

Weaving Together the Francis Fabric

For five years in his teaching role as the Church's universal shepherd, Pope Francis has been working away at his contribution to the magisterium. One could say he's been weaving his section of the giant, ancient tapestry of Catholic teaching and Tradition. We've stood near him for this time, noticing the individual stitches of his daily Mass homilies and the distinct patterns and color palettes of his exhortations and encyclicals.

We know the individual stitches: mercy, joy, the poor. We know the patterns: Go out into the world and spread the joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013); stand in solidarity with everyone while exercising care for our common home, the earth (*Laudato Si'*, 2015); get beyond squeamishness of the messy realities of family life (*Amoris Laetitia*, 2016).

But Francis has spent the first half of 2018 contextualizing these pieces even more centrally into our understanding of the Church's mission. He did this with a flurry of activity, in the form of the release of three Vatican texts, and as a result we are able to step back and better appreciate how the parts of Pope Francis' teachings fit together in the big picture.

Of course the practical reality is that these documents are about much more than looking at a picture. They are catalysts of deeper faith, engagement and action. They comprise part of how the Church is calling on believers to live the Gospel today.

That is why this section will look at these new additions, what they can offer the faith practice of everyday Catholics and how they fit into the wider context of both what Pope

Francis has already taught as well as the overall Church mission and Tradition.

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PLACUIT DEO

Letter to the bishops from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, released March 2

As he weaves away at the teaching of his pontificate, his tools have shifted. The fine needlepoint of spiritual guidance that is a daily Mass homily is one thing. The industrial-grade loom of the Vatican's official doctrine arm is where a pope goes to make a larger, more formal pronouncement.

The letter [*Placuit Deo*](#), on "Certain Aspects of Christian Salvation," focuses on the modern permutations of two Christian heresies, neo-Pelagianism and Gnosticism. The former is the tendency to think that one can earn salvation through acts. The latter is the temptation to think salvation is a purely interior reality, something one can achieve through the right thoughts, ideas or meditative practices.

Jesuits are well known for their ability to hold two ideas in tension, and Pope Francis – a Jesuit – by way of the prefect of the doctrine congregation – now-Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria, another Jesuit – opens up the space between these two temptations in a big way: Salvation is freely given by God; we do not earn it. But we participate in it externally in a "sacramental economy."



The participation, in the Church, in the new order of relationships begun by Jesus occurs by means of the sacraments, of which Baptism is the door, and the Eucharist is the source and the summit. In this, the inconsistency of the claims to self-salvation that depend on human efforts alone can be seen. Against this, the Faith confesses that we are saved by means of Baptism, which seals upon us the indelible character of belonging to Christ and to the Church, from which derives the transformation of the way of living our relationships with God, with other men and women, and with creation (cf. Mt 28:19). Thus, purified from original, and all other sins, we are called to a new existence conforming to Christ (cf. Rom 6:4). With the grace of the seven sacraments, believers continually grow and are spiritually renewed, especially when the journey becomes more difficult."

Placuit Deo, No. 13

Placuit Deo In Brief

- Salvation is of the whole human person – body and mind – and is not attained by the strength of the individual but by the grace of God, challenging heresies of Pelagianism and Gnosticism.
- Evil is not found in the material. Everything created is from God.
- Our desires can only be truly fulfilled by drawing close to God: “No created thing can totally satisfy us because God has destined us for communion with Him” (No. 6).
- By becoming flesh yet being truly divine, Jesus’ life and sacrifice connects humanity with the divine, creating a synergy between both that defies individualism.
- Our salvation as the body of Christ calls us to evangelization.

The Church exists to evangelize the world (see Blessed Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 14), but it also serves as an ongoing source of grace to its members as the Gospel mission leads us out into the world. *Placuit Deo* adds that Christians, having cooperated with God’s saving grace in this way, can look forward with hope to the Last Judgment, at which “each person will be judged on the concreteness of his or her love ... especially regarding the weakest” (No. 13).

This weaves Pope Francis’ teaching on salvation back to his choice of name, after Francis of Assisi, for his concern for the poor, peace and God’s creation. Each of these issue areas takes us into contact with the weakest, whether the poor themselves, those traumatized and displaced by war or those whose lives have been upended by environmental degradation.

GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE

Apostolic exhortation on holiness, published April 9

In April, Pope Francis issued his third apostolic exhortation [*Gaudete et Exsultate*](#) (“Rejoice and Be Glad”) on the call to holiness. Joining 2013’s “Joy of the Gospel” and 2016’s “The Joy of Love,” commentators have noted that the pope has now effectively completed a “Joy” trilogy. But instead of evangelization or family, which those exhortations covered respectively, here Francis turned his attention to holiness.



“At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him. But it can also entail reproducing in our own lives various aspects of Jesus’ earthly life: his hidden life, his life in community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love. The contemplation of these mysteries, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola pointed out, leads us to incarnate them in our choices and attitudes.”

Gaudete et Exsultate, No. 20

Gaudete et Exsultate In Brief

- Not “a treatise on holiness, containing definitions and distinctions” but a “practical way” to “repropose the call to holiness ... in our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities” (No. 2).
- Salvation is not an individual event, but occurs in the community of the Church, including the saints, as our examples in holiness, and our next door neighbors.
- Each person has been entrusted an unique mission by God; holiness is discovering that mission and living it out in the little gestures of daily life.
- There are two enemies of holiness: Gnosticism, thinking that we can perfectly understand God, and Pelagianism, thinking that we can work our way to God.
- The Beatitudes, and reflecting upon them, offer us the keys to holiness.
- Five signs of holiness in the modern world are: being grounded in the love of God, joy, boldness, sharing in the details of community life and practicing constant prayer.
- The devil is actively working against us; to be holy, we must listen to God and practice discernment.

Like the treatment of salvation in *Placuit Deo*, Pope Francis links a central aspect of Christian life – the universal call to holiness – in a way that calls people out of themselves. The Christian is to live the mysteries of Jesus’ life by replicating them out in the world. Again ever the Jesuit, his reference to the exercises of St. Ignatius, of contemplating the Gospels by imagining ourselves as a character in the story, suggests that delving more deeply into the Gospel will inevitably lead the Christian more deeply into the world and into the suffering of others.

OECONOMICAE ET PECUNIARIAE QUAESTIONES

Letter on the global financial system, published May 17

The theme of faith lived out in concrete ways is evident in the content of the [joint letter issued in May](#) as a collaboration of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development.



It's difficult to think of something more material and less spiritual in nature than the global financial system. And yet, the document notes, decisions involving the economy have an impact on "the authentic well-being of a majority of the men and women of our planet" (No. 6).

"What is needed, on the one hand, is an appropriate regulation of the dynamics of the markets and, on the other hand, a clear ethical foundation that assures a well-being realized through the quality of human relationships rather than merely through economic mechanisms that by themselves cannot attain it. This ethical foundation needs to inform a range of persons but especially those working in the fields of economy and finance."

Oeconomicae et Pecuniariae Quaestiones, No. 1

Alongside recent offerings on holiness and salvation, global finance might seem an odd topic. But in two ways Pope Francis shows that this is anything but a peripheral topic for him. First, he made the pronouncement not only through the doctrine congregation but also through the output of two dicasteries. Second, the document anticipates the question of why the Church is even getting involved in such affairs: "In order to

liberate every realm of human activity from the moral disorder that so often afflicts it, the Church recognizes among her primary duties the responsibility to call everyone, with humble certainty, to clear ethical principles” (No. 3). It adds that “the proper orientation of reason can never be absent from any area of human activity. It follows that there can be no area of human action that legitimately claims to be either outside of or impermeable to ethical principles based on liberty, truth, justice and solidarity” (No. 4).

Oeconomicae et Pecuniariae Quaestiones In Brief

- Ethics cannot be excluded from economics.
- “No profit is in fact legitimate when it falls short of the objective of the integral promotion of the human person, the universal destination of goods, and the preferential option for the poor” (No. 10).
- Financial activity has a primary vocation to create profit through moral means and to equitably disperse capital.
 - Regulations must be set in place and favor complete transparency, creating a renewal of economics within society so that wealth is used to benefit all.
- Because everyone is united in fundamental solidarity, we cannot selfishly keep goods to ourselves.

Fitting into context

In the Church, teaching documents build on one another. Newer documents develop the teaching of older documents and open them up, sometimes in surprising ways. Older documents provide the necessary foundation and context and can focus the direction of a new teaching by showing us where we’ve been. The magisterium of Pope Francis is no different, and it’s helpful to draw quick comparisons to the major texts that came earlier in his pontificate.

AMORIS LAETITIA

On Love in the Family

The pope's 2016 [exhortation on family life](#) provides the other end of the spectrum of the concrete realities in which the grace of salvation plays out. Rather than the global reach of *Laudato Si'* (and the financial document), we see that grace plays out in realities as everyday as family life and as intimate as the love of married life. Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia noted earlier this year, in a talk on the 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, how people can reject God through what we do with our bodies. It runs the gamut, from the planet to our persons. Jesus came to reconcile all of it.



It would also be safe to say that the document stands a prime example of this pope's insistence that "reality is more important than ideas" – again, a dogged insistence that God's grace is not to be relegated to the abstract and theoretical.

LAUDATO SI'

On Care for Our Common Home



Pope Francis' encyclical on integral ecology is probably the most glaring instance of his taking on the injustice of entire systems and calling the Christian conscience to respond. And now that we have a letter on the morality (or lack thereof) of the global economy in 2018, it is as if [*Laudato Si'*](#) is shining a light on another system and showing the inescapable interconnectedness of human persons.

Environmental degradation and the global financial system aren't too far removed from one another in terms of how they fit into the pope's "throwaway culture" and "globalization of indifference," in which entire segments of society are used and abused by a powerful few. And *Laudato Si'* itself is further focused by the call of *Placuit Deo*, through which we can see that care for creation isn't an extraneous piece to the Christian mission. Rather, Pope Francis weaves it into that economy of grace that our concrete, loving witness must reflect. That's a dauntingly high bar when our society makes every one of us a contributor to environmental degradation.

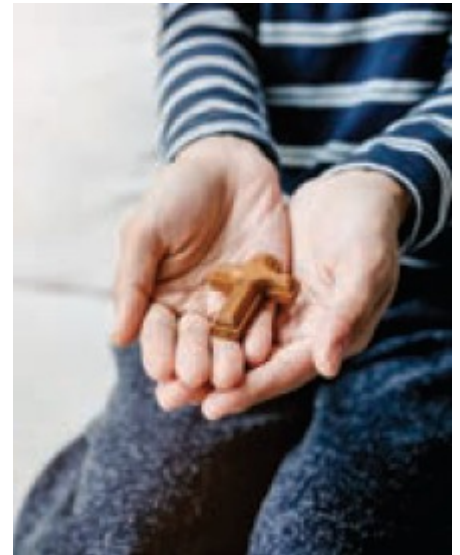
EVANGELII GAUDIUM

On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World

Pope Francis' inaugural [apostolic exhortation on evangelization](#) will

likely remain a foundational text for quite some time. Even back in 2013, the pope was bashing Gnosticism and neo-Pelagianism, and we scrambled to understand what he meant. Now, half a decade of weaving later, we see the powerful positives bound up implicitly in that double negative: A Church that is humble enough to know that it is only

cooperating in the gratuitous grace that a loving, merciful God boundlessly pours out. A Church that insists on making "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties" of the world its own (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 1), that doesn't shy from concrete, prophetic application of the Gospel to what Pope St. John XXIII called the signs of the times.



Interconnectedness is the point of the picture Francis is weaving, both in the content of his teaching and how he presents the Gospel in his ministry as pope. If heaven and earth were on opposite sides of the tapestry, Francis keeps pushing the needle through, back and forth, from evangelization to the environment, from family life to salvation, from holiness to global economics, weaving them all together seamlessly. He calls us to see how other people's problems should be a source of deep urgency, literally, for our souls.

He's spelled it out for us, and ultimately it's all summed up best with Jesus Christ. Freely given by God in a concrete, external way. Things that are incarnated get bruised. Things that are out in the world get dirty. It's been his picture all along.