

Guest Editorial

Perplexing Perceptions AND Perspectives

LOUIS DETHOMASIS, FSC

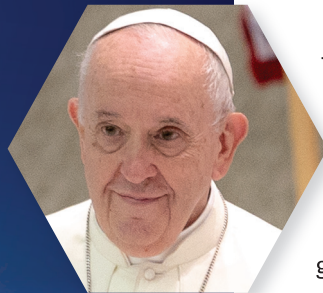
THE REAL VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY CONSISTS NOT IN SEEKING NEW LANDSCAPES BUT IN HAVING NEW EYES.

Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust, a baptized and confirmed Catholic who became an atheist, could very well have taken his insight from St. Paul, who admonished his listeners:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

ROMANS 12:2



Today, Pope Francis echoes these same insights. He calls us to see and create a new, more welcoming Church in which its faith-filled followers go “out there” to the peripheries, bringing new life to a world transformed by the gospel. However, today’s geopolitical conflicts and the growing cultural “religious warrior” uproars arising in the Church—even within the hierarchy itself—pose a complicated, perplexing problem for spreading the gospel. Do we bring those Church tensions with us to the peripheries or hide them?

Perhaps we need to reflect upon Pope Francis’ use of the word *peripheries* also as a metaphor. A metaphor that will grasp our perceptions and propel our perspectives beyond geographic borders; and, a metaphor that embraces our imaginations and generates new frameworks of actions and possibilities for all, especially the young. We must envision a new horizon that can make the evangelization of the Church more relevant and effective for today’s world, beyond geographic borders!

With “new eyes” we may see reality from a perspective that includes and encompasses those contemporary, non-geographic, cutting-edge, and avant-garde peripheries “out there” never seen before in human history:

👁️ *Artificial intelligence and generative AI.*

👁️ *Cloning and manipulating DNA.*

👁️ *Biochemical altering drugs that can change human emotions and behaviors.*

👁️ *Engineering biomolecular components to reprogram living organisms.*

👁️ *Creating “biohybrid” systems mimicking human parts.*

👁️ *A new kind of space—cyberspace.*

👁️ *A new kind of reality—virtual reality.*

IF THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH IS NOT RECEPTIVE AND HELPFUL TO LET THE HOLY SPIRIT GRACE ITSELF WITH “NEW EYES,” THEN ITS EXISTENCE WILL BE NO MORE THAN A REVERED YET ROTTING RELIC OF THE PAST.

Indeed, God created the universe and saw it as “very good.” Now, billions of years later, we see that humans are creating a metaverse. It is defined as “the next iteration of the internet: a single, immersive, persistent, 3D virtual space where humans experience life in ways they could not in the physical world.” This metaverse has no border gates or geographic peripheries. Do we know yet if this is also “very good”? However, we know it is certainly not “business as usual” for the world or the Church. When we look “out there” today we must be comatose if we are not perplexed when we see:

👁️ *What was normal in our lives is now odd, unforeseen, and bewildering to comprehend;*

👁️ *What was natural and ordinary is now somehow unnatural and peculiar;*

👁️ *What were traditional aspirational vistas of hope now are detours enclosed by sociopolitical, scientific, and even religious ideological roadblocks;*

👁️ *What was ordinary faith is now becoming extraordinary doubt—especially among the youth;*

👁️ *What—“business as usual”?*

The world is altered, changed, modified, and transformed. Can the Church, with its leaders and members, remain within its traditional religious culture and bring its disagreements and clashes to today’s peripheries? And then expect a relevant, healing, and meaningful message in today’s world or for the Church in the future? No, it is not (cannot be) “business as usual”!

Today, humans have the power to choose, are choosing, and will choose who and what they will



become in ways never thought possible, natural, ethical, or religious.

It will take challenging, uncomfortable, and perplexing perceptions and perspectives today to navigate those new pathways at the metaphorical border gates opening to new existential realities and horizons.

If the institutional Church is not receptive and helpful to let the Holy Spirit grace itself with “new eyes,” then its existence will be no more than a revered yet rotting relic of the past. Religious cultural ideology “warriors” will not give us Paul’s “renewing of your minds.” To be honest, they are and have been part of the problem! Have we not learned yet that manipulating Jesus’ gospel into polarized and competing Church ideologies is to reason and faith as glut-tony is to healthy and fine dining?

As paradoxical as it may appear, for today’s hierarchy, clergy, religious congregations, and all the faithful to choose to be “out there” at the peripheries, they must first be “in there”! “In there” deep within their very own unique spirituality, commitment, and mission that no longer can be grasped, clutched, or formed only from the bones of institutional relics found in its traditional formation, rules, customs, and behaviors. In today’s Church, there are bishops, clergy, sisters, brothers, and the faithful who have those “new eyes” to see Pope Francis’ peripheries also as a metaphor to go deep within themselves first. We need many more of them; many more of them must speak up even louder; and, many more of them must refuse to be silenced by the religious ideological “warriors” who are satisfied with a smaller more so-called “faithful” Church.

At the metaphorical borders of today’s peripheries that are no longer confined by geographic limits, the Church cannot be just what we think we know through rational,

dogmatic, catechetical, and devotional traditions. Instead, it must be a true, living, personal, evolving, and daunting relational experience of how, with faith in Jesus, each of us comes to see, embrace, accept, and live out with others what they and we do not know. We must have a transformed faith!

I am convinced that “the world” cannot destroy the institutional Church. It can only die by suicide! It will only die without those “new eyes” to see that Jesus and his Church need all of us to lead and go beyond those traditional geographic borders, bringing God’s love to all. We are neither a conservative nor a progressive Church—it is Jesus’ Church!

In our modern worlds of social media, virtual reality, and the meta-verse, recall the faith-filled words not of a theologian but of that wonderful human being who happened to be a comedian, Gracie Allen, when she said: “Do not put a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.”

Today God is speaking to all of us, especially in the institutional Church, telling us that we can penetrate today’s existential peripheries “out there” if we first seek “in there,” deep within ourselves, a faith that will:

👁️ *Serve the People of God with loyalty but openly acknowledge that those entrusted to our care may have questions to which we have no answers. However, there are no answers we have that they cannot question;*

👁️ *Bring our healing services to all in a clear way that makes it obvious that our core mission to serve is not essential to bring people to the Church; but rather, to bring Jesus Christ with his inclusive, unconditional love, mercy, and compassion to the people so that they may choose for themselves how to be Jesus’ faithful followers;*

THAPANA_STUDIO / SHUTTERSTOCK

WE MUST HAVE THE FAITH AND COURAGE TO BE “DOERS” OF THE GOSPEL.

👁️ *Transform our institutional Church to see that we can truly be loyal and faith-filled while openly and freely expressing doubts and concerns about ourselves, our sinfulness, and our shortcomings. Then, nurture that same trusting spirit while accompanying all those we serve. We must make real for all to see that a faithful follower of Jesus and a loyal member of the Church can proclaim: “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).*

👁️ *Demand that it is not enough to piously proclaim the “preferential option for the poor,” and facilitate it only to be a nice, political, and inconsequential phrase. From our innermost convictions, we must speak out to public authority and break down systemic structures that do not support and empower the dignity of each woman and man;*

👁️ *Provide innovation and leadership that will pave new and more effective paths toward an equal and equitable role for women in the world and the institutional Church, and be a model that concretely expresses the end of an embedded and continuing cultural, structural, and dominant patriarchy;*

👁️ *Affirm a respectful acknowledgment of the dignity of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or any person’s lifestyle who nurture loving, caring, and respectful relationships even when (no, especially when) our beliefs are different from theirs.*

Louis DeThomasis, FSC, PhD, a De La Salle Christian Brother, is president emeritus and professor of interdisciplinary studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota. He is the cofounder of Christian Brothers Investment Services, Inc., he was awarded the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Medal, and is a member of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. Six universities have given honorary doctoral degrees to him.

👁️ *Achieve and do nothing less than what Paul did: “I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it” (1 Corinthians 9:22–23).*

In conclusion, I have tremendous confidence in today’s Church to nurture a recreated vision and effective mission to meet and embrace the peripheries in the world and within ourselves. My confidence and faith are not just naïve or wishful thinking on my part. My conviction is based on my fifty-five years as a De La Salle Christian Brother who has received from my confreres, even (especially) when I did not deserve it, their Christlike understanding, acceptance, compassion, sensitivity, and love. I see that same Christian, loving spirit in abundance among most clerics, religious, and lay women and men.

We must have the faith and courage to be “doers” of the gospel. We must be brave enough to do new things. We are gifted with the Lord’s amazing grace. Perhaps, Picasso had it right when he said, “God is just another artist. He made a giraffe, an elephant, and a cat. He has no style. He just keeps trying new things.”

WAKE UP! Now is the time for us to try new things!

Live Christ in our hearts—forever! #