BOOK REVIEWS

THE CHURCH OF MERCY: A VISION FOR THE CHURCH, by Pope Francis, Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2014, 150 pp., $16.95.

Here is a revolutionary Pope, one who seeks to renew the Roman Catholic Church's mission and purpose through dynamic Christian social action. For too long, Roman Catholicism was floundering, embroiled in legal disputes, theological debates, and, ultimately, distancing itself from its flock. The Vatican began to look more like a museum of bygone glory and less like the center of a vibrant church. The election of Pope John Paul II, an intellectual framing the concepts of Personalism in Christian theology, appeared to stir something within the walls. He was a beloved leader and man of the people. Pope Benedict XVI's quiet, contemplative approach allowed the Church to deal with the problem of child abuse, internal division, and the marked decline in membership. It was a time of introspection and repentance. His successor, Pope Francis, is interested in reinvigorating the Church with a renewed purpose of reaching out to the marginalized and the poor with a bold declaration of human dignity and justice.

The Church of Mercy is a collection of 39 speeches, papers, and sermons during his first year as , divided into ten chapters, each proclaiming an aspect of the direction for the Church. The unifying strand is *solidary*. As Pope Francis observed, "The word *solidarity* is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mind-set that thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few" (p. 24). Clearly, economics is a problem Pope Francis wants the Church to address. In Address 30, entitled *The Cult of the God of Money*, the reader is questioned why objects are considered of more importance than people. Social attitudes, such as the comparison of a computer failure being of more importance than the starving person, are brought into perspective. Even when considering only humans, there is an inequality that reflects the commodification of humans. "This 'culture of waste' tends to become a common mentality that infects everyone. Human life, the person, is no longer seen as a primary value to be respected and safeguarded, especially if that person is poor or disabled or not yet useful, like the unborn child, or is no longer of any use, like the elderly person" (p.113). Economic inequity, a result of commodification, globalization, and the development of capitalism in developing countries, is something that the Church must address. Pope Francis is stepping forward with what appears to be a refined version of liberation theology. While there is dispute as to whether Pope Francis is promoting distributism or simply stating something needs to be done to alleviate the living and working conditions of the poor, the call has gone out to the Church to do something. Having served among the poor and marginalized people, he is certainly aware of the hardships under which God's people exist. It is a Christian duty to help those in need, and "each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society" (p.23). Solidarity,

however, extends beyond the problem of economics and embraces *service* to others, *accompanying* others in the search for social acceptance, and *defending* others in the search for justice. In short, *solidarity* is going to require Christians to get their hands dirty by working with, and for, others. This is the rythmic beat of the Christian's life, "the heart of the catechist always beats with this systolic and diastolic movement; union with Christ, encounter with others" (p. 17).

For Pope Francis, the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), is at the heart of what it means to be an active Christian. To do anything less marks the death of a vibrant faith-in-action.

> Whenever we Christians are enclosed in our groups, our movements, our parishes, in our little worlds, we remain closed, and the same thing happens to us that happens to anything closed, it begins to grow dank…When we think about going far away, to an extreme outskirt, we may be a bit afraid, but, in fact, God is already there Jesus is waiting for us in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded bodies, in their hardships, in their lack of faith (p. 19).

Let's face it, Roman Catholics are not known for their evangelism efforts. One does not have Roman Catholics knocking on doors and leaving pamphlets. As Pope Francis sees it, this is gong to change. "We cannot keep ourselves shut up in parishes, in our communities, in our parish or diocesan institutions, when so many people are waiting for the Gospel!...It is not enough simply to pen the door in welcome because they come, but we must to out through that door to seek and meet people!" (p. 60). The call to evangelize comes with *called to promote the culture of encounter*. The concept is simple: find opportunities to serve and build relationships, to have *solidarity* and *fraternity* in a human society, that regardless of economic or social status, places God's value on each person.

The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church is an outstanding work worthy of study by all Christians, regardless of denomination. The messages, clear and concise, have a profound depth onene recommendation is to have your pen in hand, because this is a book that demands to have underlined passages and hastily written sidenotes. Pope Francis is not a hushed, introspective pope lost behind the Vatican walls. It quickly becomes apparent he is equally at home with the cacaphony of sounds and smells of a busy third-world street as much as with the gentle chants and sweet scents of incense and candles. His call to the Roman Catholic Church is clear: "This day and age, unless Christians are revolutionaries, they are not Christians. They must be revolutionaries through Grace!" (p. 13).

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