominations, religions or races. Notably his statements regarding the refugee-crisis have been met with harsh critique, in spite of Francis' constant reference to the Gospel. This opposition comes from an exclusivist and Eurocentric ecclesiology: Francis allegedly speaks as a Pope from another continent, who does not understand European Christianity. A brief overview of his social and religious background may shed light on the ethos of Bergoglio/Pope Francis and his social commitment.

2.1. *Who is the man?*

Jorge Mario Bergoglio (1937) born from an Italian immigrant family, joined the Jesuit order with 24, and was ordained priest in 1969, shortly after the conclusion of Vatican II. Provincial of the Argentinian Jesuits (1973-1978), he became Archbishop of Buenos Aires (1988), was created Cardinal by John Paul II (2001), and was elected Pope in 2013. Emblematically, he chose the name Francis, after St Francis of Assisi, a reformer of the Church, known for his appraisal of poverty and simplicity, and his love for the created world.

Pope Francis' concern for the disenfranchised, his sensitivity to economic and social injustice may be understood from his Latin American ecclesial and theological background, shaped by liberation theology, which stresses the responsibility of the Church for the destitute. The second Conference of the Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968 formulated a powerful commitment to the poor. The bishops envisaged a Church for the poor and raised their voice against injustice and oppression, calling Christians to commit themselves to social justice. The conference demanded the reform of political authority and criticized the international manifestations of neo-colonialism (Biallowons 2013, 95-98). (Medellín was equally critical of liberal capitalism and

Marxism, as both violate human dignity; the one because of its insistence on the primacy of capital, the other due to its proclivity to totalitarianism: (CELAM 1968, 1.10)). The same concerns surface continuously in the statements of Bergoglio/Pope Francis.

Bergoglio's ethos is inspired in equal measure by his religious convictions, notably the insight that God is mercy. Mercy is the keyword of his papacy. Mercy is the essence of the Gospel, capable of transforming the world (Kasper 2015, 126). Ecclesial ministry is not an exercise of power, but an exertion of mercy on behalf of the destitute. In one of his mediations Bergoglio evoked Romano Guardini's distinction between the persuasive, value-based effectiveness of truth and the coercive character of power (Bergoglio 2013, 188; cf. Guardini 2005, 658). Kasper has appropriately characterized the pontificate of Francis as the revolution of tenderness and love, a return to the root of the Gospel. Francis' statements interpret the faith and morals of the Church in the light of the Gospel (Kasper 2015, 37-39). The values cherished by Francis are also related to his Jesuit background. In a 2013-interview he evoked Peter Faber, an early companion of Ignatius of Loyola, as his model, mentioning his simple piety, gentleness, openness to dialogue, discernment and determination (Spadaro 2013). Faber was a man open to life, without mental barriers and preconceptions, a reformer aware of the fact that the Church needed renewal, a man of reconciliation and peace (Kiechle 2015, 57-60).

Francis' ethos finds a symbolic expression in a simple lifestyle, with a remarkable continuity from his episcopacy to the papacy. As successor of Archbishop Antonio Quarracino (1998), he did not move into the episcopal palace, but continued to live in a small apartment and use public transportation. As a pope, he opted again for a simple lifestyle, declining to move into the papal apartments. When created cardinal, he dissuaded his friends from going to Rome for the occasion, asking them to offer the travel expenses to the poor, and he did the same following his election to papacy (Tornielli 2013). As a cardinal he continued his pastoral work among the poor, in the favelas. He remained attentive to human proximity as a pope, and he demands the same from priests. In his vision, the Church has to leave her walls, to go out to the outskirts and search for those in spiritual or material distress (Francis 2013a, Francis 2015a). God's mercy eludes categorizations, pre-established methods and opinions (Falasca 2007).

In what follows I turn to the ethical implications of Francis' emphasis on divine mercy, focusing on his statements concerning poverty, social marginalization, refugees, and ecology.

2.2. Pope Francis, the "Communist"

Bergoglio's position on economic and social issues cannot be understood without the insights of liberation theology, which has shaped

in a decisive way the thinking and practice of Latin American churches. In a society marked by social and economic inequities, authoritarian, repressive regimes and military dictatorships this theology emerging in the sixties enabled Latin American communities to find new responses to these challenges, to overcome their ghettoization due to apologetic constraints and the association with political and economic power. Liberation theology has led these churches to discover their identity and responsibility (Gutiérrez 1973, 91-92). The engagement of the Church on behalf of the poor and oppressed, encouraged by the Medellín Conference literally became an issue of life and death, as many have paid with their life. The most prominent example is Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, an outspoken promoter of social justice. His social engagement was inspired by the insight that the suffering people embodied the passion of Christ (Zechmeister 2012, 145-146).

Liberation theology defines itself as a critical reflection on social realities; it is a response to specific economic, social and political conditions. It argues that God can be found only on the side of the poor, and it demands the effective liberation of the destitute and oppressed. It censures economic exploitation, marginalization and oppression. Its proponents maintain that the proclamation of the Gospel cannot be separated from social realities. Clerics and theologians may not remain indifferent to poverty and exploitation, but should offer practical solutions and sustain the struggle of the destitute (Gutiérrez 1973; Boff 2009). As Christ is the saviour and deliverer of the poor, of those who suffer (*passio*), the Church has to learn to practice compassion (*compassio*) and solidarity (Eckholt 2015, 111-132). Theology remains an intellectual pursuit unless it identifies with the poor and reflects their perspective, proclaiming the liberating Gospel (Mustó 2013, 643). This insight has to inform both theology and political activism.

Liberation theology, censured during John Paul II and Benedict XVI because of its political dimension and certain exponents' sympathies with Marxist ideas, was rehabilitated under Pope Francis. In September 4, 2013 *L'Osservatore Romano* dedicated an issue to liberation theology, with contributions by Gustavo Gutiérrez ("I preferiti di Dio"), Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ("Fare la verità e non solo dirla", highly positive about liberation theology), and Ugo Sartorio ("Una chiesa che ha bisogno di tutti"). The issue appeared following the presentation of the Italian translation of Müller's book written with Gutiérrez on liberation theology (2004). Gutiérrez critiqued neoliberal economic doctrine oblivious of humans and encouraged critical theological engagement, assuming ethical responsibility and collaboration with ecological groups.

This social commitment was firmly stated in the final document issued by the Aparecida-Conference of the Latin-American bishops in 2007 and returns constantly in the statements of Pope Francis.

2.3. *A friend of the poor*

Although not a liberation theologian, Pope Francis shares many of its concerns, notably its focus on social issues and the engagement of the Church on behalf of the poor. These matters are repeatedly addressed since the beginning of his papacy. In his first statement to the press after his election (March 16, 2013), he explained the choice of his name as a reference to St Francis of Assisi, following the exhortation of Cardinal Claudio Hummes to remember the poor. “Saint Francis of Assisi is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation [...] He is the man who gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man.” In this context Francis made the programmatic statement: “How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!” (Francis 2013c).

In June 2013, in an encounter with students of Italian Jesuit schools, the Pope returned to the issue of poverty and social engagement, encouraging them to work for the poorest, to improve the world and become champions in the service of others. “Poverty in the world is a scandal”, he asserted. “In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry. [...] Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures.” (Francis 2013d).

Bergoglio has fully experienced the humiliating effects of poverty in Argentina. His statements reflect the Latin American experience and largely coincide with the principles expressed in the Concluding Document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean held in Aparecida (Brazil) in 2007. The similarities are not accidental, as Cardinal Bergoglio has chaired the drafting committee (Cavassa 2013). The Aparecida-Documents is a thorough, comprehensive analysis of the Church in Latin America, a diagnosis of the economic, social, political, ecological and humanitarian problems that challenge the continent and a testimony to the social sensitivity of these Churches. Aparecida restates the social engagement of the Church, assumed since Medellín.

The document evokes the inequities faced by indigenous and Afro-American communities, the social exclusion of women, the deprivation of the youth of educational and professional opportunities, the suffering faced by the poor, the unemployed, the migrant and displaced, the landless peasants, the victims of child prostitution, the families that live in dire poverty, the disabled, the bearers of severe diseases, the victims of violence (through kidnapping, terrorism, armed conflicts, public insecurity and domestic violence), the drug-addicts, the lonely elderly, and the prisoners (CELAM 2007, 65, 88-97). The environmental issues receive a particular attention: the need to preserve biodiversity and

natural resources, a sustainable economic development and the problem of climate change (CELAM 2007, 66, 83-86). Economic concerns figure prominently, targeting monopolies, profit as supreme value, free trade agreements that disadvantage poor countries, the high foreign and domestic debt, the concentration of financial and informational resources in the hands of small economic elites, insufficient access to new technologies, speculative financial investments, the concentration of landholding in the hands of a few, and corruption, often linked to drug trafficking (CELAM 2007, 60-62, 67-72). The displacement of large parts of the population through migration produces severe loss of human capital, of trained professionals, and poverty (CELAM 2007, 73). Migration has dramatic proportions, as millions of people are displaced due to persecution, violence or economic conditions. The Church should welcome them as an ecclesial family (CELAM 2007, 411-416). Aparecida also addresses the authoritarian regression of democracy, neo-populist politics, corruption, violence due to organized crime, drug trafficking, paramilitary groups, common crime, the unjust laws passed by some parliaments facilitated by citizens' abdicating their duty to participate in public life, the violation of human rights and the armed conflicts (CELAM 2007, 74-81). In this context the Aparecida-document reaffirms the preferential option of the Latin-American episcopate for the poor and excluded (CELAM 2007, 179, 391-398). The *Message of the Conference to the Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean* states the same engagement. The Churches commit themselves to defend the weak (the children, the sick and disabled, the elderly, the imprisoned, the migrants), to contribute to dignified economic-living conditions, to fight against all forms of violence and exploitation, to promote a culture of honesty and to favour a sustainable development based on a just distribution of wealth. This commitment is inspired by Christ, the human face of God and the divine face of man (CELAM 2007, 392).

The statements of Pope Francis evoke the same responsibility and commitment to the disenfranchised. The encyclical *Laudato Si'* speaks literally of "the preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters", in the context of human ecology, in "a global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable". This requires expressions of solidarity able to achieve the common good (Francis 2015, 156, 158). The topic of poverty, the responsibility of the Church for building a just society returns constantly in the statements of the Pope. So does the responsibility of the Church and society in the European refugee-crisis. The refugee, the immigrant, the persecuted require the same protection, whether in Latin-America or in Europe.

2.4. A compassionate Pope: The marginalized, the refugees and the rite of feet washing

Mercy (*miser cordia*), a fundamental value in the thought of Pope Francis, is a theological-religious term that may not be comprehensible or appealing to a secular public. However, mercy, as understood and symbolically expressed by Francis, strongly resonates with his social commitment, and has significant political implications.

Pope Francis called a Jubilee of Mercy, inaugurated with the opening of the gates of mercy in St Peter's basilica on December 8, 2015, on the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican II. With this symbolic gesture and timing the Pope recalled the aspiration of the Council to shape a Church with open doors, open to contemporary society, to those facing spiritual and material distress. Pope Francis has constantly called the Church to leave its secure walls, to proclaim the Gospel in a novel way on the outskirts of society (Francis 2014, 112). The Jubilee of Mercy pointed in equal manner to God's merciful love to all humans and to the compassion humans have to show toward each other (Francis 2015b, 4, 9, 21).

One of the social consequences of this compassion concerns the refugee crisis. The issue divides European public opinion. Pope Francis has repeatedly critiqued the insensitivity and incapacity of the Western world to solve the humanitarian crisis. He addresses the issue from a religious perspective, discovering in the marginalized the face of Christ, regardless of their race or religion. On July 8, 2013 he visited Lampedusa, a spot that has witnessed numerous tragedies over the last years, in a gesture of solidarity, but also to kindle the conscience of Christians, speaking of the globalization of indifference and of Christians' numbness to the suffering of others (Francis 2013b). On April 16, 2016 following the bitter outcry of Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens for solidarity, he visited the island of Lesbos where he met the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in a joint ceremony of prayer for the refugees and recollection of the victims. He returned to Rome with three families of Syrian refugees. In a press conference on the return flight he recalled the deep impression the tragic situation made on him (Francis 2016b; Wooden 2016). On October 26, 2016 on the occasion of the Wednesday general audience in Saint Peter's square he returned to the issue stating: "The only way to a solution is that of solidarity. Solidarity with the migrant, solidarity with the foreigner.... Let us not fall into the trap of closing in on ourselves, indifferent to the needs of brothers and sisters and concerned only with our own interests. It is precisely in the measure to which we open ourselves to others that life becomes fruitful, society regains peace and people recover their full dignity." (Francis 2016a). Instead of capitalizing on fear, Francis continuously calls for solidarity, without limiting the actions of the Church to praying or celebrating the mass for the sufferer.

Francis' emphasis on mercy and solidarity explains some of his surprising liturgical gestures, notably his way of practicing the rite of the washing of feet during the Eucharistic celebration on Holy Thursday. The rite is taken from the Gospel of John, which narrates Jesus' gesture setting an example of selfless love and service for the disciples (John 13, 34). In the Western Church the rite has been practiced under various forms, in different contexts and with different emphases. Pius XII confirmed the rite of washing of the feet (*Maxima Redemptionis nostrae mysteria*, 1955), as an expression of fraternal love, calling the attention of the faithful to the works of Christian charity. Consequently the *Roman Missal* specified that the rite had to be performed on chosen men (*viri selecti*). In general, these were selected from clerics or seminarians.

In contrast to this restrictive practice, Archbishop Bergoglio exercised the rite in a far more inclusive way, frequently inviting lay persons, men and women, mostly from poor and marginalized groups. As a Pope, Francis continued this inclusive practice. In 2013, on Holy Thursday, celebrating the Eucharist in the Casal del Marmo juvenile detention centre in Rome, he washed the feet of twelve young detainees, men and women. One year later, he performed this rite at Santa Maria della Provvidenza, a rehabilitation facility for the elderly and people with disabilities on the outskirts of Rome. In 2015 he celebrated the Mass in the chapel of the Rebibbia Prison and washed the feet of twelve inmates, men and women. Even more remarkable was his decision of 2016 to celebrate the Holy Thursday Eucharist in a Center for Asylum Seekers in Castelnuovo di Porto. Among the young refugees whose feet he washed there were not only Christians of different denominations, but also Muslims. The highly symbolic gesture pointed to the respect and compassion the Church should have for refugees, for persons in need, regardless of their religion. In his homily he referred to brotherhood that transcends cultural and religious differences.

In December 2014 Pope Francis instructed the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to extend the rite to other persons as well, to permit a larger representation of the people of God in the ceremony (Francis 2014a). The decree of the Congregation (January 2016) opened the rite to men and women, young and old, healthy and sick, clergy, religious, and laity. The decree quotes the emphasis of Pope Francis on the example of Christ, on the universal dimension of his self-offering (Francis 2016). The commentary of the decree strengthens the link between the rite and the commandment of fraternal love, which "binds all the disciples of Jesus without any distinction or exception" (Francis 2016c).

This inclusive interpretation of the rite of the washing of the feet was received as an innovation, but in fact it returns to the broader practice of earlier centuries. In certain Western churches it was part of the ritual of baptism. Ambrose attests it in Milan as a (quasi-)sacramental rite and a

service of humility following the example of Christ (Ambrosius 1845, 397-398; Ambrosius 1845b, 432-433). As part of the baptismal rites, it could have hardly excluded women or lay persons in general. According to the 1600-Roman *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* the bishop could wash the feet of thirteen poor, after having dressed them, fed them and provided them with alms (*Missale Parisiense* 1841, 203). These few examples show that the contemporary performance of the rite in the Roman Church restricted in fact a more inclusive practice.

The manner in which Cardinal Bergoglio/Pope Francis has practiced this rite has a religious and social significance. As Francis chose not to limit the rite to men (or clerics), he symbolically reinforced the belonging of all Christians to the people of God. More significantly here, with his inclusion of the disenfranchised, of the refugees and those belonging to other religions, Francis emphasised the responsibility of the Church for alleviating all forms of suffering and for restoring the dignity of the human person. In this he has transcended borders and conventional forms, to give a powerful expression of a solidarity rooted in his faith.

2.5. A „green” Pope

The Aparecida-document emphasized the importance of environmental concerns, but also the social impact of the destruction of the natural habitat (CELAM 2007, 83-84). Ecology is a key issue for Pope Francis, too. His first independent encyclical, the *Laudato si'* (2015) offers a serious analysis of the challenges of ecology and our shared responsibility for the environment. The Pope evokes the suffering of Mother-Earth (Francis 2015, 2). The ecological concern of the Pope joins that of Patriarch Bartholomew (Francis 2015, 8, referring to the Patriarch's *Message for the Day of Prayer for the Protection of Creation*, in 2012). Environmental concerns are linked to social responsibility, to the issue of justice for the poor (Francis 2015, 10). Nature is not simply an object for human use. The encyclical addresses burning issues like pollution, climate change, the dangers of a throwaway culture, the importance of water as universal human right (Francis 2015, 20-31, 43). Francis extends the ecological concerns beyond environmental issues proper to address social inequity, poverty, the situation of rich countries, matters that affect millions of people. The Pope reminds Christians of their responsibility (Francis 2015, 67), and invites them to cultivate the “ecological virtues” (Francis 2015, 89).

3. Conclusion

Modern definitions of the public sphere have relegated religion to the private sphere. In this sense religion is a private matter and does not regard the public space, where ethical principles draw from a secular

humanism. The statements and liturgical gestures of Pope Francis have challenged the dissociation between religious practice and social ethics, and have returned religion to the forefront of public discussion. Francis has dared and succeeded to transcend reified and sacralised forms of religious practice, just as the border between the secular public sphere and private religion. His outspoken defence of the dignity of the person, of human rights is inspired by his religious convictions, and expresses what he (and Kasper) has called the revolution of tenderness. This revolution is not carried out with the instruments of power. It comes from a religiosity focused on a simple lifestyle and the practice of mercy, paired with openness to other cultures and religions, deep concern for the poor and the persecuted, and a penetrating critique of oppressive social, economic and political systems. In this context liturgical celebrations and rites, like the Masses celebrated among the marginalized or the washing of the feet of prisoners, disabled or refugees become the effective symbol of his social commitment.

The global impact of Pope Francis has been largely enhanced by the media. His homilies and speeches are accessible online; his visits, liturgical celebrations, ritual gestures and discourses have been broadcasted on television. On social media powerful images and thoughts are just one click away. This phenomenon brings up a more general question, that of the blurring of the border between public and private space due to the media.

The concerns expressed by Pope Francis were met with incomprehension in certain European, Catholic circles, in spite of the fact that they express the essence of the Gospel. As a Jesuit Pope with sympathies for the Franciscan spirituality, rooted in the social sensitivity of the Latin American Church, Francis continues to surprise public opinion and perhaps even more his own Church. Francis proclaims that God cannot be confined within the walls of the Church(es). Priests should go out to the existential outskirts, to be shepherds with 'odor of the sheep'. For his detractors he is a liberal, Communist, red, green, foreign Pope, who does not understand Europe and destroys European Christianity. This assessment comes from traditionalist circles confined within the walls of the Church, marked by nostalgic triumphalism, focused on a clerical, hermetic liturgy, where apprehension of the sacrality of the rite and language surpasses any other concern. It is not by accident that this understanding of the liturgy has little sympathy for social concerns.

All things considered, the phenomena addressed in this paper may call for a new discussion regarding the strict separation between public, shared social concerns and private religion.

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