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In 'Evangelii Gaudium,' Pope Francis exhorts us

Mary Ann McGivern | Jan. 28, 2014 NCR Today

When Pope Francis was elected, one of the stories circulating was that in the previous election, he had come in second to Pope Benedict XVI. I've thought about that, wondering if, when he heard the name "Benedict," he had considered to himself what name he would have chosen -- perhaps Francis. If he had looked at the red shoes and thought how peculiar it would have been to be wearing them. And if, as Benedict spoke to the church, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was quietly aware that he would have said it differently.

Such puzzling about "what ifs" is only human, and sometimes, it serves us well. I say this because to me, " The Joy of the Gospel [1]" is bursting with what Francis wants to tell the church. This is an exhortation that has been on Francis' mind for a while. Perhaps it was a theme of his as a cardinal in Argentina. Probably those who know him well nod and say, Yes, he's been saying that for decades. But "The Joy of the Gospel" has an urgency about it, a desire to remind us to be joyful, to love one another, to be eager to share God's love.

"The Joy of the Gospel" is just five chapters. The first chapter is about being joyful. Francis makes it clear that Scripture and church teaching are not doleful. The last chapter is about sharing that joy with others, and here, Francis' own passion shines through. He relies much less on quotations, expressing his own understanding of how our experience of faith, hope and love of Jesus of Nazareth impel us to meet the other.

Chapter 2 is a laundry list of what is wrong in the world, and Chapter 3 is a laundry list of how to evangelize. They are interesting and I read them with a pen in my hand, marking the lines that were well phrased and the ideas that struck me. They are not orderly expositions about how to reform or evangelize the world. They are Francis' thoughts about what needs to be done, and he has interesting thoughts. Sometimes it felt like touching all the pickets in a fence, but that doesn't make these to-do lists less important.

Chapter 4 addresses economics and peace-making. The economics section is strong and clear: What we have is wrong and we must figure out a way to better share the wealth of the earth. The section on peace, not so much. He's more cerebral here. Once more, his analysis is very interesting, but I now was wishing for a laundry list of wrongs: possessing nuclear weapons, selling arms, using food as a weapon. Much of my work tracks weapons manufacture and sale; I would have been grateful for specifics from Francis. Nonetheless, his words are a great support for peace-making.

Francis never scolds. He is always encouraging. Even regarding abortion, he notes that we have failed desperate women by not standing with them in the face of their overwhelming trials. And he writes in the first person. As we might say of someone who is not pope, "He's got skin in the game."

The "Joy of the Gospel" is an exhortation. It's not an easy read, but it is accessible to all of us who care about living our faith today. I encourage you to read it.

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Links:

[1] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html