

Francis and a church that breathes with both lungs

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 27, 2013 All Things Catholic

Editor's note: Because of the Thanksgiving holiday, John L. Allen Jr.'s column, "All Things Catholic," is running Wednesday instead of its customary Friday. The column will be back on schedule next week.

There's no mistaking the fact that Pope Francis' new apostolic exhortation, "[Joy of the Gospel](#) [1]," released Tuesday by the Vatican, amounts to a call for fairly sweeping change on multiple fronts.

At the big-picture level, Francis says he wants a more missionary and more merciful church, one less afraid of change than of "remaining shut up with structures which give us a false sense of security," "rules which make us harsh judges," and "habits which make us feel safe."

At the level of detail, Francis hints at reform in numerous arenas, including a blunt call for a "conversion of the papacy" toward a "sound decentralization." That includes at least one seemingly clear reversal of previous policy: assigning teaching authority to bishops' conferences, as opposed to a 1998 ruling under John Paul II denying them precisely that role.

Yet there's a deeper sense in which "The Joy of the Gospel" stands in clear continuity with Francis' immediate predecessor, Benedict XVI, and in particular his 2009 social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

In effect, both documents amount to full-frontal assaults not on Catholic doctrine or discipline, but on contemporary Catholic sociology.

Benedict meant to attack the de facto split between the church's pro-life and its peace-and-justice wings while Francis is now challenging another frequent division, between those Catholics most committed to the new evangelization and those invested in the social Gospel.

To be clear, neither of those fractures have anything to do with official Catholic teaching, which actually rejects both. They have everything to do with real life on the ground, however.

As happened with *Caritas in Veritate*, experts will pore over "Joy of the Gospel" with a fine-tooth comb, seeking to unpack what Francis' language might imply on all sorts of questions. There's a risk, however, just like four years ago, that the microscopic examination could miss the forest for the trees.

In both cases, the real novelty is that the documents are acts of synthesis, weaving together strains of Catholic thought usually kept separate. Benedict XVI insisted on the organic link between what he called "human ecology," meaning the church's teaching on matters such as abortion and marriage, and "natural ecology," including the environment. As Francis repeats in "Joy of the Gospel," Benedict argued that defending the unborn child and defending the poor are two sides of the same coin.

Francis is once again trying to do the same thing, uniting two bodies of reflection and energy usually associated with very different constituencies. In his case, they're "New Evangelization," meaning the effort launched under

John Paul II to relight the church's missionary fires, and "Social Gospel," referring to Catholicism's engagement on behalf of the poor, immigrants and the environment, as well as its opposition to war, the arms trade, the death penalty and so on.

Francis devotes an entire section of his text to what he calls "the social dimension of evangelization."

"If this dimension is not properly brought out," he writes, "there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization" because "both Christian preaching and life are meant to have an impact on society."

He goes on at some length, quoting Bible passages about concern for the poor, and pointedly concludes: "This message is so clear and direct, so simple and eloquent, that no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it."

Francis ticks off several issues that ought to be of special Christian concern, including rising income inequality, spreading unemployment and the plight of migrants and refugees. He wields some of his sharpest language in deriding a "crude and naïve trust" in the "sacralized workings of the present economic system" and leaves no doubt that missionary Christians must be change agents vis-à-vis a "throw-away culture."

Making the poor feel welcome, he says, represents "the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the kingdom."

At the same time, and despite urging a greater commitment to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, Francis is also utterly explicit that evangelization also means bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ.

"What kind of love," the pope asks, "would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?"

Here's the thing. That combination between proclaiming the faith and living it out may seem natural and compelling, but it's often not how things really work at the Catholic grass roots.

From personal experience, I can say that one can spend a lot of time at conferences and symposia on the new evangelization without hearing much about, say, the war in Syria, the human costs of the Eurozone crisis, or the impact of global warming. Similarly, one can attend a truckload of "social ministry" gatherings without getting much on the sacraments, the life of prayer, Marian devotions or growth in personal holiness.

That's an overgeneralization, but anybody who's been around the block in the Catholic church will recognize the scent of truth.

Protagonists in both the contemporary Catholic renaissance in apologetics and evangelization and in the church's social activism sometimes regard what the other party is up to as a distraction. Evangelizers sometimes say that a nongovernmental organization or a political party can fight unemployment, but only the church can preach Christ. Social activists reply by insisting that rhetoric about a loving God means little to people whose lives are broken by misery and injustice.

From the point of view of Catholic teaching, both are absolutely right, which leads one to wonder what they might be able to accomplish by working together. Promoting that spirit of common cause, one could argue, is the beating heart of "Joy of the Gospel."

John Paul II used to invoke the image of a church that "breathes with both lungs," which he used to talk about unity between Eastern and Western Christianity. Benedict tried to apply it to the relationship between pro-life

and social justice work with, it has to be said, mixed results.

The deepest ambition of "Joy of the Gospel" lies in Francis' dream of a church that breathes with both lungs regarding mission and justice, uniting its concern for poverty of both the spiritual and the flesh-and-blood sort. The drama of his papacy, in a sense, lies in how well he may be able to pull it off.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org [2]. Follow him on Twitter: [@JohnLAllenJr](https://twitter.com/JohnLAllenJr) [3].]

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