

**THE “FRANCIS MOMENT”:  
A NEW KAIROS FOR CATHOLIC ECCLESIOLOGY**

Presidential Address

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It was about four months ago that I decided to consider the ecclesial vision of Pope Francis as my presidential address, and proposed the title, “The Francis Moment.” Since that time, I fear that this “Francis moment” may soon give way to a kind of “Francis fatigue” and even a “Francis backlash.” The popular media have continued to fawn over our first Latin American and Jesuit pope. Some more sophisticated commentators have complained, however, that the popularity of Francis is dangerous insofar as it can mask deep fissures in the church and overlook the limits of papal authority. The always thoughtful Paul Baumann recently warned that:

Whatever people think Pope Francis is offering, he is no magician; he can’t alter the course of secular history or bridge the church’s deepening ideological divisions simply by asserting what in truth are the papacy’s rather anemic powers. In this light, the inordinate attention paid to the papacy, while perhaps good for business, is *not* good for the church. Why not? Because it encourages the illusion that what ails the church can be cured by one man, especially by a new man. In truth no pope possesses that kind of power, thank God.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, NCR’s Jamie Manson has drawn our attention to the dispute between the LCWR and the Vatican, a situation that confirms her initial judgment, made over a year ago, that from a doctrinal perspective, little is likely to change under Francis.<sup>2</sup> Others are disheartened by news of the CDF’s investigation of a theological giant in the Asian church, Michael Amaladoss. Certainly, there is much about this still young pontificate that remains unclear. I will not be offering a comprehensive assessment of a pontificate that is still less than a year and half old. The focus of my reflections will be more strictly ecclesiological in character.

Unlike Pope Francis, his four most recent predecessors were all participants at the Second Vatican Council. Of the four, Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI each carried forward distinct elements of conciliar teaching. At the same time, significant conciliar themes were either neglected entirely or given only a cursory nod. Whatever else may be said about Pope Francis, his pontificate reflects a fresh reception of the council. I contend that this pope has boldly returned to the foreground of church life and theological reflection five features of council teaching that offer tremendous promise for realizing the council’s reformist agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Baumann, “The Public Pope,” appeared in the online journal *Slate* (March 11, 2014), available at [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/foreigners/2014/03/pope\\_francis\\_at\\_one\\_year\\_why\\_intense\\_focus\\_on\\_the\\_papacy\\_is\\_bad\\_for\\_the.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/03/pope_francis_at_one_year_why_intense_focus_on_the_papacy_is_bad_for_the.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Jamie Manson, “Time to Face the Facts,” *NCR Online* (May 13, 2014), available at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/time-face-facts-pope-francis-agrees-doctrinal-assessment-lcwr> (accessed on June 17, 2014).

## I: Finding a Root Metaphor: The Church as the Pilgrim People of God

We begin with the question of root metaphors and concepts for considering the theological foundations of the church. Let us start with the interpretive framework established by Pope Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. To substantiate my claim that this pontificate marks the end of the hegemony of *communio* as a privileged conciliar hermeneutic, I need to offer a brief excursus on selected elements of the Pope Benedict XVI's own ecclesiological framework. It is fair to say that no individual has had more influence on the formal, ecclesiastical reception of Vatican II than Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict, first as a renowned theologian, then as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and finally as bishop of Rome. A profound Christocentrism has pervaded his ecclesiological writings over the course of his long career as he embraced, early on, Augustine's conviction that the church makes present in history the *totus Christus*.<sup>3</sup> For Pope Benedict, the church, and by extension its liturgy, is not a human construction but a divine reality received as gift. Pope Benedict's own ecclesiology of communion was shaped in his early years both by his critical engagements with Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology and by the work of Henri de Lubac. As cardinal prefect of the CDF he was somewhat unfairly accused of repudiating the council's understanding of the church as the people of God. In fact, we find in his work a fairly nuanced analysis of the biblical origins and understanding of "people of God" language. However, he insisted that the primary referent of the "people of God" in Scripture was not the church but Israel, thus making the "people of God" ill-suited as the primary framework for grasping the theological nature of the church. It has been his conviction that an adequate and comprehensive ecclesiology must attend much more to the Christological and therefore Eucharistic heart of the church. Moreover, he has insisted that the ecclesiological employment of "people of God" language, particularly in the service of certain political and liberation theologies, was prone to a sociological reductionism.

In 1985 a series of interviews with the prefect of the CDF were published under the title, *The Ratzinger Report*.<sup>4</sup> In those interviews the German cardinal criticized a hermeneutic of rupture at play in too many contemporary interpretations of Vatican II and he continued to express his concerns regarding the suitability of "people of God" as a guiding image of the church, encouraging instead the biblical and sacramental concept of communion. That same year Pope John Paul II convened an extraordinary synod to assess the reception of the council. Not surprisingly, the critique of "people of God" ecclesiologies was heard in the synod hall. Influential synodal participants called for a shift away from "people of God" to the concept of communion which they contended, with then Cardinal Ratzinger, was in fact the central ecclesial concept of the council. Soon after, Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, affirmed the judgment of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod when it referred to the notion of communion as "the central and fundamental idea" of Vatican

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the clearest exposition of Ratzinger's ecclesiology is found in Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985).

II.<sup>5</sup> There were two difficulties with this development. First, the synod's claim for the centrality of *koinonia/communio* in the conciliar texts was almost certainly overstated and second, people of God ecclesiologies were unfairly associated with a false democratization and politicization of the church.

The biblical notion of *koinonia/communio* has in fact proven extraordinarily fruitful. It has helped theologians re-imagine a more open and relational vision of the church, a more balanced account of the relationship between the local and universal church and a greater appreciation of the church as grounded in the sacraments and the triune life of God. Moreover, the *koinonia/communio* theme has proven particularly helpful in ecumenical dialogue. However, many theologians who have been influential in its development, figures like Jean-Marie Tillard and Walter Kasper, never saw *communio* as an alternative to an understanding of the church as the "people of God" constituted by faith and baptism and sent forth on its pilgrim journey in the world. The difficulty with Cardinal Ratzinger/ Pope Benedict's ecclesiological understanding of communion, in my view, is that it tends to privilege: 1) the hierarchical character of the church's communion, 2) the priority of the universal church over the local churches, 3) Eucharist over baptism, 4) apostolic succession over the baptismal priesthood, and 5) the church's sacramental communion over its mission in the world.<sup>6</sup> Again, none of these moves necessarily follow from a communion ecclesiology, but they were common features in many of that ecclesiology's quasi-official articulations.<sup>7</sup> This distinct version of communion ecclesiology became the *de facto* official ecclesiology of the council.

The pontificate of Pope Francis marks the end of a thirty-year hegemony of *communio* as the exclusive theological articulation of council teaching. Certainly, there is no evidence that Pope Francis wishes to repudiate communion ecclesiology. Indeed, CELAM's 2007 Aparecida document, a document that he helped draft, successfully integrated an ecclesiology of communion into a manifesto on Christian mission and discipleship.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Pope Francis' stated preference for considering the church as the people of God does have real ecclesiological consequences.

When compared to the impressive theological corpus of Pope Benedict, Pope Francis brings a less developed ecclesiology to his Petrine ministry. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to recognize his shift away from an exclusive reliance on an ecclesiology of communion to capture the deepest reality of the church. Early in his pontificate he expressed his preferred starting point for reflection on the church: "The

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<sup>5</sup> *Christifideles Laici*, 19, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For a further development of this critique, see Jose Comblin, *The People of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 58ff.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Doyle has elucidated the impressive elasticity of the concept of communion for the development of ecclesiological reflection. See Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> CELAM, "Concluding Document," available at <http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf> (accessed on June 17, 2014).

image of the church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God.”<sup>9</sup> Francis has clearly been influenced by the Latin American reception of council teaching by way of CELAM. The early CELAM documents made extensive use of “people of God” imagery, and the 2007 Aparecida document continued that trend while integrating into its reflections the ecclesiology of communion. The latter move was quite understandable given that the document was promulgated during Benedict’s pontificate.

In any event, it is not difficult to understand why Pope Francis has preferred the “people of God” imagery as the starting point for his ecclesiological reflections. Soon after the council Yves Congar would write: “The expression People of God in itself has such depth of meaning and such dynamism that it is impossible to use it in reference to the reality that is the Church, without orienting our thoughts in certain perspectives.”<sup>10</sup> Congar felt that the council’s adoption of this biblical image gave a certain priority to “the quality of discipleship,” a theme, we will see, that has been central in Pope Francis’ writings. According to the influential French Dominican, the council placed the treatment of the church as the people of God immediately after its consideration of the church’s origins in the triune life of God in order to emphasize its historical reality; the church not only abides in history as a *societas perfecta*, it is in fact shaped by history. It is this twofold commitment to the historicity of the church and the emphasis on missiology that Francis has found so congenial to his own ecclesiological commitments.

Emphasizing the church as God’s pilgrim people has allowed Francis to receive more fully the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the priority of Christian baptism, so apparent in both *Sacrosanctum concilium* and *Lumen gentium*. From this conciliar commitment to the priority of Christian baptism comes a re-contextualization of ordained ministry. Here too we see the ways in which his reception of the council has been reflected through the lens of CELAM. The Aparecida document emphasized the council’s teaching on “the common priesthood of the people of God” and understood the council to teach that the ministerial priesthood was entirely at the service of the baptismal priesthood.<sup>11</sup> Francis has continued this emphasis. He has little interest in maintaining a neo-cultic theology of priesthood. As we know he has offered consistent denunciations of “neo-clericalism” in its many forms.<sup>12</sup> In a papal audience this past March the pope said:

Those who are ordained are placed at the head of the community. Yes, they are at the “head,” but for Jesus this means placing their authority at the service of the community . . . “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, “A Big Heart Open To God,” *America* (September 30th, 2013), available at <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview> (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Yves Congar, “The Church: People of God,” *Concilium* 1 [*The Church and Mankind*] (New York: Paulist, 1965), 12–13.

<sup>11</sup> Concluding Document, no. 193.

<sup>12</sup> This concern predates Pope Francis’ pontificate. A year before his papal election he had denounced “neo-clericalism” in the pastoral care of priests, particularly with respect to the administration of the sacraments. See “That NeoClericalism that ‘Hijacks’ the Sacraments,” *Vatican Insider* (May 9, 2012), available at <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/inquiries-and-interviews/detail/articolo/sacramenti-sacramentos-the-sacraments-17899/> (accessed on June 17, 2014).

be first must be your slave” . . . A bishop who does not serve his community does not do good; a priest or a curate who does not place himself at the service of his community does not do good, he is mistake.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the pope’s preference for the image of the church as people of God is closely related to his commitment to the council’s teaching in *Ad gentes* 2 that the church is missionary “by its very nature.” This leads to the second distinctive feature of Francis’ ecclesiological vision: his creative re-reception of the missiological vision of the council, which for Pope Francis means inviting us to what we might call a more centrifugal sense of the church.

## II: The Missiological Vision of Vatican II—A Centrifugal Church

Francis calls for a church sent in mission as a sign and instrument of God’s mercy and justice. His ready appropriation of the language of the “new evangelization” so central to both John Paul II and Benedict XVI highlights an undeniable continuity between Francis and his predecessors. The pope speaks of the new evangelization fourteen times in *Evangelii gaudium*.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, one can detect in his writing a subtle modulation of his predecessors’ theology of mission. This modulation is reflected in his preference for the language of “missionary discipleship.” Again, we can trace this back to the 2007 Aparecida document that offered an extended reflection on missionary discipleship. Francis uses the term to highlight the fundamentally centrifugal thrust of the church’s activity and the need for Christians to enter into a deeper and more profound solidarity with the world. As is familiar to anyone who has been paying any attention to Francis, he will frequently employ a favorite expression, the “smell of the sheep.” He has used this image in an address to newly appointed bishops calling for them to have the smell of the sheep on them.<sup>15</sup> He appealed to it in a homily at a priestly ordination,<sup>16</sup> and in *Evangelii gaudium* he applies it to all the baptized, precisely in their work as missionaries:

An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be (EG 24).

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<sup>13</sup> A summary of this papal audience can be accessed online at <http://visnews-en.blogspot.com/2014/03/francis-to-faithful-help-your-pastors.html> (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> All references to *Evangelii gaudium* will be made parenthetically in the body of the paper and denoted as “EG” followed by the article number. The English translation may be accessed online at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to a Group of Newly Appointed Bishops Taking Part in a Conference, 19 September 2013,” in *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014), 85–8.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, “Homily, 21 April 2013,” in *The Church of Mercy*, 89–95.

For Pope Francis, the church's mission begins not with strident condemnation but with an openness to "a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter" (EG 220). He certainly is not blind to the brokenness of the world. This is, after all, a pope who has issued stringent denunciations of the evils of capitalist excess and its attendant "throw away culture" (EG 53). He is also aware of the dangers and challenges peculiar to our postmodern world, yet there is less emphasis on decrying the "tyranny of relativism." The missionary encounter that Francis envisions has two aspects. First, the church must be willing to encounter the world on its own turf, with humility and openness. Second, the missionary encounter must be, in the end, an encounter with Christ. The robust Christocentrism that governs his theology of mission provides a clear example of continuity with his predecessor. Indeed in *Evangelii gaudium* he directly quotes Pope Benedict: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (EG 7).

The centrifugal orientation of the church requires that it "go forth to everyone without exception" (EG 48). He writes: "I prefer a Church which 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" (EG 49). We need, he insists, a church "that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone."<sup>17</sup> One can see here the influence of Latin American theology. Within days of his papal election Francis began speaking of his preference for "a church of and for the poor." Christians must vacate any space that keeps them secure and buffered against the reality of poverty. We must be attentive to the "cry of the poor." This means working to address the causes of poverty and injustice in our world but it also requires a deep solidarity with the poor. In *Evangelii gaudium* he writes:

The word "solidarity" is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few (EG 188).

This new mindset goes to the heart of the pope's sense of the church. The church does not merely address the needs of the poor, it must learn from them, from their participation in the *sensus fidei* in which they teach us of the suffering Christ (EG 198). This new ecclesial mindset is evident in his evocative image of the church as a "field hospital" that goes out to meet the wounded on the battlefield of life: "It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds."<sup>18</sup>

At every step of the way, the missionary church must show the world the face of mercy. This stress on mission and mercy has given Pope Francis' Eucharistic theology a distinctive character. To explain what is distinctive here we need to recall briefly the council's teaching on eucharistic sharing in *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism:

There are two main principles governing the practice of such common worship: first, the bearing witness to the unity of the Church, and second, the sharing in the means of grace. Witness to the unity of

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<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, "General Audience, 2 October, 2013," in *The Church of Mercy*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> "A Big Heart Open to God."

the Church very generally forbids common worship to Christians, but the grace to be had from it sometimes commends this practice.<sup>19</sup>

The council asserted that the Eucharist has two distinct but related ecclesial dimensions: it is a symbol of church unity and a means of grace. In my reading of Pope Benedict, the first principle, the Eucharist as a symbol of ecclesial unity, almost completely eclipsed the second. His theology of the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity not only precluded intercommunion with members of other Christian communions in all but the most exceptional of circumstances, it also led him to resist any pastoral accommodation for those whose participation in the church had been compromised by sin, such as the divorced and remarried.

Pope Francis certainly shares Benedict's deep eucharistic spirituality, but his missionary theology and his emphasis on the church bearing the face of mercy to the world provides the context for his eucharistic theology. This has inclined him to emphasize the council's second eucharistic principle, the Eucharist as a means of grace. He writes:

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 (EG 47).

Pope Francis' commitment to a centrifugal church fundamentally oriented toward mission is further explored in his frequent juxtaposition of "center" and "periphery," an insight he likely gained from Yves Congar. For Congar, the place where creative ecclesial initiative occurs is rarely at the center of the church but rather at the periphery. In *True and False Reform in the Church* he writes:

Initiatives often start at the periphery. They say that history develops at its margins and that's right. The margin is closer to the periphery than to the center. Further, the center, with its vocation to oversee *structure*, prefers something *defined* to something that is searching and striving for expression. Yet a spiritual organism is more likely to grow out of the elements searching and striving for expression.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, The Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism, 8. This translation is available on the Vatican website at:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> See Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 240. See also, Yves Congar, "Theology of the Council," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 155 (1966): 220–21. Paul Philibert offers a helpful distillation of Congar's use of the relationship between "center" and "periphery" in "When Not in Rome: Lessons from the Periphery of the Church," *America* (March 24, 2014). Available online at <http://americamagazine.org/issue/when-not-rome> (accessed on July 4, 2014).

Pope Francis, I believe, has taken up and expanded on Congar's appeal to the ecclesial significance of the periphery. The pope has been critical of a church content to abide in static and self-contained ecclesial structures. In an address to the bishops of Brazil, he insisted that authentic missionary discipleship will inevitably lead Christians "away from the center and toward the peripheries."<sup>21</sup>

Francis is not a professional theologian and he has only occasionally addressed the role of the theologian in the church. However, in his December 6th, 2013 address to the International Theological Commission he situates the work of theology at the heart of this missionary encounter:

Theologians, then, are "pioneers . . . in the Church's dialogue with cultures. But being pioneers is important also because sometimes we think they [theologians] stay back, stay in the barracks . . . No, they are on the frontier! This dialogue of the Church with cultures is a dialogue at once critical and benevolent, which must foster the reception of the Word of God by people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev 7:9).<sup>22</sup>

According to Francis, the theologian must exercise her vocation at the periphery as well, working on the frontlines of the church's missionary engagement with the world today.

Francis also calls for a movement from the center to the periphery in his reflections on religious life. This last November he engaged in a lively exchange at a gathering of the superiors of male religious orders. At that meeting he boldly challenged those in religious life:

Being at the periphery helps to see and to understand better, to analyze reality more correctly, to shun centralism and ideological approaches . . . This is really very important to me: the need to become acquainted with reality by experience, to spend time walking on the periphery in order really to become acquainted with the reality and life-experiences of people. If this does not happen we then run the risk of being abstract ideologists or fundamentalists, which is not healthy.<sup>23</sup>

It is from the periphery that vowed religious are best positioned to exercise the prophetic character of their vocation:

In the church, the religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophecy. This does not mean opposing the hierarchical part of the church, although the prophetic function and the hierarchical structure do not coincide. I am talking about a proposal that is always positive, but it should not cause timidity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in John L. Allen, Jr., *Against the Tide: The Radical Leadership of Pope Francis* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2014), 47.

<sup>22</sup> This address may be accessed online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20131206\\_commissione-teologica\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_commissione-teologica_en.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, "Wake up the World! Conversation with Pope Francis about Religious Life," ed. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, *La Civiltà Cattolica* (2014) I: 3–17, available at [http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli\\_download/extra/Wake\\_up\\_the\\_world.pdf](http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> "A Big Heart Open to God."



Francis recognizes that professed religious can be in communion with the hierarchy without being subsumed into it.

All of this inevitably raises certain question regarding the recent apostolic visitation of women religious communities here in the US, the strictures imposed on the LCWR and, most recently, the harsh judgment voiced by Cardinal Müller but a few weeks ago. On the one hand, it was unfortunate that the CDF prefect drew attention to the much-deserved award given to Prof. Johnson. His criticism was based on the theologically flawed doctrinal assessment of her work produced by the US Bishops' Committee on Doctrine. On the other hand, it does little good to engage in facile hero-worship where the LCWR is concerned. One can admire the LCWR's exemplary service to the church while still wishing that they were more eager to expose their membership to a broader range of theological perspectives in their choice of speakers (and I may be implicating myself here since I had the privilege of addressing their assembly a few years ago!). More troubling is the possibility that Müller's views may indeed, as some commentators have suggested, reflect those of Pope Francis. We cannot avoid the fact that this pope has offered sweeping dismissals of feminist theology that stand in stark contrast to his much more discriminating appreciation for liberation theology. Abstracting from the recent LCWR-CDF "dust up," there is a larger issue in play here. Pope Francis' own language helps us name the uncomfortable distance between a church leadership stuck in a cramped ecclesiastical center and the place of many religious communities that have deliberately located themselves at the periphery in solidarity with the broken and marginalized of this world.

Let me conclude this section with a brief reflection on the relationship between church mission and church reform. Over the past few decades we have heard notable figures in church leadership challenge the so-called "liberal Catholic" agenda for church reform because, in their view, it is susceptible of a too-easy accommodation with secular modernity. Rather than be distracted by an emphasis on structural reform, the church's energies, they have insisted, should be redirected toward the new evangelization. The Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, Francis George, for example, has characterized liberal Catholicism and its emphasis on structural church reform as "an exhausted project."<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, however, does not see the church's mission and structural reform as mutually exclusive alternatives. In fact for Francis one is the necessary precondition for the other. In his July 2013 address to the coordinating committee of CELAM during his visit to Brazil he said:

The "change of structures" (from obsolete ones to new ones) will not be the result of reviewing an organizational flow chart, which would lead to a static reorganization; rather it will result from the very dynamics of mission. What makes obsolete structures pass away, what leads to a change of heart in Christians, is precisely missionary spirit.<sup>26</sup> He further develops this idea in *Evangelii gaudium*:

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<sup>25</sup> Francis Cardinal George, *The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion, and Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 164–68.

<sup>26</sup> This address can be accessed online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130728\\_gmg-celam-rio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-celam-rio_en.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

I dream of a “missionary option,” that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself (EG 27).

This commitment to a program of ecclesial reform in service of the church’s mission has led the pope to criticize a more bureaucratic way of dealing with pastoral issues (EG 63). He has complained that “[t]he church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules.” All of this suggests that proposals for church reform are not to be evaluated in relation to their employment of secular categories or by the extent to which they threaten the status quo but rather by their effectiveness in facilitating the church’s mission in the world.

### III: A Listening Church

A third feature of Francis’ nascent ecclesiological vision is his call for a “listening church.” Francis speaks positively about a church that will be messy precisely because of its commitment to honest dialogue, listening, and even disagreement. In his interview, “A Big Heart Open to God” he reflects on the meaning of *sentire cum ecclesiae*. “Thinking with the church” requires, first of all, that we get beyond our own self-styled, and often self-serving credos. There is much to be mined here in the light of recent studies on the deregulation and commodification of religion and the perils this represents for the experience of religious community. Yet, for Francis, “thinking with the church” also means much more than a scrupulous, servile obedience to every ecclesiastical decree. It means thinking with the *whole* church and not just the ones who count ecclesiastically. It means daring to enter into a “complex web of relationships” and living in receptive solidarity with all God’s people. It means recalling not only the infallibility of the church’s teachers but also, as the council taught, the infallibility of the believing church. And then there is this quite remarkable statement: “When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine,” Pope Francis contends, “then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> Let us not overlook the audacity of this claim. Francis is saying that we can be confident of an assistance of the Holy Spirit to the bishops *on the condition that* they are open to listening to others. This perspective stands in startling contrast to the almost mechanistic notions of the assistance of the Holy Spirit often invoked by church leaders.

In *Evangelii gaudium* we come to the end of a *de facto* fifty year papal moratorium on consideration of the council’s teaching on the sense of the faithful.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “A Big Heart Open to God.”

<sup>28</sup> A welcome exception is the 2011 document of the International Theological Commission, “Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria.” This document can be

Francis specifically exhorts church leaders to attend to the graced wisdom of the whole people of God. He recalls the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the infallibility of the people of God *in credendo*. "The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression" (EG 119). Francis invokes the work of theology at precisely this juncture. In his address to the ITC he insisted that theologians play a central role in discerning the sense of the faithful.<sup>29</sup>

The pope's desire for a humble, listening, discerning church has led him to make regular pleas for the recovery and reform of consultative and collegial structures (e.g., episcopal synods):

The consistories [of cardinals], the synods [of bishops] are, for example, important places to make real and active this consultation. We must, however, give them a less rigid form. I do not want token consultations, but real consultations. The consultation group of eight cardinals, this "outsider" advisory group, is not only my decision, but it is the result of the will of the cardinals, as it was expressed in the general congregations before the conclave. And I want to see that this is a real, not ceremonial consultation.<sup>30</sup>

We are already seeing an example of this in the actions of Cardinal Baldiserri, the secretary general of the synod of bishops, who called for bishops to consult the faithful regarding their beliefs and concerns on the topic of marriage and family. What the synod will do with the information gleaned from that consultation remains to be seen.

Francis has also directly challenged bishops to broaden their practice of consultation:

In his [the bishop's] mission of fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion, he will have to encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in the Code of Canon Law and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear. Yet the principal aim of these participatory processes should not be ecclesiastical organization but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone (EG 31).

What is particularly welcome in this passage is the recognition that consultation is more than gathering together safe voices that function as little more than an ecclesiastical echo chamber. I suspect that most bishops and pastors—for that matter, most theology department chairs and even presidents of theological societies—think that that they are consultative just because they seek out the opinions of others. The pope rightly insists that authentic ecclesial consultation that aspires to be more than a pragmatic public relations maneuver, that aspires, that is, to be a genuine listening to the Spirit, must attend to a wide range of voices, including those in ecclesial exile of one kind or another. The pope's commitment to a listening church is also evident in his preference for interviews and informal dialogue over the promulgation of

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accessed online at

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_doc\\_20111129\\_tologia-oggi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_tologia-oggi_en.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Address to the International Theological Commission.

<sup>30</sup> "A Big Heart Open To God."

normative pronouncements. Could we be encountering here a new genre of magisterial teaching, one that is more provisional and open-ended in character?

#### IV: Ecclesial Subsidiarity

Pope Francis' commitment to ecclesial subsidiarity represents the fourth feature of his fresh reception of Vatican II. Without ever using the term itself, the Second Vatican Council encouraged ecclesial subsidiarity in the liturgy constitution, giving to regional episcopal conferences significant authority in liturgical matters.<sup>31</sup> We might define the principle of ecclesial subsidiarity as follows: *the primary responsibility for the realization of the individual Christian vocation and the fulfillment of the mission of local Christian communities lies with those individuals and local communities themselves. Only when the realization of these goals appears unattainable at the lower level and/or threatens the faith and unity of the church universal should one expect intervention from higher levels of church life.*

In 1967 the synod of bishops recommended that the principle of subsidiarity guide the process of revising the *Code of Canon Law*. Indeed, the preface to the new code explicitly affirmed the ecclesiological applicability of the principle of subsidiarity even though the principle is largely eschewed in the code itself.<sup>32</sup> A quite different view of ecclesial subsidiarity came to the fore at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. At a gathering of cardinals assembled for the synod, Cardinal Hamer rejected the principle, insisting that the council had avoided any ecclesial application of subsidiarity.<sup>33</sup> At a press conference after the conclusion of the Synod, Cardinal Jan Schotte also rejected the legitimacy of subsidiarity as an ecclesiological principle. Both prelates insisted that the principle was inapplicable because the church was no mere sociological reality but rather a spiritual communion and therefore not subject to the sociological rules that apply to other secular institutions.<sup>34</sup> This position reflected then Cardinal Ratzinger's own concerns regarding the dangers of both a sociological reductionism and an ecclesiological relativism. In *Pastores gregis*, Pope John Paul II himself expressed reservations regarding subsidiarity.<sup>35</sup>

In spite of this ambivalence, many of the churches of the global south have continued to affirm the ecclesiological importance of the principle. The Federation of

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<sup>31</sup> See *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 22, 36, 39–40, 44.

<sup>32</sup> This principle appeared in the Preface to the Latin edition, which can be accessed online at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_\\_\\_P1.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/___P1.HTM) (accessed on July 30, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> The text of his address may be found in *Synode extraordinaire, Célébration de Vatican II* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 598–604.

<sup>34</sup> For a review of this argument see Ad Leys, *Ecclesiological Impacts of the Principle of Subsidiarity* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 113–19; Joseph Komonchak, "Subsidiarity in the Church: The State of the Question," *The Jurist* 48 (1988): 298–349, at 336–37.

<sup>35</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Pastores gregis*, 56, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20031016\\_pastores-gregis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20031016_pastores-gregis_en.html) (accessed on June 17, 2014). For a more developed treatment of ecclesial subsidiarity see, Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (New York: Paulist, 2006), 80–2, 132–33.

Asian Bishops Conferences has regularly insisted on the value of ecclesial subsidiarity, holding that pastoral decisions concerning the life of the church are best made at the local level. For the Asian church this is not an abstract sociological axiom but a concrete principle of ecclesial action that flows from a theology of the local church.

Although Pope Francis prefers to speak of ecclesial “decentralization,” a theologically less helpful formulation in my view, there can be no doubt that this pope from the global south is effectively recovering the principle of ecclesial subsidiarity. A Brazilian bishop recently disclosed a conversation with Pope Francis in which he claims that Francis was sympathetic to the pastoral urgency of the current priest shortage but felt that a proposal for married priests should not come from the pope but from regional episcopal conferences.<sup>36</sup> Although a second hand account, the position attributed to Pope Francis is consistent with what he wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. 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” (EG 16).

Later in the document he returns to this theme:

The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position “to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit”. Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated. Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach (EG 32).

What is intriguing about this passage is the fact that Pope Francis footnotes John Paul II’s *Apostolos suos* when he refers to the insufficient elaboration of an understanding of the doctrinal authority of episcopal conferences. This appears to be a thinly veiled judgment of the theological inadequacies of that document.

## **V: The Pastoralty of Doctrine**

The final feature to consider in Pope Francis’ ecclesiological vision is as much a matter of fundamental theology as it is of ecclesiology. What I have in mind here is the role the pope assigns to church doctrine in both mediating divine revelation and nurturing Catholic Christian identity. As has been frequently discussed during our convention, the crisis of Catholic identity, with respect to both individual believers and Catholic institutions, has been a major preoccupation of church leadership over the past several decades. In today’s church we must reckon with a destructive polarization. On the one hand we can see in some church circles an unhealthy and

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<sup>36</sup> David Gibson, “Are Married Priests Next on Francis’ Agenda,” *National Catholic Reporter* (May 9–22, 2014): 12.

overly subjectivist suspicion regarding requirements for adherence to normative church teaching as a benchmark of Catholic identity. On the other hand, we see a problematic doctrinal reductionism that relies on a largely “digital” conception of doctrine.<sup>37</sup> Doctrine understood in this digital mode is purged of its mystagogical and transformative character and rendered strictly regulative and informational.

Pope Francis offers a more balanced understanding of church doctrine. It is firmly rooted in the council’s commitment to what Christoph Theobald has coined “the pastorality of doctrine.”<sup>38</sup> In Pope John’s influential opening address at the council, *Gaudet mater Ecclesia*, he called for a magisterium that was fundamentally pastoral in character. He was not content to have the council offer a mere repetition of previous doctrinal formulations; what was demanded was a penetration of church doctrine in view of the pressing questions of our age.<sup>39</sup> The council followed the pope’s lead and consistently treated doctrine as something to be authentically interpreted and faithfully applied within concrete historical, cultural, and pastoral contexts.

This commitment to the pastorality of doctrine has been exhibited time and again with this pope as he insists that doctrine must be interpreted in relation to the core Christian kerygma and in light of the pastoral context in which it is being applied. In his address at the plenary session of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Francis distilled his understanding of doctrine in one sentence: “In reality, doctrine has the sole purpose of serving the life of the People of God and it seeks to assure our faith of a sure foundation.”<sup>40</sup> In an open letter to the founder of the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Eugenio Scalfari, the pope admitted to a certain reluctance to speak of “absolute truth,” not because he was a “relativist” but because, for Christians, truth is mediated through a relationship with a person, Christ. As such, truth is always encountered in history.<sup>41</sup>

We see this recontextualization of doctrine most clearly in Pope Francis’ retrieval of one of the most neglected themes of the council, the “hierarchy of truths.” The council writes: “When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in catholic doctrine there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.”<sup>42</sup> In this brief

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<sup>37</sup> For an articulation and critique of this digital approach to doctrine, see Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Dogma: Faith, Revelation and Dogmatic Teaching Authority*, trans. Philip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 108.

<sup>38</sup> Christoph Theobald, “The Theological Options of Vatican II: Seeking an ‘Internal’ Principle of Interpretation,” in *Vatican II: A Forgotten Future [Concilium 2005/4]*: 87–107.

<sup>39</sup> Pope John’s opening address may be accessed online at <http://conciliaria.com/2012/10/mother-church-rejoices-opening-address-of-john-xxiii-at-the-council/#more-2134> (accessed on June 18, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” (January 31, 2014). The text can be accessed online at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-address-to-congregation-for-the-doctrine-of-the-faith> (accessed on June 18, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Pope Francis, “Letter to a Non-Believer.” This letter can be accessed online at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130911\\_eugenio-scalfari.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_eugenio-scalfari.html) (accessed on June 18, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, The Decree on Ecumenism, 11. The English translation is taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport: Costello, 1996).

passage, the council introduced a crucial distinction between the content of divine revelation, understood as God's self-communication in Christ by the power of the Spirit, and those church doctrines which, in varying degrees, mediate that content. When the council first articulated this teaching in *Unitatis redintegratio*, Oscar Cullmann, noted Protestant theologian and observer at the council, remarked that this teaching was "the most revolutionary . . . not only in the schema *De Oecumenismo*, but in all the schemas of the council."<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, since the council there has been little recourse to the hierarchy of truths in magisterial documents. In an important study of the topic, Catherine Clifford uncovers but a single papal reference to the hierarchy of truths prior to Pope Francis.<sup>44</sup> Where it has appeared in other ecclesiastical documents we find, at times, a troubling reformulation of the council's teaching. Recall that the council taught that church doctrines differed in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith. In a 1973 statement the CDF taught instead that "some dogmas are founded on other dogmas which are the principal ones, and are illuminated by these latter."<sup>45</sup> The difference in formulation is significant. Whereas Vatican II introduced a crucial distinction *between* doctrine and the more fundamental Christian kerygma, the CDF asserted only that doctrines vary in their relations one to another.<sup>46</sup> The principal consequence of the CDF's reformulation was a severe restriction of the field of application for the hierarchy of truths. This helps explain why the concept has received so little attention in magisterial teaching.<sup>47</sup>

Pope Francis has recalled for us, however, the true spirit of the council's teaching on the hierarchy of truths. He insists in *Evangelii gaudium* that doctrines are not ends in themselves; they serve us when they draw us into life-giving relationship with Christ. He writes:

All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense,

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<sup>43</sup> Oscar Cullman, "Comments on the Decree on Ecumenism," *Ecumenical Review* 17 (1965): 93.

<sup>44</sup> It is found in Pope John Paul II's encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut unum sint* (37), where it appears, however, without any developed explication or application. This document can be accessed at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html) (accessed on June 18, 2014). See Catherine Clifford, "L'herméneutique d'un principe herméneutique: La hiérarchie des vérités," in *L'Autorité et les autorités: L'herméneutique théologique de Vatican II*, ed. Gilles Routhier and Guy Jobin (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 69–91, at 70.

<sup>45</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium ecclesiae*, 4. This document can be accessed online at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19730705\\_mysterium-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html) (accessed on June 18, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Clifford, 76.

<sup>47</sup> Clifford finds more promising appropriations of the conciliar teaching in several documents of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and in particular in the Ecumenical Directory but the impact of these texts on Catholic discourse in the post-conciliar period has been minimal. *Ibid.*, 85–90.

the Second Vatican Council explained, “in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.” This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching (EG 36).

Unlike the 1973 CDF statement, Francis understands the council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths as more than just ranking doctrines; the council wished to relate doctrine to something more basic, the Christian kerygma. He writes:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing (EG 35).

Francis is not afraid to affirm church doctrine as basic to Christian identity, but he consistently orients that doctrine toward the basic Christian kerygma and situates it within the pastoral life of the church.

We have already encountered some concrete examples of Pope Francis’ commitment to the pastorality of doctrine. It is evident in his openness to a re-imagining of the church’s teaching on the possibility of communion for the divorced and remarried. He has no wish to reverse church teaching on marital indissolubility *per se*, but he is committed to placing it within the field of Christian mercy. As yet another example, consider the pope’s recent discussion of Pope Paul VI’s teaching on artificial birth regulation in *Humanae vitae*. In a March 5, 2014 interview he responded to a direct question about adherence to this controversial papal teaching:

It all depends on how the text of *Humanae Vitae* is interpreted. Paul VI himself, towards the end, recommended to confessors much mercy and attention to concrete situations. But his genius was prophetic, as he had the courage to go against the majority, to defend moral discipline, to apply a cultural brake, to oppose present and future neo-Malthusianism. The object is not to change the doctrine, but it is a matter of going into the issue in depth and to ensure that the pastoral ministry takes into account the situations of each person and what that person can do. This will also be discussed on the path to the Synod.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The transcript of the interview can be accessed online at <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/transcript-pope-francis-march-5-interview-with-corriere-della-sera/> (accessed on June 18, 2014). In fairness, Pope Benedict XVI was already moving in this direction. In his 2005 address to the curia on the hermeneutics of Vatican II, he developed a hermeneutics of reform in which he claimed it was necessary for the council to revisit a number of doctrines—religious liberty, Catholic thought on liberalism, religious pluralism. His argument seems to have been that these teachings had to be revisited precisely because the historical/cultural context of these teachings had changed. What was more problematic was his insistence that these changes took place, not at the level of doctrinal, principal, but only at the level of doctrinal application. This address can be accessed online at



Listen carefully and you hear echoes of John XXIII's call for a deeper penetration of church doctrine and its more pastoral realization. Francis offers the wise acknowledgement, one too often lacking among critics of *Humanae vitae*, that there was a profound wisdom in Paul VI's concerns about what would later be called a "contraceptive mentality." The central values embedded in the doctrine must be applied, however, in ways that "[take] into account the situations of each person and what that person can do." This does not reflect a pastoral compromise of the demands of church teaching, but an authentic interpretation of the doctrine apprehended within a specific cultural and pastoral context.

Finally, we can consider the pope's controversial remarks on homosexuality encapsulated in his oft quoted and just as frequently misunderstood statement, "who am I to judge." John Langan appeals to something very much like the pastorality of doctrine in his article in *America* this past March where he claimed that Pope Francis was not concerned with either a simple reaffirmation or reversal of the church's official teaching on homosexuality, but rather with a deep reconsideration of the church's "stance." For Langan, "stance" is distinct from a specific doctrinal formulation. To consider the church's "stance" on an issue is a matter of:

critical reflection on the tradition to clarify what strengths are to be preserved and what continuities are to be affirmed even while searching for the sources of limitations in the teaching and acknowledging the development of new questions and problems.<sup>49</sup>

A change in stance may or may not bring about a change in church doctrine. What it does allow for is a consideration of hitherto neglected factors and insights.

For many Langan's proposal that we focus on a change in "stance" will not go far enough. They will continue to press the question: will or will not this pope reverse this or that controversial church teaching? However, there is an important way in which the "will he or won't he" question misconstrues how doctrine develops. It is a common misconception that doctrinal change and development occur primarily by ecclesiastical fiat. In fact, history shows that doctrine changes when pastoral contexts shift and new insights emerge such that particular doctrinal formulations no longer mediate the saving message of God's transforming love. The gradual shift in the church's condemnation of usury offers us a classic example of what I have in mind here. That teaching was not reversed in a single papal decree. Rather, there was a gradual and halting pastoral discernment that the teaching, in its classical formulation, no longer served the central values it was intended to protect, namely the welfare of the poor.<sup>50</sup>

Certainly church leadership contributes to the change and development of doctrine, but its role is generally more indirect. Bishops and pastoral leaders contribute to the development of doctrine when they do what Pope Francis has been insisting on for the last fifteen months: move from the center to the periphery and see, in specific pastoral contexts, how doctrine actually "works," that is, how it

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[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html) (accessed on June 18, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> John Langan, "See the Person," *America* (March 10, 2014): 14.

<sup>50</sup> See John Noonan's still classic treatment of this in *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); idem, *The Church that Can and Cannot Change* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

contributes to bringing people into a saving encounter with God's abundant love and mercy.

In my address this morning I have argued that the pontificate of Pope Francis represents a fresh reception of the teaching of Vatican II and offers new opportunities for continuing the council's reformist agenda. Of course, it remains to be seen the extent to which his inspirational papal rhetoric can be transformed into an effective program for church renewal. The first steps at curial reform, at least as regards Vatican finances, have been promising but they represent, in many ways, the low hanging fruit of church reform. I suspect that the success of this pontificate will depend on his ability to refashion the episcopate according to his preferred pastoral profile. Bishops who are willing to have the "smell of the sheep" on them, bishops who are willing in humility to listen before they teach, will find a pastoral field rich in opportunity and a laity eager to collaborate in the transformation of our church into a church of mercy and justice. Whether this pontificate offers a genuine *kairos* for the church, or ends up as nothing more than an historical anomaly remains unclear. But let us pray that this new pope may bring to fruition Pope John's fervent desire that the council bring forth in the church a new Pentecost.