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In first encyclical, Francis reaches out to seekers

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 5, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis

In what Pope Francis has referred to as a document written by ?four hands,? meaning his and those of his predecessor, Benedict XVI, the new pope?s first encyclical insists that Christian faith ?must be professed in all its purity and integrity,? but also strikes a pose of open arms to all the "seekers" of the post-modern world.

Anyone who is ?open to love," the document says, is "already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith.?

In a sense, the document amounts to a synthesis of the spirit of ?affirmative orthodoxy? under Benedict, which is now seemingly being extended into the papacy of Francis: Tenacity in defending the content of orthodox belief, but a determination to phrase that content in the most positive and outward-reaching fashion possible.

The 90-page encyclical letter, titled *Lumen fidei*, or ?Light of Faith,? was released today in a Vatican news conference.

The text is marked by striking outreach towards people open to God who have not yet arrived at the fullness of Christian belief.

?To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith,? it says.

It suggests that a genuine concern for others, even among non-believers, represents the stirring of faith.

?Anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God,? it says.

While insisting that Christian faith reflects objective truth, the encyclical also says that Christians must not be arrogant about it.

?One who believes may not be presumptuous,? it says. ?On the contrary, truth leads to humility.?

Noted American spiritual writer Fr. James Martin, a member of Francis? Jesuit order, said the encyclical could help ?the seeker, the doubter, the agnostic and even the atheist.?

Martin called the document ?a heartfelt attempt to speak to anyone still searching for God.?

The encyclical was initially drafted by Benedict XVI, and it clearly reflects many of his core themes: the link between faith and truth, the dangers of relativism, the importance of tradition and the magisterium, and the necessity of living faith in the context of the church.

In terms of content, the new document suggests there will be no major doctrinal innovations under Pope Francis.

?Because all the articles of faith are interconnected, to deny one of them, even of those that seem least important, is tantamount to distorting the whole,? it says.

The encyclical calls for ?vigilance in ensuring that the deposit of faith is passed on in its entirety.?

At the level of political and cultural implications, the encyclical suggests that Christian faith must lead to concern for the environment and the poor.

?Faith also helps us to devise models of development which are based not simply on utility and profit, but consider creation as a gift for which we are all indebted,? it says.

?It teaches us to create just forms of government, in the realization that authority comes from God and is meant for the service of the common good.?

Francis insists that faith must be "placed at the service of justice, law and peace."

In what amounts to a concrete illustration of that point, release of the encyclical comes just 48 hours before Pope Francis is scheduled to make his first trip outside Rome on Monday to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, a major point of arrival for impoverished migrants from Africa and the Middle East seeking to reach Europe.

The pontiff will toss a wreath into the sea to memorialize those who have died making the crossing, and is expected to call for more compassionate immigration policies during remarks later in the day.

Lumen fidei was presented this morning in a Vatican news conference by Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops; Archbishop Gerhard Muller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith; and Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.

Noting that the encyclical began under Benedict and reached completion under Francis, Ouellet said it thus ?illustrates in an extraordinary way the most fundamental and original theme it develops, the dimension of communion in the faith,? Ouellet said.

This is not the first time an encyclical originally drafted under one pope has been issued under another.

For instance, Benedict XVI?s first encyclical letter in late 2005, *Deus Caritas Est*, contained elements of a draft document on Catholic charitable activity begun under John Paul II.

When Benedict announced his resignation in February, Vatican spokespersons acknowledged the existence of a draft encyclical intended as a capstone to the ?Year of Faith? decreed by the outgoing pope. At the time, a spokesman speculated that perhaps Benedict would finish the project in retirement and issue it as a personal reflection.

Instead, Benedict chose to leave the draft for his successor, and Francis brought it to completion.

In remarks to a meeting with Italian bishops before the encyclical?s release, Francis indicated that it will take the place of a concluding document, usually an ?apostolic exhortation,? summing up the results of last October?s Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization.

The Vatican publishing house printed 500,000 copies of *Lumen fidei* in its first press run, at a price of 3.5 Euro each, roughly $4.50.

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