**The Importance of Literature in Pope Francis’ Pastoral and Political Vision**

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There is a Spanish word very dear to Pope Francis. It is *desborde* or, in the verbal form, *desbordar*. It is difficult to translate it into other languages with always the same word. We could say overtaking, overflowing, going beyond the edge, etc. Faced with some major problems the Pope says that “the way out is found by ‘overflowing’ (*la salida se encuentra por ‘desborde’*)” (QA,120). He adds that we must “broaden horizons”. It is not enough to “regulate” life, we must open it to God, whose presence is always greater, overflowing.

Francis made this vision explicit in a talk he gave to *La Civiltà Cattolica* on the occasion of the publication of issue 4000 of the magazine, when he said: “That’s why I like poetry so much and, when I can, I keep reading it. Poetry is full of metaphors. Understanding metaphors helps to make thinking agile, intuitive, flexible, and sharp. One who has imagination does not stiffen, has a sense of humour, always enjoys the sweetness of mercy and inner freedom. He is able to open wide visions even in narrow spaces, […] The thinking of the Church must recover genius”. When interviewed again in 2016, Pope Francis said, “The novel, literature reads the human heart. It helps us embrace desire, splendour, and misery. It is not a theory. It is helpful for preaching to know the heart”.

**Creativity, Imagination, and Language**

As a young Jesuit, Bergoglio taught literature at the Colegio de la Inmaculada Concepción, a Jesuit school in Santa Fe. There he developed the conviction that creative experience is very relevant. It is also significant that he wanted to write, on June 20, 1981, the preface to a collection of poems by the Argentine Jesuit Osvaldo Pol, entitled *De destierros y moradas (Of Exile and Dwellings)*. Francis wrote, “The poetic word has dwellings of flesh in the human heart and- at the same time- feels the weight of wings that have not yet taken flight”.

This is an important definition of poetry. It absorbs the feelings, the passions, the carnality of desire. That’s why its weight is not that of wings that, once they have taken flight, are no longer felt. On the contrary, the poem feels this weight, because the wings still touch the earth. Bergoglio knows that lack of imagination is a serious problem for faith. We lack powerful images that help us “imagine” the truths we believe. So many times, in fact, as pope he has used, and continues to use, images taken from poetry, even in his most important documents.

**The Logic of ‘Incomplete Thinking’**

There is a peculiar aspect of poetic expression that Bergoglio loves. “I love tragic artists”. I want to dwell here on one aspect of this passion for tragedy: the fact that it testifies to the complexity and contradictory nature of human experience, of life. The need for “incomplete thinking” can be detected in Francis’ passion for the dystopian novel *Lord of the World*, by Robert Hugh Benson. In this work, a charismatic world leader emerges and leads many to think that he represents the way beyond the divisions, constituted, for example, by nations and religions, into a broader and more inclusive humanism.

**A literature of the people**

Bergoglio makes his own the definition of a “classical” work that comes from Cervantes. The “classic” work is that which everyone can somehow perceive as their own, not a small group of refined *connoisseurs*. This lets us understand a fundamental aspect of the pontiff’s literary passion: the “classic” for Bergoglio is always “popular”.

It should not be forgotten that Bergoglio is the son of immigrants. This is why it is necessary to talk about Bergoglio’s great interest in Leopoldo Marechal (1900-1970), a classic writer of Argentine literature, who well expresses the value of the unity of a people on the basis of diversity and *mestizaje*. Marechal helped Bergoglio reflect on and imagine the value of *mestizaje*, which he explained well to the Jesuits in Mozambique: “Mixing makes you grow, it gives you new life. It develops racial mixing, change, and gives originality. Building walls means condemning yourself to death. We can’t live asphyxiated by a culture as clean and pure as an hospital operating room, aseptic and not microbial”.

**The Poetics of the ‘middle class’**

Art is not a “laboratory” for experimenting with cultural and expressive dynamics: instead, it is part of the flow of history, part of humanity’s journey on earth. Francis said, in the 2013 interview, “I see holiness in the people of God, their daily holiness. There is a ‘middle class of holiness’ that we can all be part of, the one Malègue talks about”. Malègue is known for his unfinished trilogy *Pierres noires*. *Les Classes moyennes du Salut*. Describing what he means by the “middle class of holiness,” Francis showed his link to Malègue’s pages at the beginning of his *Gaudete et Exsultate*, the apostolic exhortation “on the call to holiness in the contemporary world”.

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Interweaving the reading of Hernádez, Malègue, Dostoevsky, and Manzoni, one senses the humanity Bergoglio has in his heart. It extends as if within a square. So, by constructing a map of Bergoglio’s readings, we can better understand his vision as pastor and perhaps even discover the roots of his way of understanding life and the world.