

Vatican II and the Year of Faith: Pope Francis, the Church, and the Gospel

Like almost everyone else, I was surprised and delighted last week with the election of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio to succeed Pope Benedict XVI. So far the new Pope has struck a very clear tone of humility and simplicity. His reputation for these virtues follows him from Buenos Aires. His chosen name, "Francis," illustrates his love of poverty and the poor. And the news media have been quick to point out his many "firsts:" first Jesuit, first Latin American, first Francis.

There is something the media are missing, however. The secular news sources emphasize the *style* and *tone* of this Papacy. (A recent article in *The New York Times* used just these terms.) I have seen little about the *substance* of his teaching. But the new Pope has already emphasized that he is *not* a novelty when it comes to Church doctrine. He has repeatedly signaled his continuity with Pope Benedict. He teaches in terms drawn from the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism. And his radical simplicity is not something new or different in the history of the Church. He just believes that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not political or social ideology, is the answer to the world's needs. These themes have emerged clearly in the few public remarks the Pope has made.

The Church is not an NGO

The Pope emphasized several times in his earliest speeches that the Church is not essentially a political entity, an "NGO," or a social service agency. It is a spiritual reality tasked with the reconciliation of the world to God. At the Mass with the Cardinal Electors on March 14, he said, "if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord."

On March 16, speaking to representatives of the media, Pope Francis made this point more explicitly: "The Church is certainly a human and historical institution with all that that entails, yet her nature is not essentially political but spiritual: the Church is the People of God, the Holy People of God making its way to encounter Jesus Christ."

This is the language of the Second Vatican Council. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* famously described the Church as *The People of God* to whom all men are called. Joined together by faith and the sacraments, God's people form one mystical body of Christ. This is the primary reality in which men find the fulfillment of human need and destiny.

The Pope recognized that not everyone shares this Catholic faith. For those who have only a materialist or naturalistic perspective, it can be difficult to appreciate the Church's mission. Therefore, he urged the members of the media to try to understand the Church on her own terms, which are spiritual. He said, "[I] ask you to try to understand more fully the true nature of the Church, as well as her journey in this world, with her virtues and her sins, and to know the spiritual concerns which guide her and are the most genuine way to understand her."

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life for All Men

In teaching that the Church's mission is spiritual, the Pope places Jesus Christ at the center of that mission. On March 15, the Pope met with the college of cardinals and made this remark:

Inspired also by the celebration of the Year of Faith, all of us together, pastors and members of the faithful, will strive to respond faithfully to the Church's perennial mission: to bring Jesus Christ to mankind and to lead mankind to an encounter with Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life, truly present in the Church and also in every person.

The Pope also stressed that the message of Christ is attractive because *it is true*:

Christian truth is attractive and persuasive because it responds to the profound need of human life, proclaiming convincingly that Christ is the one Saviour of the whole man and of all men. This proclamation remains as valid today as it was at the origin of Christianity, when the first great missionary expansion of the Gospel took place.

The Ministry of the Pope

Finally, all the talk about "style" should not obscure the fact Pope Francis clearly understands and embraces the unique and authoritative ministry of the Bishop of Rome. In the service of love, it is necessary for the Church to have one visible source of unity. In his very first public address (the *Urbi et Orbi*, on March 13), Pope Francis acknowledged the essential role of the Bishop of Rome in bringing about the visible unity of Christ's faithful.

He spoke first to the Church at Rome, noting that "The diocesan community of Rome now has its Bishop." But then he turned to the world and acknowledged the unique role of the Roman Church and its Bishop. He cited the words of the second century bishop Ignatius of Antioch, who recognized that Rome "presides in charity" over all the Churches:

And now, we take up this journey: Bishop and People. This journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches. A journey of fraternity, of love, of trust among us. Let us always pray for one another.

According to Pope Francis, the papacy is essential to the constitution of the Church. But it does not exist for itself. It exists for the sake of Christ. He said:

Christ is the Church's Pastor, but his presence in history passes through the freedom of human beings; from their midst one is chosen to serve as his Vicar, the Successor of the Apostle Peter. Yet Christ remains the centre, not the Successor of Peter: Christ, Christ is the centre. Christ is the fundamental point of reference, the heart of the Church. Without him, Peter and the Church would not exist or have reason to exist.

The world now celebrates the election of Pope Francis. Writers and pundits remark on his simplicity and humility, his style and tone. But have they considered the source of his simplicity? It is the simplicity of St. Paul who said, "I had no thought of bringing you any other knowledge than that of Jesus Christ, and of him as crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2)