

LIMEN

Journal of the Hungarian Migration Research Institute

3 (2021/1)



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Frontispiece:

The Ugandan army patrolling the refugee settlement in Rwamwanja, January
2020, photo: Sándor Jászberényi.

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Founders:



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Pope Francis: Let Us Dream: The path to a Better Future.
Simon & Schuster, 2020. (160 pages)

Review by Márk Vargha

The Covid-19 pandemic has been determining the everyday life of most people on the planet for a year now, and the archbishop of Buenos Aires was inaugurated as pope under the name Francis eight years ago. In the discourse centred around the pandemic, a number of globally reputed scholars, influential company managers and famous politicians expressed their views on the possible root causes and consequences of the crisis. In other words: where did mankind go wrong, and what should it do differently after the crisis is gone? The book authored by the head of the Catholic Church and scheduled for release right before last Christmas fits into this pattern. He discloses his edited conversations conducted with journalist Austen Ivereigh, former press secretary and PR director of the archbishop of Westminster, with Ivereigh's epilogue. In the book titled "Let us dream", the topic of migration is also mentioned, thus we can learn the Pope's opinion formulated on the issue by him directly, which we hereby attempt to place into a framework by using several other sources.

Liberation theology

Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the archbishop of Buenos Aires was elected as the 266th pope of the Roman Catholic Church on 13 March 2013. Besides being the first pope to take the name Francis, he is the first in other respects as well: the first Jesuit and American on the throne of Saint Peter, but no one else has made it to the papal office from the Southern Hemisphere before either. As regard to the person and activity of Francis, South America plays a significant role, since this is the region where the so-called liberation theology emerged in the second half of the 1960's. The so-called base communities were the antecedents of this theological approach that had been formed in the previous decade to be a platform for experiencing brotherhood in small groups. This was the period when local Catholicism discovered that faith could be used to liberate the poor, as a kind of revolutionary power. Nevertheless, he did not come to this realisation "by himself". Instead, this approach originates from the activity of theologians teaching theology

at faculties in western universities, who adapted these ideas to South America where a number of the bishops and believers accepted them. The impact of left-wing ideology – in particular, Marxism – on this approach is indisputable, which resulted in its approximation to the enforcement of Soviet interests: Ion Mihai Pacepa, a recently deceased general – who served with the infamous Roman intelligence service, the Securitate, and then defected to the US – argues that the KGB played a part in spreading it. And one of its most known advocates was Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan Catholic priest who served as a member of the Sandinist government. Working as the minister of culture from 1979 to 1987, Cardenal had an overtly hostile relationship with John Paul II due to his views.

In contrast to Marxism, the liberation theology puts the emphasis on the personal relationship between man and other people instead of the relationship between man and the world. In addition to solidarity, subsidiarity also forms an essential part of it: poor people are not only passive subjects of liberation, but rather its active actors.

The approach was criticised by several theologians and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the 1980's (on two occasions). The latter body argued, among other things, that changing the society will not make people themselves better; instead of an armed fight, a passive resistance is the better way to go; and finally, according to the Congregation, creating a specific social model is the task of politicians, and not priests. Pope Francis makes no explicit reference in his book that his ideas would be based on this approach. In the epilogue, however, his conversation partner clearly indicates the significance of liberation theology – more precisely, its Argentinian version – that permeates the whole book. According to him, Francis is convinced that real change will not come from above, it will come from the peripheries where Christ lives. The rich thinking tradition of the Argentinian Church lies behind this conviction, which is known as the Theology of Peoples.

Structure of the book

The three parts of the book are framed by the Prologue and the Epilogue. The first entitled “Time to see” was compiled from the pope's audio-recorded answers to Ivereigh's questions. Seeing means the perception of reality, then, within reality, the realisation of the misery faced by those living on the periphery of society. The

second part entitled “Time to choose” is the result of a looser, more spontaneous, but at the same time deeper (“master-student” like) communication between Francis and Ivereigh (similar to the third part). He highlights various powers that affect man nowadays, and classifies them into two categories: those to be followed (“come from God”) and those to be rejected. The third part entitled “Time to act” intends to present how we should act on the basis of the foregoing, more precisely, what we should do differently from what we have done until now. This part answers the following questions: What does it mean to be a people? What do people mean to me? What does the dignity of the people mean? What is solidarity? What is wrong with the unchained market orientation? What should we think about human trafficking and abortion? Why should populism be rejected? Why are people’s movements important (such as the Cartonero in South America)? What can we learn from these movements? Then he mentions three topics under separate subtitles: Earth (i.e. environmental protection), Housing and Work.

Migration – and many other things

The topic of migration is touched upon in the third part, in two respects. First, in connection with the harsh criticism of human trafficking, when Pope Francis clearly favours the acceptance of people arriving, referring to today’s population movement as a right, and relying on the victim position of everyone arriving – be they economic immigrants or refugees. According to Francis, the dignity of our peoples requires corridors for the migrants and refugees so they can move from regions where life threatening conditions prevail to more peaceful places, without any fear. The pope argues that deterring immigrants by letting hundreds of refugees die during perilous journeys by sea or walking through the desert is unacceptable. Francis highlights that the Lord will hold us all accountable for each and every such death.

In our opinion, the pope approaches the problem of integrating the people who arrive in developed states superficially. He only calls to assist integration, and fails to address the basic problem that most developed societies have their needs satisfied by poorly paid immigrants. Instead, he criticises some specific existing consequences of the basic problem that cannot be applied to the majority societies – or the media which play an obvious role in informing the public – en bloc. According to Francis migrants are used as scapegoats, they are painted in

a negative light, and they are denied the right to safe and decent work. The pope only briefly makes a more complex approach, he asserts that governments should act carefully in assessing their reception and integration capacities.

The other topic touched upon by the pope in connection with migration is national populism. Indeed, he calls the efforts of national populism aimed at protecting “Christian civilisation” (quotation marks from the original – MRI) in Christian majority countries from some alleged enemies, like Islam, a phantasmagoria. Ignoring the complexity of the concept of populism in political science, the pope gives a rather simplistic explanation. According to him, the loss of the relationship with God and the universal sense of brotherhood fed the sense of isolation and the fear of the future. As a result, non-religious and superficially religious people vote for the populists to protect their religious identity, fully ignoring that fear and hatred are incompatible with the gospels. Finally, the ideas following the abovementioned thoughts are hard to interpret otherwise than the promotion of receipt without thorough distinction and impact assessment. According to Francis, the essence of Christianity is God’s love for all people and our love for our neighbours, especially those in need. He argues that by rejecting a struggling immigrant – no matter what their faith is – in the fear that we dilute the “Christian” (quotation marks from the original – MRI) culture, then we present Christianity and culture in a grotesquely false manner. The pope concludes that migration is a threat to Christianity only in the minds of those who benefit from voicing such threat. Failing to define “struggling immigrant” in detail leaves a large room for free interpretation, which the actors favouring reception may exploit worldwide to exert pressure not only on the followers of the Catholic Church, but also the political powers, groups and parties that identify themselves as Christian democrats and compete for the votes of the former group.

Summary

Though “Let us dream” is an important piece due to the global prestige of the office held by the author, we should underline that this set of statements lacks any authoritative power. Accordingly, the members of the church organisation and the believers would be wrong if they viewed the content as “sayings” of an undeniable authority. There is no doubt, however, that the pope unintentionally – some say, intentionally – became an opinion leader of the international left

based on the ideas of liberation theology over his 8-year reign. As such, the book is an influential intellectual work in a political (migration policy) aspect. Still, two comments are necessary here.

First, regarding Pope Francis as the advocate of migration is a gross simplification. Using his experiences as a descendant of Italian immigrants, and certainly not independent from the impact of political-ideological changes in the society that once accepted his family, the head of the church focusses on the individual, i.e. the migrant in need, without analysing the phenomenon of immigration in a comprehensive manner. Regardless of how the Geneva Convention orders to assess the situation of the person arriving, he or she represents a concrete type of the needy individual living on the periphery to whom believers must turn with unconditional love. Second, the apparently unsophisticated attitude of Francis to the topic (as demonstrated above) is not the one and only opinion in the church. The church itself and its “elite” are both heterogeneous: many prelates take a critical approach to migration. For instance, the recently retired Guinean cardinal Robert Sarah associated migration with modern slavery and barbarian invasion. Analysing the weight and influence of church dignitaries that have other opinions, however, would obviously go beyond the limits of this review.

For this review, we used the entries of the Hungarian Catholic Lexicon, and consulted Catholic Church historian Márton Csernus-Ortutay.

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