



CARDINAL GEORGE PELL, prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy, with Pope Francis at a general audience in November

This coming Friday marks the second anniversary of Francis' election to the papacy. In the first of a series of articles reflecting on his influence, a senior Catholic commentator considers the Pope's emphasis on evangelism, witness and mercy / **By GEORGE WEIGEL**

On a mission to the world

POPE FRANCIS DOES not seem to be an instinctively retrospective man; his passion for seeking out the lost sheep along the highways and byways of the early twenty-first century, and offering them the mercy of God and the truth of the Gospel, puts his focus squarely on the present and the future. But were he so inclined, this "Pope from the end of the Earth" could look back, at this second anniversary of his election, on some solid accomplishments.

He has reanimated the papacy itself, not so much by magisterium as by example. His reach to those who have fallen through the cracks of postmodern life has also touched the affluent, the sceptical and the wounded, even as it has put a fresh face on Catholicism and opened up new vistas for the Church's mission. All over the world, Francis is news, and when the Pope is news, so is the Church and the Gospel.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis laid out a bold strategy for the Church of the twenty-first century. The first Latin American Pope brought to his office a conviction, forged with his brother Latin American bishops at the 2007 Celam conference in Aparecida, that

"kept" Catholicism – as in "kept" by legal establishment or cultural habit – had no future. Rather, the Church had to rediscover the truth that every Catholic is baptised into a missionary vocation, and put that truth at the centre of its life. Thus Francis has returned, time and again, to the image of a "Church in permanent mission", in which its institutions become launching pads for evangelisation.

He has also reminded the Church that, amid the confusions of postmodern culture, it is witness, rather than argument, that is likely to attract those who have never met Christ and call home the disaffected and the fallen-away. Thus he continues to stress the experience of divine mercy – the healing touch of the Christ who, in Mark 1:40-45, not only speaks to a leper but touches him, taking the leper's condition on himself – as the privileged path to an encounter with the symphony of Catholic truth.

Elected to clean up what Ronald Knox used to call the engine room of the Barque of Peter, the Roman Curia, Francis has made significant progress in reforming the Holy See's finances. His appointment of Cardinal George Pell as

overseer of a powerful new Vatican Secretariat for the Economy was a masterstroke, and at every point where Pell has run into resistance, the Pope has backed him to the hilt.

Although the instruments of social media existed before him – even Benedict XVI sent out tweets – Francis is really the first pope of the new communications age. Virtually everything he says or does is commented on, analysed, praised or deplored all over the world within hours of him saying or doing it. And while this, too, is a notable accomplishment, it has also created a pope on whom are projected all manner of hopes, aspirations, fears and anxieties, from all points of Catholic opinion. Indeed, these ongoing battles over the meaning of Francis' pontificate have a tendency to obscure some of the more striking facets of this intriguing figure. Such as, for example, his interestingly dark view of the human condition at this moment in history.

Robert Hugh Benson's 1907 novel, *Lord of the World*, has small claim to literary distinction, save as the precursor to far greater dystopian fiction, such as Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*. Yet for all the book's defects as literature, Pope Francis clearly finds in it a compelling critique of a civilisation in which tolerance and humanitarianism are the facade behind which ego-driven authoritarianism eventually turns into a mass persecution of the Church.

He has made references to *Lord of the World* in several of his daily Mass homilies – brief remarks which, nonetheless, offer a reliable window into the Pope's mind and soul – and in personal conversation he admits to having read the book four times. Perhaps the Spanish translation is superior to the English original; in any case, a man who returns again and again to Robert Hugh Benson's apocalypse is someone with a very clear view of the shadow-side of our world, and especially of the mendacity rife in contemporary politics.

Then there are his frequent references to Satan, or the devil, or the forces of evil at work in the world. Has any pope since Leo XIII – whose mandated after-Mass prayer to St Michael the Archangel was a staple of pre-conciliar Catholic piety – taken such public notice of the Evil One, or been so determined to remind the Church that "satanic" is not just a trope for "really bad" (as in Stalin or Hitler or Pol Pot)?

FRANCIS' FONDNESS for Benson's view of the late modern world, his belief in the reality of Satan, and his regular references to the "idolatries" of our time meet in his steady condemnation of a "throwaway culture" in which the disposables are not just consumer goods but people. In this context, the Pope's references to "existential peripheries" are not so much a variant on the liberation theology meme of "centre/periphery" as they are a pastor's concern for those thrust to the margins of society because they are not considered "productive" – a category that, for Francis, includes the elderly, the radically handicapped, the unemployed young and the unborn.

And here we come to another intriguing, if typically unremarked, facet of the pontificate: its distinctive pro-life witness, most recently displayed in the Philippines. There, in January, Francis condemned the “ideological colonisation” of international family-planning agencies and national governments that impose population control requirements as a condition of development aid. This, in turn, helps to explain what seems inexplicable to some and is ignored by others: his repeated praise for Paul VI (whom he beatified) and *Humanae Vitae*.

The Pope’s affirmation of the Church’s settled teaching on the morally appropriate means of family planning (which Francis understands as a moral responsibility) is not cast in terms of the natural-law reasoning Pope Paul used in his 1968 encyclical. Nor is it framed in the categories of John Paul II’s Theology of the Body. Rather, Francis’ defence of Paul VI and *Humanae Vitae* is set in the context of his broader critique of the “Neo-Malthusianism” he espies in a rich, decadent West trying to impose its debased culture of instant gratification on the rest of the world – and using the bait of money in its efforts to do so. (All of which is yet another Franciscan echo of Benson.)

AS FRANCIS HIMSELF has said more than once, his will likely be a brief pontificate, given his age at election, his health, the omnipresent threat of a terrorist attack, and the example of Benedict XVI’s abdication, which he seems to judge a good precedent. Yet he is also clearly a man in an evangelical hurry. He laid out an aggressive strategy in *Evangelii Gaudium* and his remarks during his papal pilgrimages all cycle back to that apostolic exhortation and its call for Catholicism to become a Church in permanent, energetic mission. Likewise, his efforts at curial reform are aimed, not simply at efficiency, but at an *evangelical* efficiency in which structure serves mission – a model that he wants to see employed in dioceses throughout the world, not just in Rome.

Whether he will be able to accomplish all he hopes for on these two fronts – a Church that reimagine itself as a missionary enterprise, and a Curia that understands itself to be in service to universal mission – depends in no small part on his judgement in people, which means his ability to choose bishops throughout the world, and subordinates in Rome, with the wit and competence to give effect to his grand strategy.

His vision of mercy linked to truth is a bold and compelling one, shared by the most energetic and lively parts of the world Church. Drawing the clerical and lay leaders who will carry his vision into the middle of the twenty-first century is, arguably, the most urgent task for this Pope at his second anniversary.

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Thanks to official negligence, Jimmy Savile got away with it right to the end



“ Compared with the fate of other former disc jockeys, elderly pop stars and motley faded celebrities who have recently been sentenced for child abuse, the 16-year term handed down to singer Gary Glitter, real name Paul Francis Gadd, doesn’t seem out of line. If it departs from the sentencing guidelines and tariffs currently in force, no doubt the Court of Appeal will correct it. But without diminishing in any way the right of his victims to see justice done nor minimising the ordeal they suffered, one can feel pity for the man himself. He is 71, clearly aged, broken and infirm, and will spend the next eight years at least behind bars. Or die there.

Gadd was convicted of offences that included the attempted rape of an eight-year-old girl and having sex with a girl aged 12. Obviously he had to be punished. Retribution was due. But it is difficult to justify his imprisonment as a deterrent to others or as rehabilitation, and given his age it’s unlikely he’s much of a danger. There is a wider phenomenon here that raises broader issues. The background to all this is the almost unbelievably dreadful story of Jimmy Savile, who engaged, we now know, in industrial-scale sexual abuse of children and other vulnerable people. Thanks to official negligence amounting almost to collusion, he got away with it right to the end. Allied to that is the shock and shame arising from the organised and long-term abuse of minors in towns like Rochdale and Rotherham, to which official blind eyes were turned again and again. A third strand is the strong suspicion that it was not just these two groups – pop stars and their ilk, and working-class males of Pakistani origin – but also rich and powerful people who systematically abused the young and vulnerable, even in organised paedophile rings. They appear to have been protected by a conspiracy of silence. And we can’t ever forget a fourth category – abuse of children by Catholic priests, covered up by their superiors.

The nature of sexual abuse has been closely studied, and two things emerge. The first is that the damage to victims can be long lasting and go very deep into the psyche. The second is that paedophilia, a condition where criminality and pathology overlap, is hard to treat and harder to cure. What

has not received the attention it deserves is the nature of the society in which the abuse occurred, and the way it was ignored or kept hidden. Too many people knew or ought to have known, and did nothing. Nobody wanted to believe that Jimmy Savile was anything but the generous eccentric that he pretended to be.

The roots of his behaviour lie in the culture of the pop music world in the 1960s, an extreme form of the general Swinging Sixties scene when sexual rules were relaxed and taboos abandoned with alacrity. Young women threw off what they regarded as the control of their sexuality by the “patriarchal system” and unwittingly, sometimes handed that control instead to males of their own age-group and to their pop-star idols. It was uncool to say no. And those sexual predators who particularly liked young girls made the best of their opportunities.

The age of consent was treated by the authorities as somewhat blurred and non-binding – family planning clinics lawfully handed out contraceptives to 13-year-olds. If they were groomed by the perpetrators, they were first softened up for that grooming by the culture at large. The message was that sex was just a handshake, a moment of fleeting contact, nothing more serious. Those who questioned this were ridiculed: in the “permissive society” everything had to be permitted. The offences for which Gadd was convicted happened between 35 and 40 years ago. The entertainer Rolf Harris was convicted of sexual assaults going back to 1968. They were directly responsible, but a whole generation of adults chose to look the other way.

Victims often come forward when old buried memories are revived by publicity surrounding other cases, the Savile case above all. That is not to minimise them, but it is part of the context. Behaviour that wasn’t challenged or viewed as not very serious, is now at last exposed to be absolutely inexcusable and gravely criminal. But there is a problem about judging conduct in one age by the standards of another. Is the law right to treat the offences of someone like Gary Glitter as if they happened yesterday? Or do we need to be reminded, as the novelist L.P. Hartley said, that the past is another country and they did things differently there?