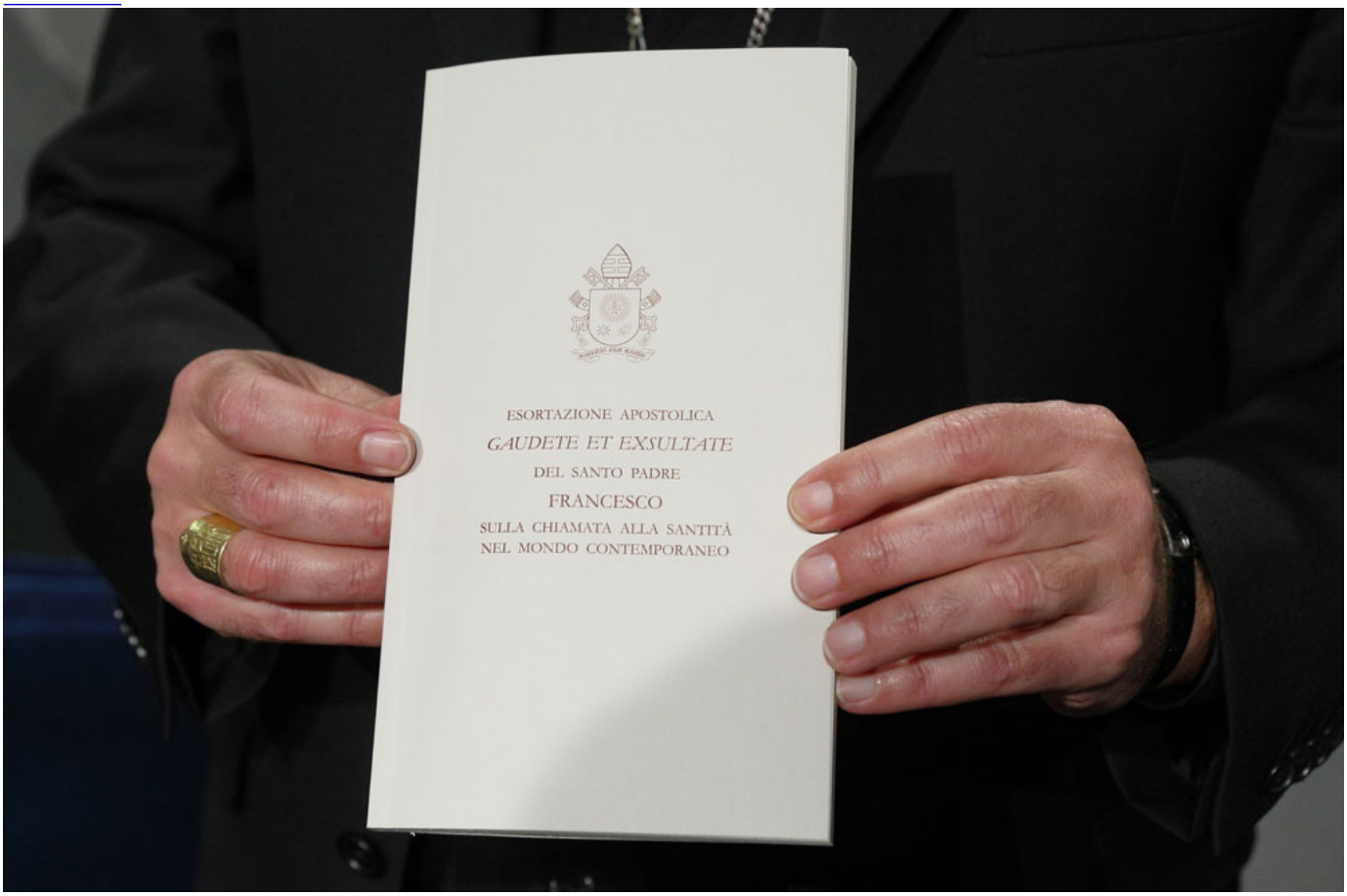
Opinion
Vatican



Archbishop Angelo De Donatis, papal vicar for the Diocese of Rome, holds a copy of Pope Francis' exhortation, "Gaudete et Exsultate" ("Rejoice and Be Glad"), during a news conference on the exhortation at the Vatican April 9. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Pope Francis' new apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* ("Rejoice and Be Glad"), released yesterday, puts the "exhort" back into exhortation. The document is one long, incisive effort to urge us Christians on. Not to be satisfied with mediocre spiritual lives, not to reduce the Gospel, not to despair of our own weakness, not to give up on God and the joy and gladness that He alone can bring into our lives and, through us, into the world.

Speaking of the "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews, Francis writes early in the document that the cloud "may include our own mothers, grandmothers or other loved ones" and that "their lives may not always have been perfect, yet even amid their faults and failings they kept moving forward and proved pleasing to the Lord." This is classic Francis: homey, grounded, encouraging.

The document strikes many of the chords Pope Francis has struck previously, but here they are interwoven into a single theme, the call to holiness in our time. In the very beginning, there is a clear stance against Christian integralism, as he cites the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (11), on the universal call to holiness, and the words he reemphasizes are "Each in his or her own way." There is a clear repudiation of gnosticism and pelagianism, two heresies he rightly sees as perennials in the life of the Christian faith. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the devil and how we should resist the urge to reduce the devil to a mere "myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea."

Last October, at a conference on *Amoris Laetitia* at Boston College, Fr. Lou Cameli said of *Amoris* that it should be read as a formation document. It is a key insight. *Gaudete et Exsultate* is explicitly a formation document, indeed I imagine it instantly becomes the textbook for adult faith formation classes the world over. And, true to the Jesuit spirituality that shaped him, Francis believes the most critical task in adult formation is discernment. He is the pope of discernment.

Taken in its entirety, this document is for all Christians, but some of the passages appear directed at specific audiences or events in the recent life of the church.

For example, in Paragraph 49, I think we can discern a response to the *dubia* raised in regard to *Amoris Laetitia*. Francis writes:

> "*Those who yield to this pelagian or semi-pelagian mindset, even though they speak warmly of God's grace, 'ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style'. When some of them tell the weak that all things can be accomplished with God's grace, deep down they tend to give the idea that all things are possible by the human will, as if it were something pure, perfect, all-powerful, to which grace is then added. They fail to realize that 'not everyone can do everything', and that in this life human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace.*"

He goes on to cite Augustine here, and elsewhere he cites Aquinas repeatedly. Hopefully, those who have their dander up about *Amoris* will see in this what they should have seen in that exhortation also: Their interpretations of Aquinas and Augustine, to say nothing of sacred Scripture, are not the only interpretations available to Christians.

In Paragraphs 6 and 15, Francis rebuffs any individualistic spirituality and insists on the ecclesial dimension of Christian holiness. Again quoting from *Lumen Gentium*, Francis notes that "The Holy Spirit bestows holiness in abundance among God's holy and faithful people, for 'it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness'." Later, he adds, "In the Church, holy yet made up of sinners, you will find everything you need to grow towards holiness. The Lord has bestowed on the Church the gifts of scripture, the sacraments, holy places, living communities, the witness of the saints and a multifaceted beauty that proceeds from God's love, 'like a bride bedecked with jewels' (*Is* 61:10)." The "me and Jesus" spirituality that continues to make inroads in certain conservative Catholic circles here in the U.S. is rejected.

Francis gives a robust, exhaustive and thoroughly orthodox, defense of the priority of grace in the life of the Christian. There is no "works righteousness" here. At

Paragraph 54, he writes a beautiful passage that finishes with a quote from St. Teresa of the Child Jesus: "The saints avoided putting trust in their own works: 'In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you empty-handed, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justices have stains in your sight'."

He then launches a direct invitation to those who have been resisting his effort to get the church to hear Jesus knocking at the door and realize he is knocking to get out, to re-think their vision of the church. He demonstrates at Paragraph 58 how it is the exact opposite of the evangelizing church called for in the previous three pontificates:

> "*Not infrequently, contrary to the promptings of the Spirit, the life of the Church can become a museum piece or the possession of a select few. This can occur when some groups of Christians give excessive importance to certain rules, customs or ways of acting. The Gospel then tends to be reduced and constricted, deprived of its simplicity, allure and savour. This may well be a subtle form of pelagianism, for it appears to subject the life of grace to certain human structures. It can affect groups, movements and communities, and it explains why so often they begin with an intense life in the Spirit, only to end up fossilized… or corrupt.*"

This "subtle form of pelagianism," so obvious in the Christian integralism that stalked Catholic theology in the first half of the 20th century, is confronted now as it was at Vatican II, by a combination of *ressourcement* focus on the significance of the Incarnation and the Christian humanism of Jacques Maritain. Francis writes at Paragraph 61:

> "*In other words, amid the thicket of precepts and prescriptions, Jesus clears a way to seeing two faces, that of the Father and that of our brother. He does not give us two more formulas or two more commands. He gives us two faces, or better yet, one alone: the face of God reflected in so many other faces. For in every one of our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the most vulnerable, the defenceless and those in need, God's very image is found. Indeed, with the scraps of this frail humanity, the Lord will shape his final work of art. For 'what endures, what has value in life, what riches do not disappear? Surely these two: the Lord and our neighbour. These two riches do not disappear!*' "

Just as when you go to a wine tasting, you are asked to identify the different smells and flavors that strike your pallet, here we taste notes of De Lubac and Levinas, of Maritain and also of Giussani, of Paragraph 22 in *Gaudium et Spes*, cited so often by St. Pope John Paul II, all brought together in a beautiful passage that could not have been written except by someone who has pastored souls for many years.

Chapter 3 is a meditation on the Beatitudes. I would ask those who charge Francis with accommodationism to read this chapter and see if they still think the Holy Father is surrendering the idea of heroic Christianity. He writes at Paragraph 65, "Although Jesus' words may strike us as poetic, they clearly run counter to the way things are usually done in our world. Even if we find Jesus' message attractive, the world pushes us towards another way of living. The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. We can only practise them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride." What part of that passage reeks of accommodationism?

At Paragraphs 96 and 97 we see a clear example of how Francis relies on the magisterium of his predecessors yet adds his own distinctive bluntness. Starting with a quote from St. Pope John Paul II's remarkable encyclical *Novo millennio ineunte* and finishing with his own bull opening the Year of Mercy, Francis writes:

> "*The text of Matthew 25:35-36 is 'not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ'. In this call to recognize him in the poor and the suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate.*
>
> "*Given these uncompromising demands of Jesus, it is my duty to ask Christians to acknowledge and accept them in a spirit of genuine openness,* sine glossa*. In other words, without any 'ifs or buts' that could lessen their force. Our Lord made it very clear that holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, for mercy is 'the beating heart of the Gospel'.*"

Similarly, his call at Paragraph 120 to accept humiliations in the spirit of fidelity to the crucified, I see no dynamics of accommodationism here, no sense that it is the mission of the Catholic Church to make excuses for the spirit of the age and reconfigure Herself to that spirit. No. In a passage that will no doubt make certain

conservatives very angry, the pope refuses to accept the Christian minimalism of those mostly concerned to keep conservative political parties in power. He writes at Paragraph 101 and 102:

> "*The other harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. Our defence of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. …*
>
> "*We often hear it said that, with respect to relativism and the flaws of our present world, the situation of migrants, for example, is a lesser issue. Some Catholics consider it a secondary issue compared to the 'grave' bioethical questions. That a politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children. Can we not realize that this is exactly what Jesus demands of us, when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome him (cf. Mt 25:35)?*"

That sounds a lot like the consistent ethic of life and of solidarity to me! More to the point, it exposes the utter hypocrisy of the culture warrior/EWTN approach to bringing our faith into the public square. Can you imagine Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia penning those words? Or Raymond Arroyo expressing them when he is doing an interview with Laura Ingraham?

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Of course, the pope's blunt words about abortion will not find their way into the speeches of many liberal Catholic politicians either, and not just politicians. Too often, so-called "Vatican II Catholics" make excuses for politicians who support abortion rights, even extreme laws such as those which permit late-term abortions, forgetting that Vatican II called abortion an "infamy" and an "unspeakable crime." And, there is a type of Catholic on the left who will recoil from Pope Francis' comments about the devil which open the final chapter on discernment.

This document is so practical, so simple in its way of reflecting upon the Scriptures and the various writings of the saints quoted, so direct in its summons to holiness, that anyone who finds himself criticizing it needs to look in the mirror. "Pope calls Catholics to holiness" should not be a controversial headline, but we live in interesting times.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up to receive free newsletters, and we'll notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.

This story appears in the **Gaudete et Exsultate** feature series. View the full series.