

Centered Toward the Margins: Teaching Pope Francis's Revolution of Mercy

Andrew Staron
Wheeling Jesuit University

ABSTRACT: In his 2017 TED Talk, Pope Francis invited his viewers to a “revolution of tenderness” through “love that comes close and becomes real.” Responding to that call, this article argues that Francis’s assertion that “mercy is doctrine” means that the substance of theology *and* its teaching requires a conversion of the minds and hearts of both students and teachers to paths wherein one might encounter the God of Mercy. After touching upon particular challenges facing teachers of theology in an undergraduate classroom, the article outlines Francis’s theological framework which both stands upon the tradition of Ignatian spirituality and justifies his using the weight of the papacy to reorient the church’s vision toward mercy and the margins. Finally, this article considers Pope Francis’s pastoral call to mercy theology might nourish undergraduate students’ imaginations and make merciful action intelligible, spiritually meaningful, and attractive.

KEYWORDS: Pope Francis, mercy, theology, pedagogy, Jesuit education

In his 2017 TED Talk, Pope Francis invited his viewers to a “revolution of tenderness” through “love that comes close and becomes real.”¹ This talk marks yet another moment Francis offers teachers to think about *what* we teach and *how* we teach, ultimately inviting us to think creatively about the radical invitation of the Gospel and its place within the classroom. I would like to consider how Pope Francis’s theology and

¹Pope Francis, “Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone,” filmed in Vatican City for TED2017, TED video, 17:52, https://www.ted.com/talks/pope_francois_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone.

his symbolic actions might transform and nourish undergraduate students' imaginations by providing what Francis calls a "guiding philosophy."² "There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things," Francis writes in the 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, "a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm."³ Taking seriously Francis's two assertions that "we are faced with an educational challenge" and that "mercy is doctrine"⁴ means that the theology we teach needs to be oriented toward the conversion of the minds and hearts of both students and teachers to paths on which one might encounter the God of Mercy.

First, I will discuss challenges facing teachers of theology in an undergraduate classroom, particularly within the core curriculum. Second, I will interpret Pope Francis's call to mercy as an invitation to a conversion of imagination to the peripheries of our communities and church. Third, I will attempt to describe some significant elements of an outwardly centered theology that I have included in my courses as a result of how I have been challenged, as a teacher, to reimagine my work, and I will consider how we might come to teach *a love that comes close*. I should note that these reflections are coming from a Jesuit context. I expect it would be fruitful to expand this conversation to others about what here is applicable across the Catholic spectrum and what others—formed in other traditions with other charisms—might have found helpful in teaching in the core.

I. STUDENTS: CONTEXTS AND CHALLENGES

We need only to make a brief nod toward the sociological data that tells us that our students—even those who attended Catholic schools—are increasingly unfamiliar with the depths of their Christian faith traditions. This unfamiliarity can often take the form of a lack of interest in the subject and lead students wonder why they have to take courses on religion, or, perhaps more accurately, on a Christianity or Catholicism with which they believe themselves familiar. While knowing more about "religion" generally can be framed as helpful for understanding the world, understanding one's own context is often strangely less motivating, particularly for students who see college primarily as a means to a socio-economic end. They are also justifiably suspicious of authoritative institutions, even more of inauthenticity and hypocrisy, and these hesitations

²Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, May 24, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, nos. 110–111.

³Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, no. 111.

⁴Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2016), 62.

color their experience of churches and church-goers. Religion's most public place appears far-too often as a combatant in the "culture wars," offering a rigid winner-takes-all approach to legal and moral frameworks, where one's place within the church community depends upon one's professed adherence to a given side in particular, inconsistent, often volatile conflicts. Christianity is presented first and foremost as a religion of doctrines to know and follow. We can hardly blame students for any hesitancy or distrust with which they approach theology courses in the core.

Here, too, it is helpful to consider the purpose of core theology courses, not from a larger curricular perspective, but from the perspective of the instructor. What do we hope our students to learn in the one, maybe two, courses we might have with them, students who will not become professionally tied to theology, church, or religion? While certainly we dream that our core course will prompt students toward further theology study, we cannot be assured of this. And while there is obviously content that we try to teach and skills that we work to form, what goes on in a theology classroom is more than conveying trinitarian doctrine or the honing of critical thinking, despite what some assessment processes seem to imply. Neither strictly a matter of content nor skill, undergraduate core theology courses ought to be concerned with forming students as interpreters, a term David Tracy uses to get to the heart of the theological endeavor. Teaching theology is first and foremost the teaching of a *hermeneutic*. We might say, theological education is concerned with the intelligibility and implications of a conversion and formation of the imagination oriented toward seeing, judging, and acting within the world in a different way—in the way defined by faith in the creating, reconciling, and sustaining God.

Here, I think it is not only helpful, but *necessary for the integrity of our subject matter*, that we bring pastoral theology back from its ostensible exile and assert its place at the heart of the Church and therefore of theology, so that we can speak to the meaning of this formation. If, as the pope notes, "The truth is not grasped as a thing; the truth is encountered," then truth (that which theology tries to make intelligible) "is not a possession, it is an encounter with a Person"⁵ and not, as he noted to the CDF in 2014, "an ensemble of abstract and crystallized theories."⁶ Truth—what doctrine attempts to articulate—is a matter of an encounter. Francis writes, "Doctrine is not a closed, private system deprived of dynamics able to raise questions and doubts. On

⁵Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014), 43.

⁶Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2014), 374.

the contrary, Christian doctrine has a face, a body, flesh; He is called Jesus.”⁷ To the Jesuits in Columbia, Francis spoke more explicitly on the work of the theology teacher: “today it is a matter of how you express God, how you tell who God is, who you show the Spirit, the wounds of Christ, the mystery of Christ. . . . How you explain these mysteries and keep explaining them, and how you are teaching the encounter that is grace.”⁸ Making this encounter intelligible cannot, therefore, simply be a matter of the right vocabulary and grammar—however nuanced, however grand—because this encounter is not a thought thing, but a lived thing. In the limited time we have with students, we can ask ourselves how we might present this encounter in a way that they can understand what it is that we discuss—to internalize it, be transformed by it, and know how to *go on* from it. In this way, all professors of theology ought to be, too, professors of pastoral theology, not necessarily in content, but in an accent and orientation that continually asks how *what we teach* might form our students’ spirituality. I suggest that when teaching in the core, this is the central responsibility of the theology professor.

II. POPE FRANCIS’S INVITATION TO MERCY AND MARGINS

Pope Francis’s compassionate words and symbolic actions have captured the imagination of many since his election in 2013. While one might certainly offer substantive reflection on his symbolic actions, for the purposes of this article, I will limit my investigation to what teachers might learn from his words and theology.

In April 2018, at Villanova’s “Francis, a Voice Crying Out in the World” conference, Jesuit historian John O’Malley noted three significant formative influences on the pope: 1) his experience of the global south, 2) his formation and experience as a Jesuit, and 3) the Second Vatican Council.⁹ Each of these points gives further texture to what I suggest we might take away from his teaching.

⁷In Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Are We Seeing Changes in the Teaching Ministry of the Pope?” *America*, September 15, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/09/15/are-we-seeing-changes-teaching-ministry-pope>.

⁸Francis, “Press Conference on Return Flight From Brazil (Part 1),” *Zenit*, August 1, 2013, <https://zenit.org/articles/francis-press-conference-on-return-flight-from-brazil-part-1/>.

⁹Meghan J. Clark (@DrClarkM1), “John O’Malley: I see 3 formative influences on Pope Francis. 1. Experience of Global South, 2. formation & experience as a Jesuit, 3. Vatican II. He is putting the council into practice in word and deed.” Twitter, April 13, 2018, 7:20 a.m., <https://twitter.com/DrClarkM1/status/984798487312248833>.

First, Francis's theological imagination is significantly shaped by the Argentinian strand of liberation theology known as the "Theology of the People." In contrast to Marxist theologies of liberation, the Theology of the People is rooted in faith in the people as an active agent in history, not simply a passive socio-economic class or category. Lucio Gera, one of the major proponents of this theology, observes: "The people have a rationality. They have their project; we don't give it to them."¹⁰ The culture and history of the people give shape to its mission; the mission is not imposed from outside by theologians, far-off prelates, or other ecclesial elites. Significant for us here is the way in which this formation liberates Francis from the patterns of a Eurocentric imagination. The Church, and the challenges it faces, need not be described in the default framework of European theologians. Instead, the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) articulated their own vision for the Church at the 2007 Aparecida conference, where the then Cardinal Bergoglio was a key player. The Aparecida vision for the Church is one of an everyday missionary discipleship with special attention to the poor and marginalized. This vision, one of the pope's biographers, Austen Ivereigh, notes, is very far from the prevailing European model in "both diagnosis (the problem is relativism and secularism) and the perceived cure (creative strategies are needed to engage contemporary Western culture, using new ecclesial movements as a model)."¹¹

Beyond the obvious impact on the way of being Church, this—when coupled with an approach to truth as an encounter with the person of Christ—promises to be liberating in the classroom, as well. Without negating any part of the Church's theological tradition, a Church of the people rooted in missionary discipleship to the poor and marginalized opens new ways of presenting and framing the tradition. The ongoing struggles with secularism, relativism, and atheism, and the battles that so occupy the North American "culture wars" are not solved, but simply hold less sway than the foundational proclamation of the mercy of God.

Second, the Jesuit spirituality that formed Francis's own emphasizes both *cura personalis*, that is, care of the concrete individual, and the process of discernment. As former Jesuit superior general Peter-Hans Kolvenbach observes, *cura personalis*, "is not a matter of transmitting learning or doctrine, of imposing a method or one's own ideas, but of offering the mysteries of the life and person of Christ so that the other person may receive them."¹² Growing from the Jesuit conviction that God is *always already active in all things*,

¹⁰In Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 112.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 346.

¹²Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, "Cura Personalis," *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* 114 (2007): 10.

including in the cases where much evidence points to the contrary, this posture invites the Jesuit to be attentive to how he might help the person in front of him become “responsible, which is to say capable of responding to what the Lord wills and desires.”¹³ Transferring this *way of proceeding* to the Church as a whole, Francis invites not an imposition of doctrine or rules, but careful, faithful awareness to the movement of the Spirit within ourselves and others and the discernment of the way in which it leads us. To be so attentive to *where our students are* is to work toward ways of making them agents of their own thoughts and faith—that is capable of responding to their ever-deepening understanding of the mercy of God.

Third, the influence of Vatican II upon Francis (who was ordained in 1969) is visible in his shift in papal *form*—in language and actions—away from that of his predecessors. John O’Malley sees the shift in genre and form as the crucial lens through which to view the Second Vatican Council, which instituted “a literary genre that was new to the conciliar tradition . . . a distinctively new mode of discourse”: the pastoral form.¹⁴ The documents of Vatican II replaced triumphant, clerical, and juridical language aimed at asserting doctrine with epideictic language intended “not so much to clarify concepts as to heighten appreciation for a person, event, institution, and to excite emulation of an ideal.”¹⁵ The language of the council is that “of persuasion and thus of reconciliation” with aspects of the world, modernity, and human experience.

Nowhere is this pastoral influence more explicit in Francis’s theology than in his emphasis on mercy. For insight into Francis’s understanding of this religiously ubiquitous—if lightly defined—concept, we could hardly do better than turn to Walter Kasper’s work on mercy, which Francis recommended during his first Angelus address as a book that “has done me so much good” because it “says that mercy changes everything.”¹⁶ Kasper describes mercy as “a matter of attentiveness and sensitivity to the concrete needs we encounter. It is a matter of overcoming the focus on ourselves that makes us deaf and blind to the physical and spiritual needs of others. It is a matter of dissolving the hardening of our hearts to God’s call that we hear in the encounter with the adversity of others.”¹⁷ As “the expression of [God’s] divine essence,”¹⁸ it is

¹³Ibid., 12.

¹⁴John O’Malley, “Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 18.

¹⁵Ibid., 25.

¹⁶Pope Francis, “Angelus,” Vatican website, March 17, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20130317.html.

¹⁷Walter Kasper, *Mercy* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist, 2014), 143.

¹⁸Ibid., 51.

that which enables us to *see* and begin to understand God. “In fact,” Kasper asserts, “we must be silent about God if we don’t know how to speak anew the message of God’s mercy to the people who are in so much physical and spiritual distress.”¹⁹ We might even say the first word of theology, then, must be mercy. Dependent upon that word, Kasper continues: it “leads human beings to ‘a return to the truth about themselves,’”²⁰ and is the “watermark of all reality . . . the primordial presupposition and ground of creation and of all of salvation history.”²¹ In this way, Kasper establishes mercy as a necessary first condition of theological hermeneutics. To interpret correctly—whether God, ourselves, our creation—we must gaze through the lens of mercy. “I will say this,” Francis writes, “mercy is real; it is the first attribute of God. . . . let us not forget that mercy is doctrine.”²² Mercy is doctrine, not saccharine sentimentality, not dismissed so-called soft pastoral sensitivity, but foundational doctrine. The rest of our formulations only hold inasmuch as they bring us back to mercy.

All three of these influences—the global south’s Theology of the People, Jesuit spirituality, and Vatican II—weigh significantly upon Francis’s call for the Church to be centered on the periphery. Like much that is central to the Gospel—love or forgiveness, for example—to be centered on the margins can quickly slip into superficiality, a catch phrase or motto to be repeated but largely ignored. But like love, mercy, and forgiveness, this vision for the Church is radical and transformative.

Here, I would like to suggest that we be attentive to a difference between being centered *on* the margins and *toward* the margins. While the former is not inherently problematic, centered *on* carries a sense of a target to be reached, a mission to be accomplished, a place to rest. Using the word *toward* is an invitation to continued movement further out than we currently are; it is a reminder that there are still those who are vulnerable and marginalized, those who are outcast from even an ever increasingly large and hospitable Church. “Jesus goes and heals and integrates the marginalized,” Francis writes, “the ones who are outside the city, the ones outside the encampment. In so doing, he shows us the way.”²³

But let us not pass too quickly over the paradoxical strangeness of this vision of the Church. To be centered toward the outside is to be centered on that which is *by definition* not the center; it is not to have a center, at least not in the sense of a fixed point of focus, something normative to build *from*,

¹⁹Ibid., 5.

²⁰Ibid., 71.

²¹Ibid., 97.

²²Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 62.

²³Ibid., 66.

something to return *to*. To be centered toward the periphery is to be called and to be in motion, to be on pilgrimage, to be on *the way* that is revealed by—and as—the person of Jesus Christ.

There is an inescapable element of instability in such movement. Instability, discomfiting at best, is often frightening. When faced with such instability, the temptation, to paraphrase William Lynch, SJ, is to “build various absolute and walled [churches], from which various pockets of our humanity will always be excluded. They will pose as ideal [churches], and will exclude the imagination. . . the sick, the different. These totalistic, these non-human [churches] offer an extraordinary fascination for the souls of fearful [people] and we are fools if we underestimate how strong and seductive they can be.”²⁴ However, against this fear, the call toward the peripheries does not secure us in our smallness, in all the things we cling to so as to keep ourselves apart, distinct from those others, but impels us toward others. The security (if security is the right word) of this Church is not of self-referential confidence but of hope in the God of Jesus Christ who, Francis writes, “is not afraid of the outskirts. If you go to the outskirts,” he encourages us, “you will find [God] there.”²⁵

Francis's Jesuit formation is rooted in the conviction that God is always already present on these peripheries, and the pope never tires of reminding us that God is *ahead of us* in our movement.²⁶ In the March 2018 apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Francis writes: “Unafraid of the fringes, he himself became a fringe. So if we dare to go to the fringes, we will find him there; indeed, he is already there. Jesus is already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, in their troubles and in their profound desolation. He is already there.”²⁷ And Christian life is an invitation to join him.

But there is risk in being the Church of Jesus Christ, a risk starkly described by Terry Eagleton, who observes, “The New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do.”²⁸ Francis recognizes this danger and does not shy from its implications, proclaiming, “I would prefer a thousand times over

²⁴William Lynch, *Images of Hope* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 26.

²⁵Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy*, 18.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 19.

²⁷Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican Website, March 29, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html, no. 135.

²⁸Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 27–28.

a bruised Church” to a Church ill from stagnation and fear.²⁹ Indeed, Francis embraces the vulnerability that comes from mercy. Among the topics discussed between Francis and reporters on the plane back to Rome from World Youth Day in Brazil in 2013 were the concerns regarding the pope’s safety when he disregarded his security detail’s recommendations. Francis observed:

Then we had problems with security theories. . . . With less security, I was able to be with the people, to embrace and greet them, without armored cars. It’s the security of trusting people. It’s true that there is always the danger that there is a madman . . . alas, yes, that there is a madman who does something. . . . But, to make an armored space between the Bishop and the people is madness, and I prefer this madness: [to be] outside and run the risk of the other madness. I prefer this madness outside. Closeness does good to all.³⁰

Francis chooses the risk to his own security over the risk to his pastoral responsibility, which is the risk of indifference to those on the peripheries. Whatever vulnerability results from his moving from his security detail, he refused the madness of turning from the people of God. A Church that follows Francis to the madness outside—the “field hospital”³¹ Church—“triggers the imagination” and forces us, as Blaise Cupich, the cardinal archbishop of Chicago puts it, “to rethink our identity, mission and our life together as disciples of Jesus Christ.”³²

III. THEOLOGIZING TOWARD THE PERIPHERIES

If Francis’s teaching and example invites us to consider the form of the Church and if a central focus of what we ought to be doing is teaching our students so that they understand the mercy of God—that is, so that they are capable of responding to this gift, then we need to consider what “teaching toward the peripheries” might look like in the classroom. But I should make it clear what I am not asking about: First, I am not here engaging the question of service learning, immersion activities, or experimental learning. While undoubtedly these are ways to move students toward the margins, I am concerned primarily with what occurs *within* the classroom. Second, although I am working to over-

²⁹Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy*, 19.

³⁰Francis, “Press Conference on Return Flight From Brazil (Part 1).”

³¹Antonio Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

³²Blaise Cupich, “Pope Francis’ ‘field hospital’ calls us to radically rethink church life,” *America*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/12/29/cardinal-cupich-pope-francis-field-hospital-calls-us-radically-rethink-church-life>.

come the alienation of academic and pastoral theology,³³ I am still concerned with *theology* and not campus ministry. For the purposes of the article, I am interested in *how this way of being Church thinks*.

Part of understanding how the Church thinks is an ongoing recognition that God is not something to be grasped and mastered, but someone who *happens* to us—someone who, to use James Alison's term—we *undergo*.³⁴ Therefore, our theology should never presume to achieve a finished conceptualization, but rather to make our being on this path more intelligible, to make our understanding of this undergoing slightly less inadequate today than yesterday, and tomorrow than today. In this way, theology is like riding a bike—it requires us to *keep moving* so that we do not fall; and in this case, it requires us to keep moving *toward the margins*, in a process of openness and renunciation that invites ever more expansive and in-depth understanding of our ongoing encounter with divine mystery.

I propose here three examples of how this reimagining might impact theology: first, in the doctrine of God; second, in how spirituality is situated in everyday life; and third, in how our students understand human reason.

This merciful orientation toward the margins has explicitly theological content if we apply Francis's assertion that "the name of God is mercy" to the question of monotheism, using mercy as the core, rather than an "attribute," of God. Francis borrows from St. Thomas Aquinas to make this point: "It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way."³⁵ When framed by mercy, the doctrine of monotheism turns us less toward questions of the divine nature and more toward the encounter with this mercy. After all, the greatest commandment is not to conceptually believe in the one God, but to worship and love this God, and by doing so to be open to the encounter with this God.

At a foundational level, this means that the doctrine of *Creatio ex nihilo* is less an assertion of *what God did once upon a time* but a statement about creation's ever ongoing relationship with God.³⁶ *Creatio ex nihilo* means that all of creation is contingent upon the God whose name is mercy. Because his project that brings theology into creative conversion with one group often on the margins of the Church, the LGBTQ community, James Alison is well situated to direct us to the theological import of this peripheral orientation. Channeling Rene Girard and St. Augustine, Alison highlights the contradiction

³³Kasper, *Mercy*, xv.

³⁴James Alison, *Undergoing God* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

³⁵Pope Francis, *Year of Mercy* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2015), 5, referencing Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II q30 a4.

³⁶See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q 46; *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 31–38.

of creation's contingency upon divine mercy and our idolatrous tendency to assert our god *over and against* other people or parts of creation—to separate ourselves from those who cannot stand in the center of a self-referential and religiously pure Church. If, as Alison contends, *all that is* is always and forever contingent to the one who is contingent to nothing, then “there is no rivalry at all between God and anything that is.” God is not “opposed to” any part of good creation, but only to the privation of mercy that moves us to create borders between ourselves and those we push to the peripheries.³⁷ We have a God who *has no opposite* in creation, a God who, as Francis continues to remind us, goes to the peripheries in Jesus. There is nothing that is beyond God, nothing that places us outside of God's attention and love, indeed, no *place* outside of that love. This is what is at stake in the doctrine of monotheism: faith in God's relentless, all-encompassing mercy that is contingent upon *nothing* in creation, but only upon God. A world so charged with the mercy of God looks different than one that is focused on criteria for inclusion within the Church or fueled by a fear that we might step outside of God's holy community. *This is a hermeneutical point.* And our students will learn to interpret the world and themselves differently if they learn about God in this way and orient themselves to look—and move—outwards.

Interpreting the world as contingent upon God's ongoing mercy reframes the structures of meaning and value that shape our students' appreciation for spirituality. It invites them to live their faith differently. For our many students who see their lives as marginal to the Church or see spiritual questions as marginal to their lives, this conversion of imagination includes them in ways that other theological articulations do not. While much of their lives may be lived far from explicitly religious contexts, they can come to recognize that nothing is merely secular or profane—nothing is too far to the peripheries to escape God's active presence. This opens the door to discuss various theological subdisciplines—like sacramentality and the praxis of social justice—as logical parts of the newly reimagined whole of creation. This emphasis allows professors to invite our students to be attentive to the interior movements of their hearts as promptings of the intimate activity of the Spirit.

This approach to spirituality finds welcome within the college classroom where students are in the process of making significant decisions about who they want to be and what kind of life they want to live. It's immediately relevant to most of them and they tend to appreciate being told that the moments and movements of their lives matter. And so, Francis instructed the Jesuits of Columbia that the goal of the theology teacher is to get students to ask: “what

³⁷Alison, *Undergoing God*, 19.

is happening, what has changed my heart, why does this make me happy?"³⁸ If professors have the courage to go to the existential and spiritual places where our students are—that is, to go to what is often far from our own context—to face our students' honest questions, their deep desires, and to welcome their fears and their wounds, then we give our students the space to see their lives marked by spiritual meaning and thereby offer them opportunities for discernment. If students leave their core theology course having internalized a theology that invites movement toward the peripheries, then they can grow more conscious of every aspect of their lives as spiritually significant, and gain an orientation from which "to construct criteria of discernment."³⁹ For nothing is too secular, profane, or peripheral for God.

Finally, this restructured criteria of meaning and value attends to what our students come to accept as reasonable and how they choose to live. In a 2015 homily at a penance service, Pope Francis reflected on the story in Luke 7 of Simon the Pharisee and his criticism of the woman who washed Jesus' feet and the pope emphasized how Simon's lack of mercy made him unable to see truth. Francis observes:

Simon, the master of the house, the Pharisee . . . *doesn't manage to find the road of love*. . . . He is not capable of taking that next step forward to meet Jesus who will bring him salvation. Simon limits himself to inviting Jesus to lunch, but did not truly welcome him. In his thoughts Simon invokes only justice and in doing so he errs. *His judgment of the woman distances him from the truth* and prevents him from even understanding who his guest is. He stopped at the surface—at formality—incapable of seeing the heart. Before the parable of Jesus and the question of which servant would love more, the Pharisee responds correctly: "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." Jesus doesn't fail to observe: "You have judged rightly" (Lk 7:43). When Simon's judgment is turned to love, then is he in the right.⁴⁰

Our students will judge correctly and encounter truth when they love, when they look through the lens of mercy that frees them from the dominant conventional assumptions of the culture. This mercy weakens the hold of efficiency and pragmatism, what Francis calls "two modern dogmas."⁴¹ Adherence to these

³⁸Antonio Spadaro, "Grace Is Not an Ideology: Pope Francis' Private Conversation with some Colombian Jesuits," *La Civiltà Cattolica*, September 28, 2017, <https://lacciviltacattolica.com/grace-is-not-an-ideology-a-private-conversation-with-some-colombian-jesuits/>.

³⁹Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 2017), 41.

⁴⁰Pope Francis, "Homily for the Celebration of Penance," in *A Year of Mercy* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2015), 41.

⁴¹Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy*, 60.

dogmas, to this default prioritizing of a commonsense approach to “what works” within the current systems, is a surrender to centralizing power and common criteria of success that we far-too-often see active in our students, communities, and across higher education. For example, while ongoing assessment of student learning is essential to improving education, when the goal of this assessment overlooks student formation in order to sacralize measurable skill competency⁴² or reduces the role of education to primarily fulfilling the single goal of employment, then we adopt an orientation toward the center and to our own self-referential success and security within the dominant paradigm of “what works.” Moreover, such an approach threatens to instrumentalize students themselves as a means to good outcome reports.

A centralized orientation depends upon our indifference to the peripheries—it depends upon our worship of our god over and against those we marginalize, a god who is small enough to fit only in our own center, a god we can control. An orientation toward the margins—those of our students and those of our world—moves directly against this domestication of the mystery of who are students *are*,⁴³ this submission of questions to certain answers, of mystery to mechanics, of holiness to success.

It’s not for nothing that in chapter three of *Gaudete et exsultate* presents the Beatitudes as the path to follow toward holiness. Turning to Jesus’ own way of teaching, Francis writes: “Although Jesus’ words may strike us a poetic, they clearly run counter to the way things are usually done in our world. Even if we find Jesus’ message attractive, the world pushes us toward another way of living. The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. . . . Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand real change in the way we live.”⁴⁴ Francis again makes the point: indifference to the suffering at the margins *does not allow us to see things as they truly are* and therefore to live according to the way things truly are.

We may only have one shot with these students; we may only have one chance to invite their reimagining the world through their movement toward new possibilities beyond those that are immediately visible toward the God who is always already ahead of us, always more peripheral, always more merciful. This is the “guiding philosophy” of Francis’s papacy and his invitation to the Church. For theologians, the intelligibility of a God who is on the periphery is not a “soft” intellectual endeavor; it is not mired in sentiment and impracticality, nor is it something to be relegated to the responsibility of campus

⁴²Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People*, 107.

⁴³Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 40.

⁴⁴Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 66.

ministry. *Mercy* is the name of the God who is the reason for our discipline and therefore mercy is the first and last word of theology.

To be mercifully centered toward the margins remind us that there are always those further out—those who have strayed from the fold, those who have been pushed out, those who have never had a place within the Church, those who have yet even to be named as marginalized. They are both within our classroom and those we need to bring to the attention of our students. We are invited to turn from the center, reorient ourselves and our students to look for the one who is as of yet unknown to us. “We too must ‘go out’ with [Christ] to seek the lost sheep,” Francis writes, the one who is “the furthest” from us,⁴⁵ and it is there that we are promised we will encounter Christ who is always already there ahead of us.

Andrew Staron teaches theology at Regis University in Denver, CO. He was an assistant professor of theology at Wheeling Jesuit University for six years until the institution closed the theology department. He received his Ph.D. from The Catholic University of America in 2013. His research interests include the doctrine of God, theological language, the Catholic imagination, and Ignatian Spirituality. He is the author of The Gift of Love: Augustine, Jean-Luc Marion, and the Trinity (Fortress, 2017).

⁴⁵Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy*, 73.