As the name of the new elected Pope, “Francis”, was pronounced from the balcony of the Saint Peter’s Cathedral in Rome, there was a short silence on the square. ‘Francis??...’ Then a small and modest man appeared on the balcony and just stood there for a while. The moment I was thinking: ‘O my God, do something!’ he said: ‘fratelli e sorelle, buonasera,’ and immediately the hearts of the many on the square and in the world opened. By this gesture, Pope Francis changed the face of the Church in seconds. And in the following years he continued to change the Church, not by settling matters straight, but by gestures of the good life: he choose to drives in a small car, to live in a modest apartment among the people, he went to Lampedusa to commemorate the drowned migrants, and he invited a Dutch homeless man for an interview. I consider this manner of doing, in the form of gestures, as an important means in the practices of both Pope Francis and Francis of Assisi. Through gestures they reveal life according to the perfection of the Gospel.

‘Gesture’?

The staging of an action with the intention of make another reality appear for the eyes of the spectators. Gestures are exemplary forms of action, communicating values, showing the ways how to realize them. And when the spectators are being moved by the gesture, they become more than spectators, for the become participants in the gesture and through the gesture in the new reality. Not only the spectators become ambiguous – spectators/witnesses/followers/participants – but also the agents of the gesture, who are and are not the source of the action. We can recognize this in both Francis and Francis.

Ambiguous personalities

Pope Francis has an ambiguous background. He is a Jesuit taking a Franciscan as his example. Jesuits are the elite troops of the Catholic Church, whereas Franciscans call themselves minor brothers. Jesuits are highly educated and very motivated to change situations for the better, whereas Franciscans are mostly quite simple in their living together with ordinary people.

The Jesuit Pope had chosen the name of Francis of Assisi. And who chooses a name, chooses an identity. The identity of Francis of Assisi, however, is ambiguous. Francis seemed small and insignificant, but was extremely successful; naïve and unlearned, but very wise and perceptive; very mild towards people and very strict for himself and his brothers; open-minded towards others, and fervent preacher of conversion and penitence. a singer of praise, and a penitent scourging his body.

Ambiguity: don’t forget the poor

It seems that Bergoglio had heard Cardinal Hummes whisper to him: ‘Do not forget about the poor.’ And at that moment the name of Francis of Assisi came in his mind. Bergoglio had
understood very well that also the relation between Francis and poverty is an ambiguous one: he loved ‘the highest poverty’ and hated poverty. Hence the ambiguous nature of poverty in Pope Francis’ dream of a Church that is poor and for the poor, the first poverty being something to love, the second something to alleviate. The highest poverty, which Francis of Assisi loved, is the poverty of Christ, who lived without any property. *Vivere sine proprio* is not just poverty, it is a way of life in which ownership in all terrains of life is denied: money, property, status, power, knowledge, *et cetera*. This refusal to own anything formed Francis’ life. He, who does not own ‘the right form of life’ and is not ‘morally superior,’ cannot prescribe the good life to others, but, on the contrary, needs to be receptive for corrections of his own practices. Francis knew that others knew more than he did.

There is a beautiful story of a Dominican friar, a doctor in the sacred theology, who wanted to know more about Francis’ theological thoughts. He asked him about a verse from Ezekiel: ‘If you do not warn the wicked man about his wickedness, I will hold you responsible for his soul.’ (Ez 3:18) The doctor said: ‘I’m acquainted with many people, good father, who live in mortal sin, as I’m aware. But I don’t always warn them about their wickedness. Will I then be held responsible for their souls?’ Francis said that he was an unlettered man, and it would be better for him to be taught by the other rather than to answer a question about Scripture. But the doctor insisted that he longed to hear Francis’ opinion about the matter. Then Francis said to him: ‘If that passage is supposed to be understood in a universal sense, then I understand it to mean that a servant of God should be burning with life and holiness so brightly, that by the light of example and the tongue of his conduct, he will rebuke all the wicked. In that way, I say, the brightness of his life and the fragrance of his reputation will proclaim their wickedness to all of them.’ Greatly edified by this simple answer, the doctor went away. (2Cel 103)

As he did not own the theological knowledge to enter into a discussion, the answer of Francis was not a theology, but a gesture. By exemplary living a good life one can warn the wicked, and invite them to leave their wicked ways for another way. No word needs to be spoken, and the wicked is not put in a position to defend his bad conduct. The gesture is perhaps related to the life form *sine proprio*, for, as we will see, in the gesture one is not even the possessor of his own actions.

*Ambiguity: tactical versus strategic manners of doing*

Trying to get deeper into the phenomenon of the gesture, I will distinguish between different views of the situation and between different actions to change the situation. The first difference is between a tactical view and a strategic view. This distinction is made by Michel de Certeau (*l’Invention du quotidien: arts de faire*), who distinguished between the view of tactical practitioners and strategic organizers

Francis’ life without any property, was also an itinerant life. The mission of Francis and his brothers was to go through the world, taking nothing with them, and offering peace to whatever house they would enter, accepting what would be placed before them, not resisting anyone evil and giving to all who ask of them (cf. RnB 14). Living on the road, the brothers would meet other people of the road, mostly poor and powerless. The ways of
doing of poor and powerless people may very well have been characterized by what Michel de Certeau calls ‘tactiques de pratiquants’, a more bodily and sensitive (tactic \(\text{tangere, to touch}\) practice of living and communicating. Certeau distinguishes between ‘tactics’ and strategy with the help of an image: the strategic thinkers reside at the top floor of the highest building in the city, and look down upon the streets; thus, they have an overview which helps them to organize the traffic, without having to participate in it themselves. But the people without power live on the streets; they have a very different view of the city, moving through it in streetwise and tactical ways. They have learned to know their city in the touch.

Ambiguity: Rule and life

Living on the roads, together with the poor and powerless, Francis and his brothers have learned to share in the tactical practices of the other poor and powerless. When in his early Rule Francis admonishes his brothers ‘to preach by their deeds’ (RnB 17:3), he showed that in Franciscan life deeds matter more than words (RnB 17:11; Adm 21:2), for deeds – i.e. gestures – are an effective form of communication in their own right. Traces of tact and tactics can be found, for example, in the early Rule (RnB), the later Rule (RB) and the Testament (Test) about how to live a life ‘according to the perfection of the holy Gospel’ (FormCl 6:3). There are traces of verbs communicating some admonishing tactics of practicing this life.

In the early Rule, Francis repeatedly tells his brothers to operate carefully (caveant or caveamus): with temporary things (RnB 2:2.5), their own temper (5:7), appropriating anything (7:13), their appearance (7:16), money (8:5.11.12), slander and dispute (11:1), their engagement with women (12:1), pride and vainglory (17:9), malice (22:19). In the later Rule Francis does not only settle some matters, but repeatedly admonishes his brothers: ‘I admonish and exhort my brothers’ (moneo et exhortor fratres meos, RB 3:10, 5:17, 9:3, 10:7; also in EpOrd 30.35). And in his Testament, Francis tells his brothers how to follow the Rule - regula et vita - by telling them how he himself lived in obedience (Test 25, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 38) to what God has given him (Test 1, 4, 6, 14, 16, 22, 23, 39).

There are traces of examples of the Gospel, showing gestures of this life, not only in the series of quotations, but more important in directions of how to live it: ‘Do to others what you would have them do to you.’ (RnB 4:4; Mt 7,12), ‘When we see or hear evil spoken or done or God blasphemed, let us speak well and do well.’ (RnB 17:19; Rom 12,21).

Thirdly, there are traces in the 'strange' imperatives, like 'Let them be careful not to appear outwardly as sad and gloomy hypocrites but show themselves joyful, cheerful and consistently gracious in the Lord,' (RnB 7:16) the fulfillment of which lies hardly in the power of the brothers themselves.

There was and would be no plan, only a life to be lived: the life of Christ. Thus, this humble man restored the church and the world without making use of ideals, strategies or plans. According to Giorgio Agamben this was not his failure, but Francis’ very intention.

But also in many stories, traces can be found of the tactical practices of Francis of Assisi. I will select some examples.
• When Francis met a leper, he made himself dismount from his horse, and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. After he accepted a kiss of peace from him, Francis remounted and continued on his way (3Comp 11). No word is spoken in this encounter, but it is full of meaningful gestures. The gestures of giving a coin, kissing the hand and receiving the kiss of peace - all gestures pointing at the encounter with Christ - suggest the reader that this ‘leper’ was Christ. And as this suggestion is communicated through gestures, this content migrates from body to body and from culture to culture.

• When he returned all the money and all the clothing to his father, thereby stripping himself naked, he actually dismantled his father before the people of Assisi. He said: ‘From now on I say “Our Father in Heaven” and not "my father Pietro di Bernardone."’ (3Comp 19-20). By this gesture he makes something very clear to his biological father, returning to him what Francis does not want anymore, and at the same time he chooses to follow the naked Christ nakedly (“nudus nudum Christum sequi”) and without any possessions. I can go on talking about possible interpretations of this story, but in fact, as it is told in the form of a gesture, no interpretation is needed: its communication a ‘migration’ from body to body.

• This direct form of understanding is obviously also very practical when Francis communicates with animals – his encounter with the birds and with the wolf – are full of meaningful gestures also. Not only does Francis enter into a peace-making encounter with the wolf, he also accepts him as a brother by making him put his paw in his hands and letting him go ‘from door to door’, just like the friars minor did. The gestures tell us more than the words, for they suggest that the fierce wolf became a friar minor, ‘reminding the people of Gubbio of the virtue and sanctity of St. Francis.’ (Fioretti XXI)

These and other examples of Francis’ tactical, exemplary and gestural manner of doing, show that Francis’ gestures are far more important than his words. After having pointed at Francis of Assisi as a man of gesture, I would like to give some attention to the gesture as a phenomenon.

A gesture as an ambiguous act

Gesture is an action, but it is a typical form of it. Let me first spend some thoughts about the act and action, in order to find out in what way a gesture is a typical form of an action. In ancient Greek philosophy an action was to follow a path in order to reach a happy end, which was a life at is was meant to be. A gesture does this mainly by showing the possibility of such a good life.

In the philosophy of Aristotle, it was important to distinguish the agent or actor as the father of his actions. This made man responsible for what he did and how did it. In later Christian thought, the will was developed the source of the actions. But Francis criticized the human will as the source of his actions; he said in his Second Admonition: ‘that person eats from the tree of knowledge of good and evil who appropriates to himself his own will.’ (Adm 2:3) The gesture is an action, in which not the will of the actor is important, but the will of someone else. The gesture is not owned by the agent. Rather, it seems to be an imitation of an act who's ‘father' is someone or something else.
Furthermore, the gesture does not seem to be focused on changing a situation according to the desire of the agent. **First**, the agent is not the possessor of his act, but he seems to imitate an act with another source. **Second**, the act is not a work in the sense that the agent masters the situation completely, changing it according to his desire. Although a gesture can, in a playful manner, change a situation - as we have seen Pope Francis do in his presentation on the balcony after he had been elected Pope - the focus of the gesture is on communication. It is an expressive act, an ‘embodied signifier’, by which the actor communicates a message by acting out the desired situation. Antonio Attisani calls it a performance ‘creating a communal experience of transformation.’

In his *Poetics* Aristotle speaks of tragedy as a *mimesis of an action*. Mimesis is more than imitation, more than literally copying a conduct. A young child may copy the conduct of his example. But later it will develop his own manner of doing; as a grown up he will still follow his examples, but in such way that his own personality and his own environment resonate in that act. What has started in copying, has been developed into a new way of presenting the original. That is how, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the Ancient Greek word *mimesis* was understood. In the gesture as a mimetic act, the actor plays out the action in such a way that he is not the possessor of it, nor the father, nor the worker. He performs it by supporting the action (gesture ← Latin: *gerere*, to bear, carry out, demonstrate) with his own body. As if he signs it with his signature, but refuses to own it.

**How does a gesture communicate, and how does it change the situation?**

A gesture is an ambiguous act, for it is not quite clear who or what its source is, nor is it an act in which an agent has the situation under control. It is a mimetic act, in which the actor displays a desired situation, in such a way that it is sensibly present to the spectators as much as to himself. The gesture does change the situation, but not by controlling it. The gesture makes it sensibly present, so that the spectators – the actor included – can see it as a **actual possibility**: ‘it can be, and it can be done!’ Thus the gesture changes the perspective in which the present situation is seen and valued: it can be different, it can be good. In order to change the situation indeed, the gesture must be repeated, not only by the one who showed it, but also by the spectators themselves. The gesture does not impute the responsibility to only one controlling agent, the ‘leader’ and ‘manager’, but shares this responsibility with everyone who had witnessed its performance.

This brings us to the question how the gesture communicates. The **gesture communicates by migration, it travels from body to body, from culture to culture**. This is obviously connected to the way in which the gesture communicates, by *mimesis*. As we have seen, *mimesis* is more than a simple copying; it is what the body naturally does when it is moved by another body: to do the same thing or to respond in its own way. A gesture is not copied by the brain commanding the body to do the same thing, but the receiving body itself follows the gesturing body if only by perceiving its movement. And the perception of movement is necessarily a movement. Merleau-Ponty has elaborated this very original manner of perception as an original form of communication. He writes in his *Phenomenology of Perception*: ‘The sense of the gestures is not given, but understood, that is, recaptured by an act on the spectator’s part.’ It is by being moved by the gesturing body that my body understands the gesture: I feel it and know it, because I do it. And what I understand is not a
content from the brain mediated through the body, but the content of the gesture itself: ‘The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.’ Again, gestures communicate in a direct manner, from body to body, from culture to culture. Merleau-Ponty: ‘Whether it is a question of another’s body or my own, I have no means of knowing the human body other than that of living it, which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it.

This phenomenology of the gesture makes clear what Francis of Assisi really did when he set out to follow Christ in his footprints (1 Peter 2,21): he learned to know what life Christ had been proclaiming, not by following the logical lines of a theology or observing His Rule in obedience, but by following the gestures of Christ in his own life, ‘taking up on his own account the drama which was being played out in them, and losing himself in it.’

By migrating into another body, another time or place, or another culture, the gesture changes and forms new realities, one of which is the identity of the actor. The American neuroscientist Antonio Damasio explains the generation of the identity as a feeling that something is happening. When I feel a movement, I do not only learn to know the movement, but also the one who is feeling it: that is ‘I’. Thus, feelings of the gesturing body generate the existence of the identity. Damasio distinguishes between the sense of self or core consciousness – ‘here and now, a transient entity, ceaselessly recreated for each and every object with which the brain interacts’ – from an autobiographical self or extended consciousness – ‘an identity and a person, with a history and a place.’ The generation of an identity, thus, continues in the form of a life story. With the help of Paul Ricoeur, we can elaborate this generation of an identity by describing this process as leading to an ‘attestation’. For in the development of the own identity, the ‘I’ becomes witness of the process and can ‘testify’ of itself as a person responding to its situation, and thus a ‘responsible’ person. The continuity of the autobiographical self is given with its accountability: ‘you can count on me.’ The development of the identity from suffering a situation and acting in a situation, is thus intimately connected to one’s relationship with the other. The gesture, we may conclude, is acting out a relationship between people in a situation, and changes both the people and the situation.

In the life of Francis of Assisi, the ‘other person’ is Christ, whom he followed in His footsteps. In a way, the ‘father of the action’ is Christ – although Christ Himself refers to His Father in Heaven –, and Francis is only acting out what his example did. Indeed, Francis is responsible for his actions, for he is the one who chose to follow Christ. As the action has its impact on the identity of the actor, the action has brought Francis closer to the identity of the Lord, whom he was following. So, not only the identity of the actor Francis is being developed in the gesture, but also the identity of the One followed in the gesture is revealed. Meanwhile, in and through his own body, Francis allowed the Lord to perform His actions and restore the Church, the world and the life of Francis and his brothers. Just as the Father is known through His Son (1 Joh 5,20), who performs the will of His Father, Francis makes the Lord known by following in His steps and acting according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel. This acting is a gesture, a ‘means without end’ (Agamben), for it does not solve any problem, but it sheds another light on the reality, and puts it in a different perspective.
After Francis, the gesture continues to communicate itself. Others are invited to imitate Francis or Christ. The witnesses are moved by the gestures, in such a way that their bodies follow them unhindered as models and learn the ability to perform them in their own ways. As the gestures transform the situation as well as the spectator, the mimetic act becomes a liturgy. Of course, in our experience, liturgy is defined by rules and regulations, whereas the Franciscan gestures are free and unrepeated. But the significant characteristic of a liturgical gesture, the anamnesis, is that ‘it renders performatively present the reality of that which is read’ or performed.

And this is what I think characterizes Francis of Assisi’s life, as it does, in my view, characterize the actions of Pope Francis in our days. In his actions, especially the original and unrepeated ones, he simply and freely follows the actions of Christ and Francis, and everybody who followed them. By doing so, he develops his own identity, and shows that he is an accountable person. He invites other people to do likewise, thus putting them in a situation in which they can discover their own responsibility; for the most wicked problems cannot be solved by a strong leader but must be met by each and everyone of us in our own unique ways. Thirdly, he renders performatively present the reality of that has been proclaimed by the tradition of those who believe in the Gospel of the eternal life, thus putting our own imperfect lives in the perspective of perfection. And ultimately, in his performances Pope Francis makes the real Father of the action known to the world.

The weaknesses of gesture

The strength of the gesture is also its weakness: it does not regulate or settle matters. This is precisely because gestures are not focused on matters, but on people. Gestures invite people to engage in good conduct, but they cannot force bad conduct to be stopped. And this is truly a matter of concern in these times of systematical sexual abuse by members of the Church, in ‘legally’ hiding all kinds of corruptions and in obviously avoiding to take responsibilities in the wicked problems of today. Of course, these are not only problems of the Church, but how can the Church speak with moral authority, when she is full of sin herself? Many people had hoped for the Pope to act firmly and decisively. But he does not seem to be able or willing to do so.

In this weakness Pope Francis may also be following his name-giver. For Francis of Assisi did not regulate Franciscan life in an unambiguous and legally adequate way himself. In fact, he wrote several Rules and continued to work on them. In his Letter to brother Leo he writes: ‘In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprints and poverty, you may do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience.’ (EpLeo 3) Thus, Francis gives Leo the opportunity to fulfill his obedience to the Rule by following his own way. In his Letter to a Minister, Francis writes: ‘And if he would sin a thousand times before your eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him to the Lord; and always be merciful with brothers such as these.’ (EpMin 11) This may be a beautiful gesture, and an inspiration for leaders of today, but it is not and should not be a law, and it does not settle bad matters.

I really understand that there are people, among whom bishops and cardinals, who cannot stand the apparent passivity of Pope Francis in the wicked matters of today. This was my
first response too: ‘Do something!’ But let us take the time to think about what we do when we would settle these matters. To be sure, we will not solve the problems. Worse, we will say that we did everything we could, and now that the matters are settled, we might even be tempted to stop engaging in them. Sometimes, it is better to stop fighting injustice and stop solving problems; sometimes, it is better to put our energy in inviting the divine reality in our lives through our bodies and in our gestures. Francis of Assisi said: ‘When we see or hear evil spoken or done or God blasphemed, let us speak well and do well and praise God Who is blessed forever.’ (RnB 17:19), and to his ministers he said: ‘They must be careful not to be angry or disturbed at the sin of another, for anger and disturbance impede charity in themselves and in others.’ (RB 7:3). In the most poignant matters, the gesture may be effective, for gestures change not through rules but through people. Gestures do not settle matters, but they put the responsibility for action in the hands of those who should bear this responsibility. And even then, we may question whether people are capable of preventing all violence, alleviating all poverty, saving all creatures and bringing peace to all. The Church is there to proclaim the coming of the Lord’s kingdom, not to organize it.

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