



Hope



e

DOWNLOAD THIS FOR YOUR CLASS TO READ: SMP.ORG/ASPIREVOL1



Francis's Vision of the Church

BY DENNIS DOYLE

Not long ago, I read a newspaper article reporting that officials in a government agency had been making decisions aimed at increasing their own power and wealth rather than serving the people the agency had been founded to serve. The story was sad but not unusual. What struck me about the article, though, was the tone. The journalist sounded shocked and outraged. Such feelings are ordinarily reserved for the editorial page. I wondered if maybe this reporter had been reading *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), in which Pope Francis laments that the majority of people accept, as usual, economic and social conditions that ought to evoke shock and outrage.

Evangelii gaudium is an apostolic exhortation, a document written by a pope in response to a synod of bishops.¹ This particular synod of bishops was held in Rome in 2012 on the topic of “the new evangelization.” Evangelization is the sharing of the good news of the gospel. The new evangelization emphasizes the need for Catholics to be evangelized themselves before they go about spreading the news. In his book-length response, **Pope Francis uses the theme of evangelization as a framework for expressing his vision of the Catholic Church and its mission in the world today.**



COMBINING EVANGELIZATION AND LIBERATION

Although some of the early liberation theologians in the 1960s may have placed political revolution above the gospel message, the most respected and internationally well-known liberation theologians, such as the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Salvadoran Jon Sobrino, the Brazilian Leonardo Boff, and many others, had balance at their core. Even in their cases, though, their sense of urgency and even outrage could, at times, obscure that balance in the eyes of other theologians and church leaders in more comfortable parts of the world.

Like Gutiérrez and Sobrino, Pope Francis hails from Latin America. In *Evangelii gaudium*, this Argentinian Pope Francis, without losing his balance, shares the urgency and outrage of the liberation theologians. **He calls for Christians to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality.** He asks, “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock

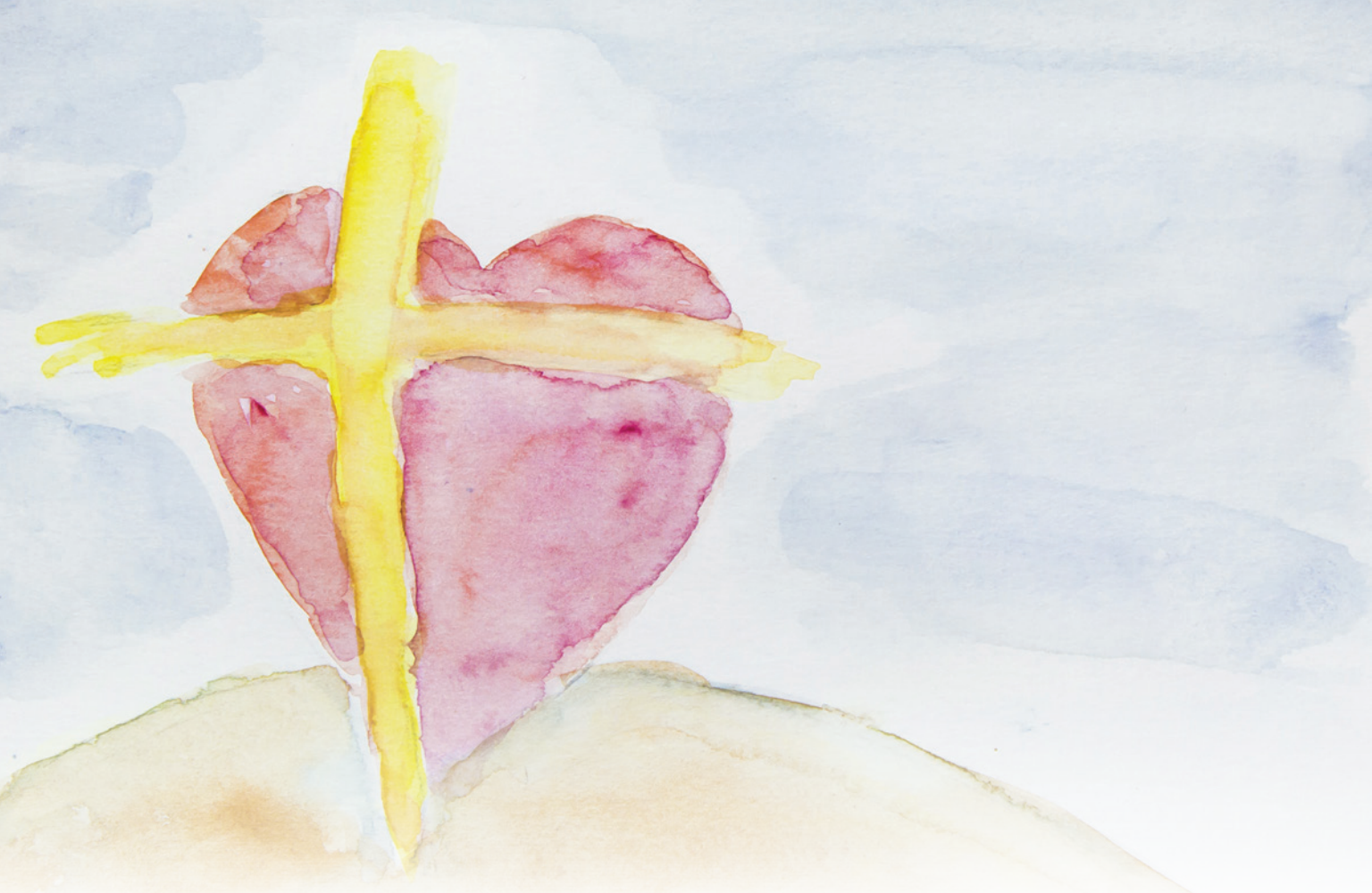
market loses two points?” (EG 53). He denounces what he calls “the globalization of indifference . . . The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase; and in the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us” (EG 54). **He declares that we are experiencing a profound human crisis in which the primacy of human dignity is being denied through the idolatry of money** (EG 55). He dismisses trickle-down theories as expressing “a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system” (EG 54). He declares that “the socio-economic system is unjust at its root” (EG 59) and that Christians should say no to the dictatorship of an impersonal economy (EG 55). He says these things without losing his simultaneous focus on the need for the personal interior transformation of each Christian.

POPE FRANCIS'S SYNTHESIS

Pope Francis ties together themes of evangelization and liberation with the word *synthesis*. His use of *synthesis* carries with it three distinct yet overlapping layers of meaning connected with the heart, authentic expression, and the integration of traditional modes of thought with modern science and technology.

All three layers of meaning in Pope Francis's use of *synthesis* are connected with the task of evangelization in the modern world. **Christians need to hold the treasure of the gospel in their hearts. They must be able to share it with others. They need to be able to understand and express their synthesis in ways that connect with modern cultures and forms of thought.**





THE FIRST LAYER: PERSONAL INCORPORATION

The first layer of meaning of synthesis describes a personal incorporation of one's Christian faith within one's heart (EG 129, 143). The very title *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), names this personal synthesis, for it is what Christians should be prepared to share with others: gospel joy. Nor is this merely a textbook faith; rather, it is the faith of a converted heart. The kingdom of heaven lives and breathes within one. It is one's treasure, because "where your synthesis lies, there lies your heart" (EG 143).

Identifying one's *synthesis* with where one's heart lies, Pope Francis alludes to a passage from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus offers important and timeless advice:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where

thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Mt 6:19–21)

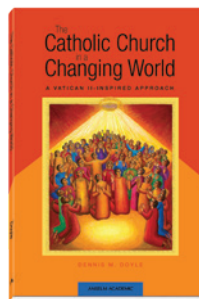
Jesus is concerned about our hearts. Where do our hearts lie? Our hearts lie where we store up our treasure. In what do we place our deepest values? On what type of gains do we focus our energies and actions? What is it that we esteem as our treasure? Later in Matthew, Jesus compares our treasure with the kingdom of heaven itself: "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field*" (Mt 13:44).

THE SECOND LAYER: AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION

The second layer of meaning of synthesis describes the authentic expression of faith that is in one's heart as it is shared with others. This meaning connects with a well-known point made by Pope John XXIII in his opening speech at Vatican II. Pope John wanted the council not to issue new doctrines, but instead, to be pastoral. He said, "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."² This distinction between the substance of doctrine and how doctrine and faith are presented echoes loudly in *Evangelii gaudium*.

Pope Francis writes, "We should not think, however, that the Gospel message must always be communicated by fixed formulations learned by heart or by specific words which express an absolutely invariable content" (EG 129). He advises preachers, "The difference between enlightening people with a synthesis and doing so with detached ideas is like the difference between boredom and heartfelt fervor" (EG 143). Christians are called to communicate their synthesis not with cold formulas but genuinely and earnestly.

*This article is an excerpt from
The Catholic Church in a Changing
World, by Dennis Doyle (2019).
Winona, MN: Anselm Academic.*



Dennis Doyle is a professor in the religious studies department at the University of Dayton. He received his doctorate from the Catholic University of America.

THE THIRD LAYER: CONNECTING FAITH TO THE WORLD

The third level of meaning of Pope Francis's use of synthesis is drawn from the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*. *Gaudium et spes* calls for "reading the signs of the times" and engaging in dialogue with people of different viewpoints. The word *synthesis* is used several times in *Gaudium et spes* to describe what is needed to address imbalances between (1) modern forms of science, technology, and culture and (2) more traditional forms of thought.

The document calls for "artisans of a new humanity" who can interweave the fruits of the various academic disciplines with an integral view of the meaning of the human person and the needs of the human family. Rather than rejecting the modern world, Christians are called to achieve a synthesis of modern and traditional paths to knowledge in the light of Christian faith. Christians need to be able to connect their faith to the concrete realities of the world in which they live. ■

THIS ARTICLE WILL CONTINUE IN A FUTURE ISSUE OF *ASPIRE*.

1. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.7089_CathChurchChangWorld_Pgs.indd.
2. "Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council," *Vatican II—Voice of the Church*, http://vatican2voice.org/91docs/opening_speech.htm.7089_CathChurchChangWorld_Pgs.indd.

The scriptural quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible, Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989 and 1993, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.





Pope Francis's Vision of the Church **Discussion Prompts**

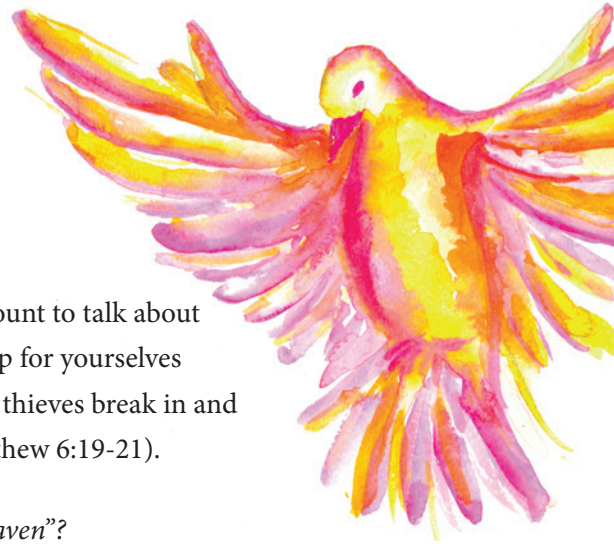
- 1.** In *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis “laments that the majority of people accept, as usual, economic and social conditions that ought to evoke shock and outrage.”
 - a. *What local and global situations can you think of that should evoke shock and outrage in us?*

 - b. *Why do you think people have begun to accept these situations as usual?*

 - c. *What can we do to transform peoples' awareness of these situations? How can we transform our own awareness?*

- 2.** The author of the article, Dennis Doyle, mentions liberation theology and names some specific liberation theologians.
 - a. *Select one of the three theologians he mentions and find a quote from that person that inspires you. Be ready to share your selected quote with the class.*

 - b. *Pope Francis shares some of the urgency and outrage of the liberation theologians. How do you see this in his words and actions?*



- 3.** Pope Francis alludes to a passage from the Sermon on the Mount to talk about synthesis in terms of personal incorporation: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Matthew 6:19-21).

 - a. What do you think Jesus is referring to as “treasures in heaven”?*
 - b. Where do you place your deepest values? What gains do you focus your energies and actions upon?*

- 4.** The second layer of meaning of synthesis talks about the authentic expression of faith. How might Christians best communicate their faith, “not with cold formulas but genuinely and earnestly”?

- 5.** In the third layer of meaning of *synthesis*, Doyle refers to the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et spes* and calls for us to become “artisans of a new humanity.” Imagine and brainstorm together what this new humanity might look like and act like. What kind of faith expression would be valuable? How would this new humanity combine traditional and modern paths?

Personal reflection: Considering your own beliefs and unique faith journey, what one idea from this article would you like to consider more?

