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A woman prays in Cali, Colombia, in this April 13, 2014, file photo. (CNS/Christian Escobar Mora, EPA)



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The first impressions of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, are in and, not surprisingly, the reviews are glowing.

And with good reason: in his reflection on the universal call of all of God's people to holiness, Francis taps into one of the richest dimensions of the Catholic imagination. That is, the notion that those who live in our midst, from our next-door neighbor to the homeless person on the street, can, and often do, reflect God's presence.

As has been the hallmark of so many of Francis' teachings, in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, he reserves special concern for the plight of the migrant, the destitute, the abandoned and the enslaved.

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But, sadly, another hallmark of Francis' theological vision also resurfaces in this latest work: his narrow view of a woman's purpose in the world.

It comes out early in the document in Paragraph 16, where Francis imagines a woman having encounters in her daily life that are also invitations to take a "step foward in holiness."

Perhaps Francis thought he was being cutting edge by using a female character in his paradigmatic example of the path to holiness, but the scenario reveals that his perception of women's lives continues to be painfully antiquated.

Those who have heard Francis' countless glorifications of motherhood and homemaking will not be surprised that the woman is a young mother who is out shopping. Her first moment of spiritual struggle comes in the urge to gossip. She declines. Then her child wants to talk with her. She is tired, but decides to listen with patience and love. When anxiety befalls her in the evening, she recalls "the love of

the Virgin Mary" and picks up "her rosary and prays with faith."

These examples may seem rather innocuous to the occasional reader of Francis, but those who listen to him regularly will recognize that he is reasserting, for the umpteenth time, his belief that women's most essential vocation, and her true path to holiness, comes in motherhood and nurturing her family.

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Another of Francis' recurring themes also emerges here: a woman's temptation to gossip. For the pope, gossip is no venial sin. In fact, he considers it to be "an act of terrorism," as he told a group of cloistered nuns during his recent visit in Peru in January.

"You know what a gossiping nun is? A terrorist!" Francis told the women, according to a Reuters report.

"Because gossip is like a bomb," the pope added. "One throws it, it causes destruction and you walk away tranquilly. No terrorist nuns!"

> "Francis, of all people, should know that gossip is a far graver problem among the men in the Curia than it could ever be among women in the supermarket."

Sure, Francis was making an attempt at humor here, but it was another example of one of his "jokes" straying uncomfortably into misogynist territory. (Remember the wisecracks about Adam's rib and the priests being controlled by female housekeepers?)

These clichés give the sense that one of women's greatest spiritual temptation is to dish the dirt. Francis, of all people, should know that gossip is a far graver problem among the men in the Curia than it could ever be among women in the supermarket.

Even when Francis speaks well of women in this document, he cannot help but see the path to holiness through a gendered lens. For example, he speaks highly of women saints whose great faith has produced reforms in the church through their "feminine styles of holiness" and "attractiveness."

These women, he writes, were lifted up by the Holy Spirit "in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked." This, of course, begs the question of when exactly the time was that women weren't treated this way. Francis seems oblivious to the fact that, in his own church, women have been mostly ignored or overlooked from the third century to the present.

To his credit, Francis does recognize, in Paragraph 3, the important witness of "our own mothers, grandmothers, or other loved ones." Unfortunately, he adds the caveat that has shattered millions of women's spirits: "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."

Like so many men before him and around him, Francis cannot rejoice in women's achievements without feeling the need to point out that we still are not perfect.

If there is any hope worth clinging to in this document, it may be Francis' acknowledgement of "unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness."

But five years into his pontificate, this small acknowledgment of anonymous women does little to advance the notion that Francis has offered any progress on the issue of justice for women in the church.

Unfortunately, as with Francis' past statements, his stereotypical characterizations of women will likely be excused away with appeals to his age or his patriarchal culture. His words about women will be held to a lower standard of expectations than all other justice issues.

But rather than give Francis another pass, *Gaudete et Exsultate* offers an opportunity to recognize that Francis' limited understanding of women and the restrictions he places on women's vocations in the world and the church have serious spiritual ramifications.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells us that the call to holiness is, at its heart, a call to wholeness. Jesus, in Matthew 5:48, calls us to "be perfect" as God is perfect. But this isn't perfection in the sense of failing to meet the highest standard. The word that Matthew uses for perfect, *teleios*, is rooted in the Greek word telos, and it really means complete or whole.

In Christian terms, our telos is that ultimate purpose to which God calls us. The path to wholeness is an ongoing process of flourishing in which God — who is the fullness of love, generosity, goodness, peace, faithfulness — becomes more and more present within us. Holiness is a journey to become fully alive, to become more completely the being whom God calls us to be.

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But Francis' prescribed path to holiness for women will remain narrow as long as he celebrates the patriarchal idea that God created men to be leaders and action-takers and women to be nurturers and servants. The path will remain truncated as long as he continues to exalt ideas that justify the rule of men over women.

Can women really achieve wholeness is an institutional church that does not see them as equal? Can women grow into holiness under a pope who insists that they are incapable of administering sacred rites? Can women reach the fullness of life to which God calls them in a church that rejects their gifts and bars them from ministering to the body of Christ?

As long as these limits remain on a woman's ability to be fully alive in her church, there will be serious limits on the extent to which she can truly rejoice and be glad.

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Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

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