

Catholic Review Column: The Joy of the Gospel, Part 9 of 9

It was some months ago that I began this series on Pope Francis' exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel." It's been my attempt to offer a summary of this document which reflects the Holy Father's prayer, thought and style. These columns are no substitute for reading the pope's own words. I hope, rather, that they are an invitation to read the document itself.

Now we come to the final part of the pope's exhortation in which he discusses how the Gospel should impact society. Sometimes people think it shouldn't have any impact. Religion is viewed by many as private. Some believe that when the church teaches on a social issue, it is engaging in politics and that politics is off limits. Pope Francis takes a different approach. He says that if we believe that God really loves each person with an infinite love and confers on him infinite dignity, if we really believe that Christ died to restore our wounded humanity, then the Gospel has a social dimension. The Gospel in which we believe and to which we bear witness demands that we desire, seek and protect the good of others.

In fact, Jesus links our own redemption to our treatment of others. On judgment day Christ will tell us that whatever we did for the poor and vulnerable we did for him. In the Gospel Jesus tells us, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). In the Our Father we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Spreading the Gospel means creating in its wake a culture where human dignity of all, including the most vulnerable, is respected and where forgiveness, mercy and love shine forth.

To be sure, believing in the Gospel should prompt us to be personally generous to

those in need. But such personal generosity does not let us off the hook from our obligation to create a society in which people can make true progress. True progress is not just economic. It includes growth in virtue, in one's relationships with others, and especially one's relationship with God.

With this in mind the church has a well-developed social teaching aimed at the creation of a society that is just and in which everyone has the opportunity to flourish. Fundamental to this teaching is the dignity of the human person from the moment of conception until natural death. Fundamental too is the God-given gift of religious liberty, a gift given to each individual, but also including the rights of churches and church institutions to act on their convictions. The church's social teaching recognizes the importance of family in authentic human development as well as the role of church organizations, schools and other institutions that stand between the state and the individual. So also the church's social teaching delves into complex questions regarding the economy, war and peace, care for the environment and immigration, to name a few.

The pope also makes it clear that in proclaiming the Gospel and in owning its social dimensions, we must not look upon the poor as merely the objects of our largesse. Rather we should know and love the poor and learn from their experiences and their faith in our efforts to mold our lives as individuals and as communities of faith according to the Christ of the Beatitudes. And we must do more than alleviate immediate needs, important as that is. Rather, we must attend to the structural causes of poverty and other forms of injustice in our society, that is to say, we must be willing to ask whether the institutions and laws in society give the poor and the vulnerable a real chance to flourish.

This week concludes the third Fortnight for Freedom. Its theme is "The Freedom to Serve." Pope Francis makes clear in his exhortation that the church is seeking no special privileges for itself but only the right to proclaim and live the Gospel in its

entirety.

When we open our hearts to Christ and experience his love, everything changes, even this old world of which we are a part. May we truly be joyous proponents of the Gospel in our personal lives, in our families, among our friends and co-workers, and in the whole of society!