



Dialectic Medal Awarded to Pope Francis

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis has been awarded the Dialectic Medal by the Institute for Advanced Dialectical Research in Seattle, Wash. The Pope received the award at the conclusion of his weekly General Audience at the Vatican last Wed. from the institute's director, Dr. Justin Burke. A statement on the institute's website described Francis as one of the world's best known religious leaders, who also brings to his position as head of the Catholic Church an uncompromising humanitarianism, a sense of social justice and a commitment to dialectical thinking, with which he tirelessly advocates for world peace, human equality and protection of the environment.

Vatican Undersecretary for Culture and Education, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, has known Francis for many years, and says, in a word, "The Pope is volcanic; he likes to enter into dialogue, to open doors and windows, do an abrupt turn, but above all enter into a dialectic... He doesn't engage in dialogue without referring to some sort of concrete experience... His type of reasoning isn't based on abstract concepts, but is a reflection and an exchange about real life."

In one of these dialogues, the Pope told Fr. Spadaro: "Opposition opens up a path, a road to travel down... I love oppositions... Oppositions help. Human life is structured in oppositional form." "Francis is known for seeking out opposition, difference, polarity, tension, and so on," says Dr. Burke, "not in order to eradicate or cancel them out, but, in true dialectical fashion, to maintain and preserve them on what he describes as 'a higher plane'." "Differences are creative," Francis says, "they create tension, and in the resolution of tension lies humanity's progress."

An eclectic thinker who is not associated with any particular school of theology, Francis is instead inspired by particular ideas. There is one, he says, that "has fascinated me ever since I was a young theology student. In Latin it is called *coincidentia oppositorum*; that is, the unity of opposites" —what the philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) described as "the grasping of opposites in their unity, or of the positive in the negative."

A longtime friend of the Pope's, the late Fr. Diego Fares, wrote that "the most creative way of receiving Francis's words is to listen to them when dichotomies appear, and to be attentive to where he invites us to look, so that what at first seemed contradictory becomes instead a creative tension."

Another guiding idea has been that of the periphery. Francis, in fact, has been called the "Pope of the Peripheries." He is fond of saying that "reality is better understood from the peripheries than from the center." According to Hegel: "The center has no significance without the periphery, nor the periphery without the center... Each aspect is necessary, but one-sided when taken alone."

"Once we become aware of Francis's dialectical framework," says Dr. Burke, "we begin to see examples of it throughout his writing, speeches, homilies and even in his impromptu remarks: it's clear that he's always thinking in terms of the dialectics of parts and whole, the individual and the collective, humanity and nature, local and global—concepts he's not trying to bring together (in a 'synthesis'), but, instead, to show how attempting to separate them leads to one-sided thinking."

The Dialectic Medal was established in 2020 to recognize and foster dialectical thinking in diverse fields of theory and practice worldwide. Its inaugural recipient was German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. The 2023 award was announced on Pope Francis's 87th birthday (17 Dec. 2023).