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The Attractions of Imperfection: Pope Francis's Undisciplined Rhetoric

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The Attractions of Imperfection: Pope Francis's Undisciplined Rhetoric

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Since his election in March 2013, Pope Francis has sparked unending interpretive anxiety in the American media—anxiety so acute that it has been named a syndrome: WPFMTS or “What Pope Francis Meant to Say.” Michael Sean Winters [defines](#) WPFMTS as the attempt “to parse the new pope’s words with the effect of gutting them of their obvious meaning.” William McGurn of the *New York Post* [embraces](#) WPFMTS, complaining of “how debilitating it is when the faithful have to explain away a pope’s words by saying he didn’t mean them, that he meant to say something more or less the opposite of what he did say, or that in the original Spanish, it’s not quite as awful as it is in English.”¹ Two years into Francis’s papacy, [WPFMTS](#) shows no [signs](#) of [abating](#)—and it is not confined to critics. Robert McClory, for example, insists that Francis’s “[Who am I to judge?](#)” clearly signals a changed attitude toward gay men and the priesthood. Given these arguments, it is perhaps not surprising that Francis has been likened to a [Rorschach test](#), a comparison [first made](#) only three days after his election.

From the start, Francis has occasioned a hermeneutic puzzle. The further puzzle is why. The answer, I argue, is that Francis possesses a rhetorical imagination, unmistakably revealed in his 2013 “apostolic exhortation,” *The Joy of the Gospel*. *Joy* presents not only compelling *rhetorica utens* but also *rhetorica docens*.² This sophistication has escaped an American media conditioned to separate “style” and “substance”

as habitually as they separate liberal and conservative.³ Francis does not fit these categories. This is the challenge of understanding “[the Francis effect](#),” the [sense](#) that the new pope’s rhetoric is having real [impact](#) (some feel for the [worse](#)) both in and outside the Catholic church. Francis’s style and substance mirror each other in ways that invite a response beyond binaries. The pope is suggesting to both religious and secular audiences that the rhetoric of preaching also requires the preaching of rhetoric.

The Rorschach Test

Francis’s refusal to take a side in America’s culture wars has made for some strange headlines (see fig. 1 and fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Article in Reuters. Rossi; December 31, 2013

Present Tense

Yes, the pope is still Catholic, despite what you heard



Fig. 2: Haring; *National Catholic Reporter*, January 8, 2014

Though its editors could be forgiven for feeling its thunder had been stolen, *The Onion*, as ever, did it best (see fig. 3).

Stunned St. Peter's Square Crowd
Overhears Pope Francis Getting
Bitched Out By God

NEWS
December 5, 2013
VIA: AP IMAGES AND
News: Bridgman - God



Fig. 3: *The Onion*, December 3, 2013.

While *The Onion* headline might satirize Francis's conservative critics, liberals are just as likely to judge the Pope by the style-substance hermeneutic. Take [this](#) example from Gary Gutting: "Unless the pope is prepared to reject the hierarchy's absolute condemnation of these actions [homosexual sex, the use of contraception, abortion] and revise the official teaching, his comments reflect merely changes of style and tone." Former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller's [praise](#) is more generous, but his assumptions are just as

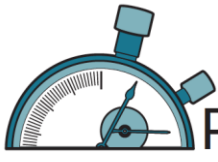
familiar: "The pope's efforts to promote a more tolerant tone and to reorient the church's priorities from inquisition to compassion are mostly words. I do not mean that as a slight. . . . Still, at some point Francis will, and should, be judged by the substance of his leadership." Even when the Pope is [admired](#) for his institutional reforms, rhetoric is always carefully separated from reality. [Paul Brandeis Raushenbush](#) writes the [following](#) for the *Huffington Post*: "Beneath the Pope's headline-catching rhetoric, he has delivered key administrative decisions over the past year that indicate serious and substantial reforms are already underway within the Catholic church." "Headline-catching rhetoric" is different from the "serious and the substantial," which always lurks "beneath."

Consider this comment from Mollie Wilson O'Reilly, associate editor at the liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, offered during a Bloggingheads.tv [discussion](#) of the new pontiff (the key discussion runs from 1:06-1:50):



In O'Reilly's comment, we see how a way of seeing becomes a way of not seeing. A person who can manage his image must be suspected of cynicism; a media-savvy person probably cannot be sincere.

Conservative reaction operates according to the same distinction. In the *Catholic World Report*,



Present Tense

“an online news magazine that tells the story from an orthodox Catholic perspective,” Carl Olson [worries](#) that the pontiff “has shown a tendency to use language that is muddled and unclear, even undisciplined.” He adds, “a pope in 2013 simply needs to be as precise and clear as possible. Fuzzy language, half-formed concepts, and failure to make important distinctions will eventually result in confusion and frustration.” Whether Francis’s language has been this sloppy is debatable. (The upset his remarks sometimes cause suggests that he is coming through loud and clear.) More striking is Olson’s standard for religious rhetoric, which suggests that it should be judged above all by how successfully it transfers information.

The style-substance assumption also troubles R.R. Reno, theologian and editor of *First Things*, another conservative Catholic publication. Like Olson, Reno [accuses](#) Francis of being “undisciplined in his rhetoric,” though Reno praises Francis for not being a “modern politician who surrounds himself with handlers and carefully stays ‘on message.’” Pope Francis is relatively unfiltered. . . . Only a person who carefully regulates what he feels, thinks, and says can maintain rigorous consistency in his public persona and public statements.” In these observations, Reno reverses O’Reilly: the Pope’s informal style is now truer indication of his sincerity. Francis is trustworthy insofar as he is “unfiltered,” honest insofar as he is “unregulated,” and sincere insofar as he is “undisciplined.” But this praise remains filtered, regulated, and disciplined by the same old assumption: intentionality in rhetoric is to be mistrusted.

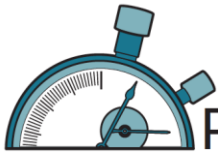
Not all reaction to Francis falls into the rhetoric-reality rut. In naming Francis “[Person of the Year](#),” *The Advocate* admitted that the choice

was entirely rhetorical. “There has not been any vote cast or ruling issued, and still a significant and unprecedented shift took place this year in how LGBT people are considered by one of the world’s largest faith communities.”⁴ In *The New Republic*, meanwhile, Damon Linker correctly [observes](#) that what we are seeing is “a revolution in papal rhetoric,” which “has a reality all its own.” Yet such acknowledgement of the power of rhetoric has proved the exception rather than the norm in the American news media, which continues to ask whether the Pope is actually [Catholic](#). It seems impossible to entertain the twin ideas that the “Francis effect” is rhetorical and that a rhetorical effect is significant.

Gaudium Rhetoricae

To be fair, Francis himself has sometimes made comments that would seem to invite the rhetoric-reality hermeneutic. In *On Heaven and Earth*, which records informal dialogues with his friend Rabbi Abraham Skorka, Francis (then Jorge Mario Bergoglio) said the following: “Today, image is more important than what is proposed. Plato said it in *The Republic*, rhetoric—which equates [to] aesthetic—is to politics what cosmetics is to health” (141). Francis would make a similar statement in *The Joy of the Gospel*, his first major papal writing:⁵ “The truth is [often] manipulated, just as gymnastic is supplanted by cosmetic” (sec. 231). These comments suggest that the Pope is a Platonist who would wish to maintain a division between substance and style.

But the rest of *The Joy of the Gospel* suggests a deeply rhetorical mindset. Certainly the style of *Joy* reveals Francis to be a formidable rhetorician. The more famous soundbites⁶ include the following: “An evangelizer must



Present Tense

never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral" (sec. 10); "the Eucharist . . . is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak" (sec. 47); "to sustain a lifestyle which excludes others . . . a globalization of indifference has developed" (sec. 54); and "there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (sec. 6). Joy, moreover, is an [exhortation](#), which is persuasive not only as *rhetorica utens* but also as *rhetorica docens*. The document invites Christians "to embark upon a new stage of evangelization marked by joy" (sec. 1). That is, it urges its readers to be not only better Christians but also better rhetoricians, though of a particular sort. As he has done [before](#), Francis clarifies what he means by evangelization: "It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but 'by attraction'" (sec. 15). The attractions of joy are more persuasive than the logic of arguments or the soundness of doctrine.

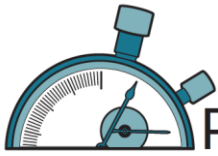
Francis's understanding of communication also goes beyond mere content transfer. This depth is most fully revealed in Spanish ([reported](#) to be the language of its composition).⁷ In the Spanish version, the verb *comunicar* makes a repeated appearance at several moments in which Francis seems to be talking about something more than what we might call "mere" style. Early in the text, Francis asks the following: "For if we have received the love which has restored meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?" (sec. 8). The original uses *comunicar* for "share." In the next section, Francis observes that "Goodness always tends to spread." The Spanish reads "El Bien siempre tiende a comunicarse." Later in the same paragraph one finds "as it expands, goodness takes root and develops" (sec. 9). The Spanish translation reads "comunicándolo, el bien se arraiga y se desarrolla." Francis's repeated use of

the verb *comunicar* suggests an assumption that communication is both an exchange and an event. Francis thinks of communication as more than information, or, rather, he thinks of it as *information*—that is, knowledge that forms.

When Francis turns to the homily,⁸ we see a more fully developed *rhetorica docens*. The homily, he writes, must be a dialogue, which is

...much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for each other through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects, but in persons who share themselves in dialogue. A preaching which would be purely moralistic or doctrinaire, or one which turns into a lecture on biblical exegesis, detracts from this heart-to-heart communication which...possesses a quasi-sacramental character. (sec. 142)

This passage fully reveals the Pope's deep understanding of communication, which is not about the transfer of information but rather the sharing of selves; moreover, when Francis asserts that the homily is dialogic, he rejects Platonism for an audience-based mode of discourse. The homily's purpose, he insists, ought to be discerned from the heart of the community. "The same Spirit who inspired the Gospels and who acts in the Church also inspires the preacher to hear the faith of God's people and to find the right way to preach at the Eucharist" (sec. 139). The first thing the preacher is inspired to do is to listen the people in order to find the right way to preach: "The preacher must know the heart of his community, in order to realize where its desire for God is alive and ardent, as well as where that dialogue, once



Present Tense

loving, has been thwarted and is now barren" (sec. 138). The worst way to thwart that passion, he suggests, is to treat the homily as a "speech or lecture" (sec. 138). (So much, it seems, for complaints about fuzzy language, half-formed concepts, and failure to make important distinctions.) The homily cannot be expressed through "abstract truths or cold syllogisms." Most importantly, the homily involves "the enjoyment of speaking." For Francis, discourse should be a pleasure.

Francis also brings a rhetorical hermeneutic to the interpretation of scripture in preparation for the homily. Understanding scripture, he writes, "calls for recognizing not only the author's ideas but the effect which he wanted to produce. If a text was written to console, it should not be used to correct errors; if it was written as an exhortation, it should not be employed to teach doctrine; if it was written to teach something about God, it should not be used to expound various theological opinions" (sec. 147). In this passage, we see not only Francis's sense of prose rhythm, not only his sense of rhetorical situation, but also his sense of the current temptations of Christian preaching—namely, an overemphasis on correction, on doctrine, and on theology to the detriment of consolation, exhortation, and teaching.

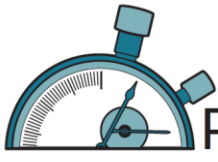
Conclusion

Several months ago, the Church conducted the first part of a [synod](#) on the family. During the meeting, officials considered adopting more inclusive [language](#) toward gay people and the divorced. Reaction ranged from [hopeful](#), to [nervous](#), to [terrified](#). This array of responses is not surprising. At its opening, Francis [exhorted](#) the synod "speak clearly. No one must say: 'This can't be said; he will think of me this way or

that . . . ' It is necessary to say everything that is felt with *parrhesia*" (sec. 7). Church officials seem to be listening. Recently, a Belgian bishop [suggested](#) that the Church should find some way to recognize same-sex couples. Conversely, Cardinal Raymond Burke, one of Francis's [most eager critics](#), has [called](#) the Church a "ship without a rudder."⁹ The liveliness of this conversation suggests that Francis is comfortable with undisciplined rhetoric.

Such rhetoric seems particularly kairotic as the institutional and cultural authority of religion wanes, at least in the West. In *After Christianity*, philosopher Gianni Vattimo argues that the collapse of metaphysics entails the collapse of God, at least of a God understood as a thunder-wielding scorekeeper. This event, writes Vattimo, means that religious experience "must argue necessarily on the basis of an 'interpretation,' as a response to a message, a reading of texts, a sending that comes from tradition" (64). Vattimo's post-metaphysical God is the God of the *kenosis* or loving self-emptying. The divine *Logos* is, as its name suggests, rhetorical. Its emergence into the world is an announcement for all, not just for those believers who already accept doctrine. Its only limit is "love, that is, the possibility of communicating with a community of interpreters" (67).

Bruno Latour would likely concur. In *Rejoicing*, Latour compares religious rhetoric to a lover's dialogue. Too often, however, contemporary religious discourse misunderstands this. It operates as though lover has "answered the question 'Do you love me?' with this sentence: 'Yes . . . , I told you so last year'" (25). This unfeeling answer is an example of information transfer, the discourse that worries about fuzzy language, half-formed concepts, and failure to

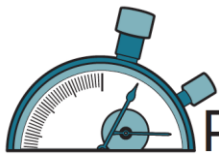


Present Tense

make important distinctions. Religious rhetoric seeks something more. The beloved does not ask if she is loved this year; the beloved asks if she is loved right now. That is the lover's rhetorical challenge (25). In scripture, Latour observes, "angels do not convey messages; they change those they address. What they transfer is not an information *content*, but a new *container*. . . . What they convey are not telegrams but persons" (32). This is what Francis means by *comunicar*—a sharing of persons whose experiences cannot be reduced to an either-or choice. Whatever his acquaintance with formal rhetoric or philosophy (as a Jesuit, he would likely have both), Francis's project is not to rehearse logic but to announce love to anyone with ears to hear.

Endnotes

1. [Anxieties](#) about [translation](#) are also a [staple](#) of Francis's [exegesis](#).
2. In making this argument, I mean to follow what Krista Ratcliffe calls *extrapolating* or "rereading non rhetoric texts . . . as theories of rhetoric" (5). Ratcliffe contrasts extrapolating with simple rereading, which entails "revisiting our interpretations of canonical and recovered theories of rhetoric" and conceptualizing, which "implies writing new theories of rhetoric" (5). Because Francis's rhetorical theory is implied (though occasionally punctuated with references to Plato and to sophistry), extrapolation seems the most productive way to read. And while Ratcliffe is designing a feminist recovery project, which is rather different than what I am doing here, her method is nevertheless appropriate for an occasionally self-conscious rhetorical text such as *Joy*.
3. Though I limit my analysis to the United States, the same division can be observed in other cultures, as [this headline](#) from *The Guardian* suggests: "Friendly rhetoric from Pope Francis in Brazil. But will it translate into action? There's a whiff of modernity about this pope. But his comments on homosexuality and women must become more than mere PR."
4. The editors appear to have been right about Francis's impact. Not long after Francis asked his famous question, Illinois lawmakers [repeated it](#) as they voted to legalize gay marriage.
5. *Joy* is actually Francis's second major papal publication; however, his previous publication, *Lumen Fidei*, was written largely by Benedict XVI and then published, with a few changes, under Francis's name.
6. I use the word "soundbite" advisedly. Francis is clearly aware of the media environment in which he is competing: "I'm not ignoring the fact that today writings don't awaken the same interest as in other eras, and that they are rapidly forgotten" (sec. 25).
7. I do not mean to engage in the translation obfuscation that has hounded every word Francis has said or published. My challenges to the English translation of *Joy* are meant to more fully reveal Francis's project—not to inhibit it.
8. In Catholicism, the homily, or sermon, is a reflection offered during liturgy, usually by the celebrating priest. It comes directly after the reading of the Gospel.
9. Francis recently assigned Burke to a new position in a move widely perceived to be a [demotion](#); however, there is no indication that Burke has been or will be silenced.



Present Tense

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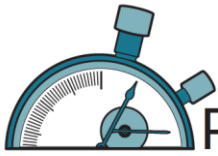
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Present Tense



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