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Pope Francis shakes hands with an older white cardinal. Another man is in the background

Pope Francis greets Canadian Cardinal Michael Czerny during an audience at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2019. Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, reflected on the social teaching of Francis during a panel discussion March 13, 2023, hosted by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life to mark the pontiff's 10th anniversary. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Pope Francis has brought a fresh perspective to established Catholic teaching, panelists said March 13 at an event hosted by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life to mark the pontiff's 10th anniversary.

Francis, formerly Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was elected the Catholic Church’s 266th pope March 13, 2013, after Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation. During his pontificate, Francis has emphasized themes such as caring for people and creation, an approach some liken to a "seamless garment."

At the panel event, Cardinal Michael Czerny, a Jesuit who is prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, said Francis has communicated the image of God in "many different situations where it's so badly needed."

The cardinal previously was an undersecretary of the dicastery's migrants and refugees section and reported directly in that role to Francis. He also is co-author of "Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis."

"I think one of the big challenges is to recognize that our goodness, our generosity, in helping in responding to the cry of the poor, is actually and correctly also an act of self-preservation," Czerny said. "That if we don't respond, we're not going to reestablish a common home for ourselves; we're going to tear apart what we've received from God and say, 'Sorry, we didn't really want this human life on this earth -- we prefer destruction.'"

Francis' pontificate has not been without controversy. But panelists said opposition to him is more narrow than it sometimes appears, citing data showing the vast majority of U.S. Catholics, 82% in both March 2021 and February 2020 surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, have positive views about Francis.

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Czerny said, "If you're convinced that your parish is the only reality of the church, and that everything outside of that is either irrelevant or threat, then I think a Holy Father who is encouraging our church to go to the peripheries -- by definition, outside the parish -- is disconcerting."

It's a "sad" vision for the church, Czerny said, to imagine that fidelity to the church is "keeping the walls as high as possible and not opening the door."

Joan Rosenhauer, executive director of Jesuit Refugee Service/USA, said Francis did not discover the poor, migrants or refugees, but his emphasis on them "is rooted in the tradition of the church."

Some Catholics, Rosenhauer said, "are more shaped by the culture and their political party than they are by the teaching of the church."

"And as long as that's the case, they will be free to dismiss something that is brand new, but they have to understand that Pope Francis is elaborating and prioritizing

teaching that has been a part of our tradition for a very long time," Rosenhauer said.