

Pope Francis throws the doors of the Church wide open



Pope Francis has published his first and very prolix papal teaching document entitled *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of Evangelization). With a tone of delightful self-mocking he observes, "I am aware that nowadays documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and that they are quickly forgotten."

On the scale of papal authority, the document is called an Apostolic Exhortation which comes below an Encyclical. This gives the pope license to add anecdotes and pastoral tips.

Since Vatican II, there have been synods of bishops convened to discuss particular topics. In the past, the pope has then written the synod document, ensuring Vatican control of the outcomes.

Towards the end of Benedict's papacy a synod was convened on "the new evangelization," which was often code for getting away from social justice and rediscovering pieties that might appeal to young people joining some of the new Church movements that were replacing regular parish involvement.

Francis says, "I was happy to take up the request of the fathers of the synod to write this exhortation." It has provided him an opportunity to roll out all the things he has been saying that have put a spring in the step of many Catholics who think this pope is good news -- having a deep pastoral sense, a strong commitment to the poor, and a resolute conviction that Rome does not have all the answers.

Trying to sum up the 50,000 words in a few phrases, I would say his message is: "The Gospel really is good news especially for the poor and anyone who takes seriously the sufferings of the world. The

church doors are open to everyone. We are not a ghetto. We engage with the world and have something to say. Get out there. Do something to help your neighbor. Do it joyfully. Do it with passion. The Church is here to help, not to hinder. Church teachings won't be changing any time soon. But don't expect Rome to have all the answers. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. And do something to change the unjust economic structures of the world."

It's refreshing that he liberally quotes statements by bishops' gatherings from various parts of the world including Oceania. He takes decentralization and subsidiarity seriously. How refreshing to have a pope write: "It is not advisable for the pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralization.'"

Vatican monsignori in long flowing robes will be troubled to hear him say, "mere administration can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be permanently in a state of mission".

In the past, more conservative bishops have tried to downplay the significance of national bishops' conferences, preferring their individual teaching role augmented by ready access to Roman dicasteries that could receive complaints from disaffected parishioners upset at the pastoral leanings of more liberal bishops.

Francis says, "Episcopal conferences are in a position to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit." He says that "this desire has not been fully realized" and notes that "excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach."

As a non-European pope, he is particularly sensitive to cultural diversity and much of the European baggage in the Church. For him, the Church was never Europe and Europe is not the Church.

He happily quotes our bishops of Oceania asking that the Church "develop an understanding and a presentation of the truth of Christ working from the traditions and cultures of the region," and inviting "all missionaries to work in harmony with indigenous Christians so as to ensure that the faith and the life of the Church be expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture."

With South American gusto, he adds: "We cannot demand that peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith, imitate modes of expression which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history, because the faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture. It is an indisputable fact that no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our redemption in Christ."

While not promising any changes to Church teaching on contraception, divorce and remarriage, etc, he offers real hope of sacramental hospitality being offered in local churches.

Having noted that "the Church has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people's lives", he throws open the doors with this declaration: "The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door.

There are other doors that should not be closed either. Everyone can share in some way in the life of the church; everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason.

This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself 'the door': baptism. The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness.

Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems."

But there are some nettles he is not prepared to grasp, and the Church will continue to suffer for it. He writes, "The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion, but it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general."

Surely it must be even more divisive if those who reserve to themselves sacramental power to determine that they alone can determine who has access to that power and legislate that the matter is not open for discussion.

Given that the power to determine the teaching of the magisterium and the provisions of canon law is not a sacramental power, is there not a need to include women in the decision that the question is not open to discussion and in the contemporary quest for an answer to the question?

Francis's position on this may be politic for the moment within the Vatican but the position is incoherent. The claim that the matter "is not a question open to discussion" cannot be maintained unless sacramental power also includes the power to determine theology and the power to determine canon law.

Ultimately the pope's claim must be that only those possessed of sacramental power can determine the magisterium and canon law.

We need to determine if "the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life" could include the power to contribute to theological discussion and the shaping of the magisterium and to canonical discussion about sanctions for participating in theological discussion on set topics such as the ordination of women.

As Pope Francis says, "Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded."

This paragraph of the exhortation on women's ordination adds nothing to a resolution of the question or the way forward. This exhortation contains some wonderful material but on this issue, Francis has attempted to lightly evade the question riding the jet stream of opposition entrenched in the magisterium and in canon law by his two predecessors.

Francis makes no pretence to having all the answers. He won't be moving any time soon to change Church teachings. But he has done a lot with this exhortation to move the Church back into the world

and to open the Church to all sinners without discrimination.

He makes appealing his vision of a Church that is "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."

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