



Pope Francis's Vision of the Church

PART II

BY DENNIS DOYLE



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In Part I of “Pope Francis’s Vision of the Church”, author Dennis Doyle began to outline the Pope’s use of the theme of evangelization as a framework for expressing his vision of the Catholic Church and its mission in the world today. This article continues to explore Pope Francis’s vision through the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*.

SPIRITUAL WORLDLINESS

TIn addition to affirming Christians who hold the joy of the gospel in their hearts, Pope Francis discusses the problem of Christians who seem to lack true conversion. There are Christians whose treasures are stored somewhere other than in heaven. Pope Francis labels this phenomenon “spiritual worldliness,” which he sees as a great danger to the Catholic Church (EG 93–97).¹ Religious people manifest a spiritual worldliness when they seek their own glory rather than the glory of God. It can be found in people in whom “we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time” (EG 95). Such people tend to be obsessed with appearances and judgmental toward others.

Pope Francis frequently expresses annoyance with those who legalistically stress doctrine or liturgy apart from other concerns. It is clear that both doctrine and liturgy are of utmost importance to Pope Francis insofar as they remain connected with faith as lived out in the world. When integrated together, Pope Francis values—simultaneously—Scripture, doctrine, liturgy, and social justice, each in the deepest and most serious ways. Even deeper than these elements, though, is the personal synthesis that lies in the heart of each Christian. When the moment arises, Christians should be able to share their faith, not simply by repeating formulas, but by speaking from their hearts. For Pope Francis, a spiritual worldliness is what characterizes a religious person who lacks such a personal synthesis.

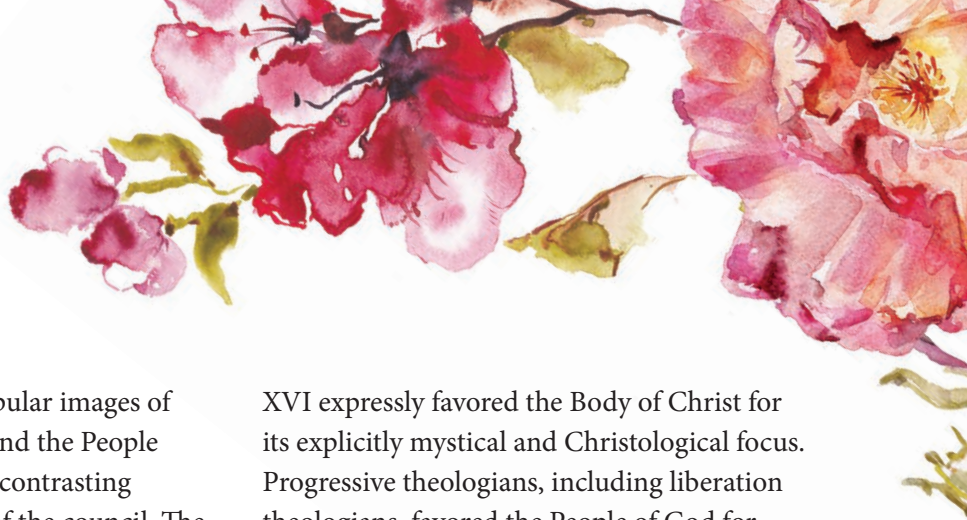
POPE FRANCIS'S DISTINCT AGENDA EXPRESSED THROUGH IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

Pope Francis frequently reaffirms traditional church teachings, including those of all recent popes. He has a distinct agenda, however, when it comes to matters of tone and emphasis. Vatican II offered a fresh approach to understanding the church with a renewed emphasis on the local community and the role of the bishop in the diocese. Later, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI judged that the pace of change after the council had been too rapid and that pressures for more rapid and radical changes regarding authority, the role of women, and sexual morality should be resisted. They put a counterbalancing stress on centralization and uniformity within the church universal.

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis explicitly expresses his preference for decentralization in matters of papal authority. When it comes to the organization of the Catholic Church in relation to evangelization, he stresses not only the diocese but even more so the parish. He describes the parish as “a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach” (EG 28). He praises also “basic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association,” although he urges them “not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish” (EG 29). Pope Francis ultimately tries to find the proper balance between the local and global when it comes to centers of power within the Catholic Church (EG 234). He wants the basic structures of the church as well as church officials to be open to change in order to serve the needs of the people.

When it comes to images and phrases used to generalize about the church, Pope Francis displays his own ecclesial preferences. *Lumen gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*) viewed the church as a mystery that could be best grasped through the use of images and symbols drawn from Scripture. After



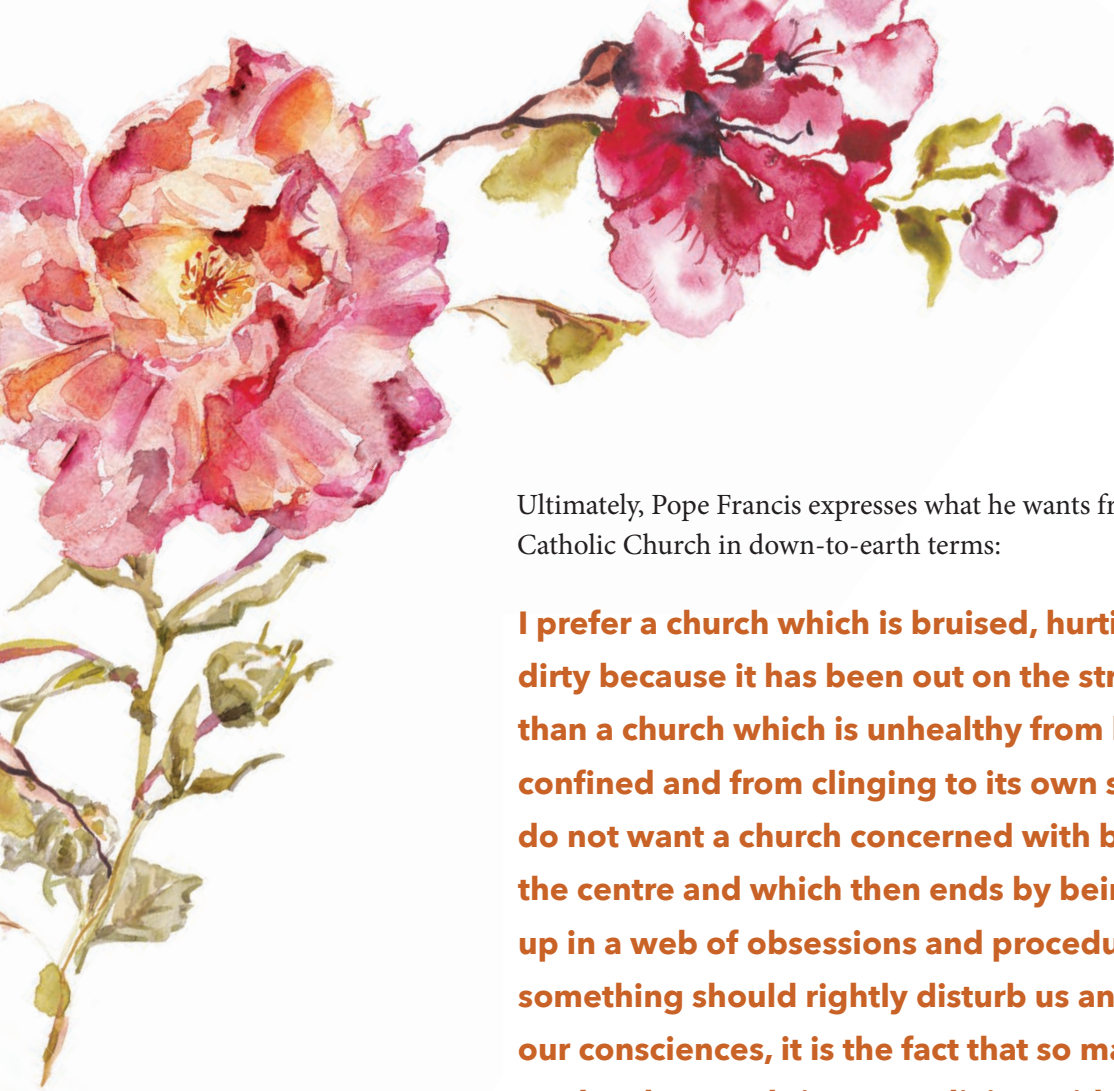


the council, two of the more popular images of the church, the Body of Christ and the People of God, emerged as banners for contrasting interpretations of the meaning of the council. The Body of Christ was embraced by conservatives; the People of God became the banner of the progressives. Popes John Paul II and Benedict

XVI expressly favored the Body of Christ for its explicitly mystical and Christological focus. Progressive theologians, including liberation theologians, favored the People of God for its historical and inclusive connotations.

These “images” represent emphasis and direction; they are not matters of basic Catholic Church doctrine. Virtually every pope comes to office with a distinct agenda that differs, at least somewhat, from that of his predecessors. This was certainly the case when John Paul II came to office in 1978 sensing a need to slow down the pace of change experienced immediately after Vatican II. It is indicative of Pope Francis’s theological direction that in *Evangelii gaudium* he uses some form of the phrase “People of God” to refer to the church about twenty-five times, whereas he only alludes to the church as the Body of Christ once. This is not to say that Pope Francis undervalues the Body of Christ image. If the document had been about the Eucharist rather than about evangelization, he likely would have used “Body of Christ” more frequently.





Ultimately, Pope Francis expresses what he wants from the Catholic Church in down-to-earth terms:

I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37). (EG 49)

Pope Francis wants the church, as the People of God, to be leaven in society. He connects the People of God with other ideas about the church, many drawn from Vatican II. The Catholic Church is to be active in cultivating its faith and in bringing in new members. It is not just to evangelize others, but to evangelize also itself on every level, including the level of the papacy. It is to be in constant mission, willing to transform itself in service to others. It is to be a place of mercy that does not judge but rather loves. It is to be a bride who is decorated with multiple cultural expressions. It is to be a mother who is open to everyone.

EVANGELIZATION AND INCLUSION

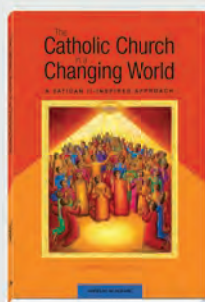
Pope Francis makes a connection between evangelization and the theme of inclusion. Christians need to share the joy of the gospel with everyone—and all need to have the joy of the gospel shared with them—including and sometimes especially, Christians. The gospel needs to be proclaimed anew to practicing Christians, those who have fallen away, and those who do not know of Christ—though Pope Francis is sensitive about respecting the existing faiths of others. Evangelization involves both the sharing of one’s personal synthesis and listening to the personal synthesis of others.

Inclusion, however, does not end with spoken words. Everyone who truly has a personal

synthesis can connect the message of the gospel with the realities of the world in which we live. For Pope Francis, sharing the message of the gospel and working toward a more just society that is inclusive of everyone are not two separate things but part of the same process.

It is in this way that Pope Francis achieves his balance between evangelization and liberation theology. Sharing the gospel connects with living the gospel, and living the gospel connects with social and economic inclusion. There is no line to be drawn dividing faith from justice.

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1. For the concept of “spiritual worldliness,” Pope Francis cites Henri de Lubac, *Méditation sur l’Église* (Paris: Désclée de Brouwer, 1953), 321. Quotes from Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*, 2013, can be found at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.