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A final look at 'Evangelii Gaudium'

Pat Perriello | Dec. 18, 2013 NCR Today

My last two blogs [1] have engendered some discussion about whether Pope Francis writes and speaks clearly or if he is frustratingly vague in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium [2]*. Reflecting on some of the comments and taking another look at the document in question, I believe it is true that some of what Francis says is open to interpretation. It may be that only the actions of the pope in the months ahead will give us definitive clarity on some issues. I would contend, however, that many of his statements are incontrovertibly clear, and it is these I would like to focus on at this time.

Interestingly, Pope Francis himself addresses the issue. He asks, "Why complicate something so simple?" He references biblical exhortations that call us to brotherly love, generous service, justice and mercy for the poor. He adds, "Why cloud something so clear?"

I think almost everyone would agree that if the pope is clear about anything, it is his emphasis on the poor. Therefore, I want to conclude my very limited foray into the riches of *Evangelii Gaudium* with a look at some additional -- and, I believe, powerful -- comments Francis makes on the poor and our need to do something concrete to alleviate their suffering.

Francis calls our attention to the words of Jesus to his disciples in the sixth chapter of Mark when he tells them, "You yourselves give them something to eat." He then goes on to explain his understanding of the saying: "It means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor."

He also makes some pretty dramatic statements worth taking a look at. "The social function of property and the universal destination of goods ... come before private property." Think about that a while. How about this one? "The planet belongs to all mankind" -- those "born in places with fewer resources ... does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity."

He also says feeding the poor is not enough. He stresses the need for "education, access to health care, and above all employment." In another place, he again says we need "to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare." I suspect he would not be happy with those who are willing to deny health care to millions of people.

Let me just add a couple of final quotes. Pope Francis mentions some words the system is not comfortable with, such as ethics, global solidarity, distribution of goods, a commitment to justice, the protection of labor, and defending the dignity of the powerless. "How many words prove irksome to this system!" he writes. While he says the church does not have all the answers, he makes clear that it is not acceptable to "turn to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempts to increase profits by reducing the work force and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded."

I heard one commentator say Pope Francis sounded like he was speaking at a Democratic Party convention. I'm sure Francis would discount any political motivation to his words, yet the implications are clear. While they may or may not align with policies of the Democratic Party, they are in clear opposition to those who would eviscerate the social safety net. He twice advocates for health care for all. That doesn't make him a supporter of

Obamacare, but it does mean he supports, as did the American bishops for decades, a right to universal health care. He is likely to favor an increase in the minimum wage, as he again twice speaks of a need for a living wage for all.

He is not a Marxist, as Rush Limbaugh would have it [3], but he definitely wants a change in the conversation in Washington. The prevailing stance that the poor don't deserve to be helped and that promotes a blind adherence to the rules of capitalism is definitely at odds with the vision of this pope.

I believe Pope Francis sums up the prevailing view that needs to change in a quote that has already received a lot of publicity. The pope asks, "How it can be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?"

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us we need to repent. The Greek word is *metanoia.* It actually means to change your mind. We would all do well to consider a change of mind and heart regarding our obligations as a society and a country to the poor in our midst.

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