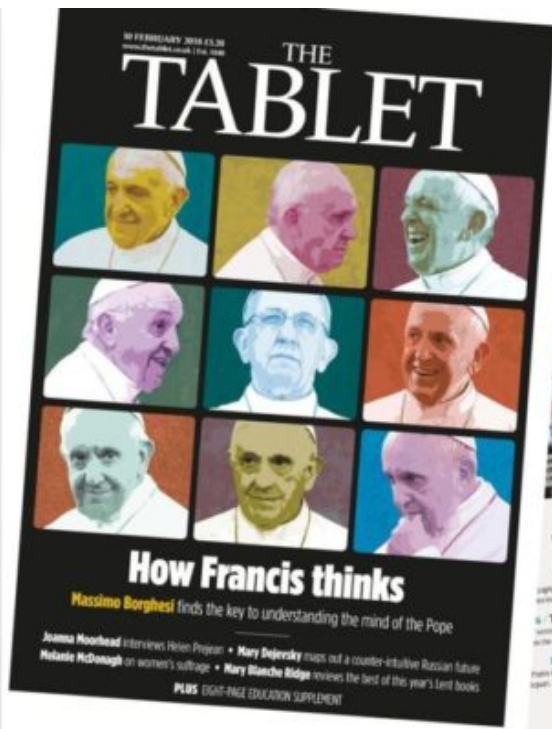


Polar opposition



(from [Alphonsian Academy blog](#))

Pope Francis asserts that the unity «we seek is not uniformity, but “unity in diversity”».

[i] Taking inspiration from Romano Guardini, the Pope describes this unity using the dialectic of polar opposition.[ii] During the Synod on Consecrated Life (1994), J.M. Bergoglio explained this dynamic: «A tension, for its life to be maintained, cannot be resolved by assimilation of one of the poles to the detriment of the others, nor by a synthesis (of a Hegelian type) that annuls the polarities. The tension (in this case the ecclesial tension) must be resolved on a higher level, that would not be a synthesis, but a resolution that virtually contains the tensioned polarities».[iii]

Unfortunately, the current technocratic paradigm, homogeneous and one-dimensional, overrides this dynamic, thus opening the way to globalized indifference, despotic domination, and the throwaway culture.

Romano Guardini's dialectic of polar opposition

Romano Guardini proposed a dialectic of polar opposition to explain the original structure of reality and the dynamism that characterizes it.[iv] In all life, he says, there is a tension between two poles which are bound together, united and indissociable.[v] «It is not a “synthesis” of two moments into a third. Nor is it a whole, of which the two moments constitute “parts”».[vi] «The two opposites are not annulled. One pole does not destroy the other. There is no contradiction and no identity. For him, [Guardini] oppositions are

resolved at a higher level. In that resolution, however, the polar tension remains. The tension remains, it is not cancelled out. Limits must be overcome, not negated. Oppositions are helpful. Human life is structured in an oppositional form. And we see this happening now in the church as well. The tensions are not necessarily resolved and ironed out, they are not like contradictions». [vii]

In this dialectic, the two elements remain linked and mutually presuppose each other, forging a unity that does not cancel out the difference. This unity can only be understood as polar tension – not contradictory – between opposites; that is, as the unity of contrast. [viii]

Pope Francis' oppositional principles

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis presents four oppositional principles: 1) *Time is greater than space*; 2) *Unity prevails over conflict*; 3) *The whole is greater than the part*; 4) *Realities are more important than ideas* [ix]. These principles are drawn from the never-completed doctoral thesis that he was drafting on Guardini [x] and respond to three bipolar and innate tensions: fullness-limitation (principles 1 and 2), ideas-realities (3), globalization-localization (4). [xi]

Recently, Pope Francis has affirmed that «conflicts, tensions, and even groups once considered inimical can attain a multifaceted unity that gives rise to new life». [xii] Polar opposition must not be confused with contradiction. For example, «evil is not the counterpart of good, as gnosis would have it, but it is its negation». Therefore, «it demands a decision, a choice»: [xiii] you have to choose one or the other, not both.

Unity in diversity

The universal fraternity will be possible if we maintain the polar opposition between universal-particular, global-local, difference-complementarity, essence-existence, avoiding any type of excluding contradiction. «Unity prevails over conflict», [xiv] but this should not lead «to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides» (EG228).

In this line, Pope Francis proposes the image of the polyhedron, «which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness» (EG 236). The whole prevails without nullifying the polarity with each of the parts. The model is not the sphere, because «the global need not stifle, nor the particular prove barren» (EG 235).

To adequately manage polarities, we need to awaken «our God-given aesthetic and contemplative sense», [xv] so as to expand «horizons beyond conflicts» (QA 104). With the help of the Holy Spirit, source of all unity and of all difference, we are invited to strengthen fraternal relationships without nullifying the polar tensions they entail.

Fr. Martín Carbajo Nuñez, OFM

[i] Francis, «*Amoris Laetitia*. Post-synodal apostolic exhortation,» (March 19, 2016), [AL], n. 139, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis(AAS)* 108/4 (Apr. 1, 2016) 311-446.

[ii] The full presentation of this topic: Carbajo-Núñez Martín, «Family relationships and polar opposition: Being equal while remaining different», in *Forum Teologiczne* 22 (2021) 61-80.

[iii] Bergoglio J.M., «La vida consagrada y su misión en la Iglesia y en el mundo», n. 3, in *Teología* 22/66 (1995) 203-212, here 204 [my translation]

[iv] Bergoglio explains Guardini's eight pairs of opposites in: Bergoglio J.M., «Necesidad de una antropología política: un problema pastoral,» in *Stromata* 45/1-2 (1989) 173-189.

[v] Cada uno «no puede ser deducido del otro, ni ser hallado a partir del otro». Guardini R., *El contraste. Ensayo de una filosofía de lo viviente-concreto*, BAC, Madrid 1996, 90.

[vi] Guardini R., *El contraste*, 90 & 79-80.

[vii] Spadaro A., «Le orme di un pastore. Una conversazione con Papa Francesco,» in Bergoglio J.M.-Pope Francis, *Nei tuoi occhi è la mia parola. Omelie e discorsi di Buenos Aires 1999-2013*, Rizzoli, Milano 2016, p. XIX. [My translation].

[viii] «Como unidad nacida del contraste». Fayos Febrer R., «La noción de persona en Romano Guardini. Ensayo sobre una teoría cristiana del hombre,» in *Espíritu* 59/139 (2010) 301-309, here 310.

[ix] Francis, «*Evangelii gaudium*. Apostolic exhortation» (Nov. 24, 2013), [EG], nn. 222-225, in *AAS* 105 (2013) 1019-1137.

[x] «Tutta la parte sui criteri sociali [in *Evangelii Gaudium*] è tratta dalla tesi su Guardini.» Cámara J. – Pfaffen S., *Gli anni oscuri di Bergoglio. Una storia sorprendente*, Ancora, Milano 2016, 185.

[xi] Bergoglio J.M., *Nosotros como ciudadanos, nosotros como pueblo, Hacia un bicentenario en justicia y solidaridad 2010-2016*, Claretiana, Buenos Aires 2011, 13.

[xii] Francis, «*Fratelli tutti*. Encyclical letter,» (Oct. 3, 2020), [FT], n. 245, LEV, Vatican City 2020.

[xiii] Borghesi M., *Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Una biografia intellettuale. Dialettica e mistica*, Jaca, Milano 2017, 122 (Id., *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2018).

[xiv] Francis, «*Laudato si'*. Encyclical letter,» (May 24, 2015), [LS], n. 198, in *AAS* 107 (2015) 847-945.

[xv] Francis, «*Querida Amazonia*. Post-synodal apostolic exhortation» (Feb. 2, 2020), [QA], n. 56, LEV, Vatican City 2020.