**CONVERSION**

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Excerpt from: *Close and Concrete: Pope Francis Evangelizing a World in Flux.*

Hélder Câmara Lecture, Newman College, Melbourne, 21 March 2019.

Pope Francis, in his first letter to the Chilean bishops after receiving Archbishop Scicluna’s report into cover-up and corruption, told them that it was at times like this, when we are “weak, frightened and armor-plated in our comfortable winter palaces”, that “God’s love comes out to meet us to purify our intentions, that we might love as free, mature and critical people.”

The risk for our Churches is to want to stay inside those comfortable winter palaces. The more intense the storm, the greater the desire to keep your head down, stay indoors, batten down the hatches, and wait for the storm to pass. But that is to miss the grace which is on offer.

Back in 1987, Bergoglio wrote about “criteria of discernment, criteria of action so as not to allow ourselves to be dragged down by institutional desolation.” He has referred to these criteria a number of times this past year. In times of persecutions and tribulations the temptations are to focus ideas; to becoming fixated with enemies — the bad people out there, the good people in here — to have an exaggerated sense of victimhood, and of “dwelling on our own desolations.” Rather than discern and reform, to lament and condemn.

In January last year, Francis warned the religious and clergy in Santiago’s cathedral of two temptations in particular, in an era of change and anxiety: “of becoming closed, isolating ourselves and defending our ways of seeing things, which then turn out as nothing more than fine monologues” and “to think that everything is wrong, and in place of ‘good news’, the only thing we profess is apathy and disappointment.”

Francis showed a different path: Peter’s forgiveness by Christ following his betrayal. Facing his weakness, saved by God’s mercy, the failed sinner became a joyful, grateful apostle, sent out to serve. He was capable of evangelizing, not because he was righteous and successful, but because he was a forgiven failure, and could therefore witness to the power of the very mercy he proclaimed.

Francis told the bishops: “A wounded Church does not make herself the centre of things, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the centre the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ.” And he added: “To know both Peter disheartened, and Peter transfigured is an invitation to pass from being a Church of the unhappy and disheartened to a Church that serves all those people who are unhappy and disheartened in our midst.”

Here we have the heart of pastoral conversion: a Church that can be of the poor, for the poor, because it is a wounded Church. Its failures were not a reason for recoiling from the world but an invitation to serve it in humility.

The Argentine Jesuits say that Bergoglio’s extraordinary gift in spiritual direction was to spot the temptations specific to each person.

In holding the Church to this path of conversion, Francis has been carefully pointing out these temptations. In the case of Chile, for example, he warned against taking refuge in abstraction and verbiage — the Latin-American vice, one might say. While to the US bishops he has warned them against taking refuge in technical or juridical reforms which are necessary but insufficient. As James Hanvey SJ puts it: “If we do not listen and then respond beyond the necessary protocols and legal instruments, the Church will miss the grace that is being offered. It will run the risk of making itself and its own survival an end in itself, succumbing to the temptation of institutional idolatry.”

In both cases, Francis warned the bishops against the urge to denounce, blame, and scapegoat, to call up a restorationist reform and crusades of purification against “enemies within” — to avoid the hard task of self- accusation, in other words, by accusing others. Archbishop Viganò would offer a perfect example of this temptation.

To restore Christ to the centre meant to face the truth, confess your sin, and in fasting and prayer to trust in the power of God’s mercy to bring about an institutional *metanoia*.

A spiritual corruption can only be purged by a spiritual conversion, a starting-again from Christ. The temptation to accuse, to deflect responsibility, can only be countered by self-accusation.

As Francis said in his speech following the recent anti-abuse summit in Rome, what he called a “positivistic” approach could supply an explanation, but not the meaning. In this case, what we are dealing with is “a manifestation of brazen, aggressive and destructive evil” that in its pride and in its arrogance considers itself “the Lord of the world”.

Protocols and legal structures, punishment of offenders, these are at times necessary, but they will not — as some of the victims’ groups seem to think — change a culture; they are the necessary signs of conversion, but they are not conversion itself. Indeed, they may become substitutes for it. As Hanvey puts it: “The pope is engaged in something much more difficult: he is asking for the profound adaptive change that conversion requires. Such adaptive change is no threat to the essence and the truth of the Church; it recovers it.”