

The papacy of Pope Francis has brought new energy and excitement to many in the Church. The Franciscan community gladly joins him in his call for a new evangelization. In this spirit, Holy Name Province has prepared a number of brief reflections on elements of Pope Francis' statements and writings, particularly "Evangelii Gaudium."

## **Is it merely a blip or is there a new church coming?**

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Who would have thought that in less than a year we would see developments in the church as those sparked by Pope Francis coming to the Chair of Peter? His words and actions are heralding a new way of being church. In his recent document on the Church "The Joy of the Gospel," he calls for a missionary transformation of the church, built on pastoral, personal and ecclesial conversion. In this he echoes his namesake, Francis of Assisi, who began his spiritual journey through personal conversion. Many, many people are eager to be a part of his effort at church renewal. Here are key developments that chart new pathways for the church.

Pope Francis describes a fresh understanding of where the church ought to be, where it ought to carry out its mission. Francis urges us to go "to the periphery," which I take to mean "go where the action is". A living church thrives where life is lived, history is made, and the Kingdom breaks in over the horizon. It is here in our midst, under our feet. He describes the church as a field hospital that takes in the broken and the wounded, cleans their wounds, binds up the broken limbs, brings healing and nourishment, and then says to them "go out and live" and we will be with you on the street. This is a call to walk the streets of our world in Dorothy Day's canvas shoes, with Francis of Assisi's open and sensitive heart. He does not want a church preoccupied with its own survival.

Pope Francis insists the church's agenda emerges by responding to the needs of the wounded, questing human hearts and our troubled world. Moreover, he describes a radical change in how we "do" church, giving *first* place to human experience. What this means is that we need to understand deeply and sensitively what is going on with people and our world. Francis says "go out and get your hands dirty, be so close to the people that you smell like them, with all of the grime of the give and take of everyday life" ... and then be alert to open up the way of Christ and His Gospel so that people can find life and meaning.

In words dear to the Franciscan heart, he pleads above all, always and forever, keep your eyes on the poor, the disenfranchised, and marginalized. They are the apple of God's eye and if you're not working for them and with them, you're probably missing the boat. Then the church becomes a kind of creepy sanctuary, a utopian Nirvana, removed from the human struggle. Francis calls this approach a "pastoral, missionary conversion."

This understanding of what it means to be church is rooted in a theology of grace and the Kingdom of God; grace, because it insists that the place of God's action is the human heart, and the Kingdom of God that sees history as the arena of God's action. Our church is primarily a community of conversion in mission to the world. It necessarily challenges us to radically rethink our lives and ministry. It marks the end of an effete clericalism and looks to a refocusing of our efforts in on to the larger horizon of where people live and die. This church is a new adventure and brings a call to all to take risks and test new approaches to minister in the field hospital that Christ set up.