

# The Theme of Communion in *Laudato Si'* and Its Implications for Ecclesiology

by Robin Ryan, CP

This essay explores the theme of communion in *Laudato Si'* and in other writings and addresses of Pope Francis. I wish to discern the connection between Francis's appeal to this theme in his ecological theology and his employment of it in his descriptions of the Church. I undertake this exploration in light of the recent critique of communion ecclesiology proffered by some theologians, and I ask whether Francis's ecclesiology meets the concerns of this critique.

## Communion in *Laudato Si'*

Pope Francis threads the theme of communion and its theological "cousin" solidarity throughout *Laudato Si'*. In the second chapter of the encyclical (titled "The Gospel of Creation") he develops a theological anthropology that intrinsically links the human person with other persons and with the rest of creation. Commenting on the Priestly narrative of creation in Genesis 1, Francis quotes a passage from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that

describes the human person as a being who is "capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself [herself] and entering into communion with other persons" (LS 65; CCC 357). The capacity for communion is essential to what it means to be human. The pope interprets the story of Cain and Abel—in which Cain is "cursed from the ground" (Gen 4:9-11)—to teach that disregard for the well-being of one's neighbor ruins one's relationship with self, others, God, and the earth. He concludes that these ancient stories in Genesis "bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others" (LS 70). This vision of the interconnection of all of the dimensions of creation pervades the encyclical.

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The section on "universal communion"—also in the encyclical's second chapter—further explores this reality of interconnection. Francis affirms that "as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect" (LS 89). He immediately extends this communion among members of the human family to the rest of creation by quoting a statement that he made in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement" (LS 89; EG 215). Further along in this same section, the pope underlines the inextricable relationship between care for our sisters and brothers and care for the natural

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world. He insists that “[a] sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings” (LS 91). Conversely, he says that “our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings” (LS 92). He concludes this section of the encyclical by reprising this principle of the interconnection of all creatures: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in a bond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (LS 92).

Francis repeatedly reiterates this principle of communion in the shadows of two destructive vices that he believes plague the lives of contemporary people: self-absorption and indifference. A pervasive attitude of individualism (which Francis links closely with self-absorption) ultimately demeans us. The pope asserts that “[o]ur openness to others, each of whom is a ‘thou’ capable of knowing, loving and entering into dialogue, remains the source of our nobility as human persons” (LS 119). Francis argues that, if we truly wish to care for our sisters and brothers and for the natural environment, individualism must be overcome by disinterested concern for others and “the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption” (LS 208). The antidote to self-absorption is solidarity, which is closely linked with communion in all of the writings of Francis. The common good of society entails “a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters” (LS 158). This includes an intergenerational solidarity that is committed to sustainable development (LS 159). Those involved in environmental education must help people “to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care” (LS 210).

Pope Francis waits until the concluding section of his encyclical to ground his emphasis on communion in Christian belief in the Trinity. Perhaps he reserves discussion of this specifically Christian doctrine to the end because he is addressing the encyclical to a wider audience. In the introduction, he says, “We need a conversation that includes everyone” (LS 14). In his reflections on the Trinity, Francis depicts the Father as the ultimate source of everything, the Son as the reflection of the Father through whom all things were created, and the Spirit as the infinite bond of love who is intimately present at the very heart of the universe (LS 238). Francis draws on the theological-mystical perspective of Bonaventure in speaking of the “specifically Trinitarian structure” of all creatures (LS 239). Rooted in the classical Trinitarian theology of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, he affirms that the divine Persons are subsistent relations. Because the Trinity is the “divine model” for the created world, the world is “a web of relationships” (LS 240). As a partaker of this web of relationships, the human person “grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures” (LS 240). In this section of the encyclical, readers can perceive the Trinitarian foundations of Francis’s repeated call to create a “culture of encounter.”

It may be helpful to note here that the Orthodox bishop and theologian John Zizioulas (Metropolitan John of Pergamon) was one of the presenters of *Laudato Si’* when the encyclical was made public, representing Patriarch Bartholomew. Though it is not clear to what extent Zizioulas’s well-known theology of communion has influenced Pope Francis, positing some influence seems plausible.<sup>1</sup> Gerard O’Connell, Vatican reporter for *America* magazine, notes that Pope Francis took a first draft of the encyclical and worked on it with some theologians. O’Connell reports, “He did not name any of the theologians that he had consulted, but it is now clear that Metropolitan John

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<sup>1</sup> Zizioulas is not cited in the notes of the encyclical, though Patriarch Bartholomew receives several references in the introductory section of the letter. For a brief discussion of the thought of Zizioulas in relationship to soteriology see Ryan, *Jesus and Salvation: Soundings in the Christian Tradition and Contemporary Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 199-201. Susan Wood, an expert in communion ecclesiology, discusses the work of Zizioulas and fellow Orthodox theologian Nicholas Afanasiev in her essay “Liturgical Ecclesiology” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz and Edward Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 138-158, at 139-142.

was one of them.”<sup>2</sup> In his comments on *Laudato Si’*, Zizioulas adduced a theme he had developed earlier in his writing on ecology—the human person as the “priest” of creation. He observed that in the eucharist the church offers to God the material world in the form of bread and wine. As these gifts are lifted up to the Creator, “human beings instead of proprietors of creation act as its *priests*, who lift it up to the holiness of divine life.”<sup>3</sup> In an earlier essay on ecology, Zizioulas wrote that the human person is the link between God and creation. Human beings are called to bring nature into communion with God and, in so doing, to sanctify it.<sup>4</sup>

In his theology of communion, Zizioulas argues that there is an intrinsic connection between being, person, and communion. What it means to be a (divine or human) person is inextricably linked with communion. The processions of the divine Persons within the Trinity—the begetting of the Son and the bringing forth of the Spirit—are expressive of “the ecstatic character of God” whose being “is identical with an act of communion.”<sup>5</sup> Zizioulas argues that without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of God: God is a personal communion of life and love.<sup>6</sup> The Triune God is the revelation of true personhood because in God being and communion coincide; this is what authentic personhood entails. For Zizioulas, “there is no true being without communion” and true being is personal.<sup>7</sup> Adducing the patristic conception of salvation as divinization, Zizioulas asserts that divinization means a participation in God’s personal existence: “The goal of salvation is that the personal life which is realized in God should also be realized on the level of human existence.”<sup>8</sup> The Holy Spirit, who is the Giver of life, “opens up our existence to become relational.”<sup>9</sup> On the human level, true being comes from a person “who freely affirms his [her] being, his [her] identity, by means of an event of communion with other persons.”<sup>10</sup> In the eucharist, Christians celebrate and enact the reality of salvation as communion with God and others.

### The Theme of Communion in Other Writings of Pope Francis

The theme of communion and solidarity permeates Francis’s other writings and his various addresses. In pursuing this theme, Francis is building on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and of the popes who preceded him. At the very beginning of *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II describes the church as “in the nature of a sacrament, a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men and women” (LG 1). This same constitution affirms that God has willed to make human beings holy “not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.” Ultimately, holiness is a communal affair. The Church, then, has been established by Christ as “a communion of life, love and truth” (LG 9). *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that the risen Christ, through the gifts of the Spirit, established a new communion among the members of his body, a bond that gives rise to mutual service and solidarity (GS 32).

The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops concluded that an ecclesiology of communion was the foundation for Vatican II’s vision of the church. The Synod said that “the ecclesiology of communion (*koinōnia*) is the central and fundamental idea of the council’s documents.”<sup>11</sup> The synod report spoke of baptism as the door

2 Gerard O’Connell, “High Level Launch for Pope’s Encyclical, in the Vatican, on June 18,” *America* online, June 10, 2015. See <http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/high-level-launch-popes-encyclical-vatican-june-18>.

3 John D. Zizioulas (Metropolitan John of Pergamon), “Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato Si’*: A Comment,” [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/18/metropolitan\\_john\\_zizioulas\\_laudo\\_si\\_give\\_orthodox\\_grea/1152356](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/18/metropolitan_john_zizioulas_laudo_si_give_orthodox_grea/1152356).

4 John D. Zizioulas, “Priest of Creation,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 273–290 (emphasis author’s).

5 John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 44.

6 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

7 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 18.

8 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 18.

9 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 112.

10 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 18.

11 Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *Origins* 15, no. 27 (December 19, 1985), 448.

and foundation of communion in the church, and it said that the communion that is experienced in the celebration of the eucharist signifies and builds up the communion of the faithful in the body of Christ. This ecclesiological vision is evident in the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* on the local church (especially LG 23 and 26). The universal church is a communion of local churches. Walter Kasper, whose thought has influenced Francis, served as the theological secretary for the 1985 synod. In his comprehensive work on ecclesiology he observes that through his work for the synod he “came to the conclusion that *communio*-ecclesiology was the central concern and the main motif of the conciliar ecclesiology.” He goes on to say, “It has become a fundamental law for me ever since.”<sup>12</sup>

Pope John Paul II connected communion and mission in his teaching on the lay faithful and on priestly formation, describing the church as a communion-in-mission (*Christifideles Laici* 32; *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 12). This ecclesiology of communion is also manifest in a well-known observation John Paul II made in his letter on the new millennium: “To make the church the home and school of communion: that is the challenge facing us in the new millennium.”<sup>13</sup>

In his in-depth study of a number of different *communio* ecclesiologies, Dennis Doyle enumerates four elements that these ecclesiologies have in common.<sup>14</sup> First, this ecclesiology involves a retrieval of a vision of church that was prevalent in the first millennium, prior to the divisions among Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians. Second, communion ecclesiology stresses the element of spiritual fellowship, or communion, between human beings and God, in contrast to visions of church that focus on its legal and institutional dimensions. This does not mean, however, that envisioning the church as communion leaves no room for structures; there must be some structures of communion. Third, this conception of church accentuates the visible unity of believers as symbolically realized through participation in the eucharist. It is thus sometimes called a “eucharistic ecclesiology.” And fourth, communion ecclesiology “promotes a dynamic interplay between unity and diversity in the Church, between the Church universal and the local churches.”<sup>15</sup> The most appropriate way to conceive of this “dynamic interplay” between the universal and the local became a well-publicized source of conflict between Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger, each of whom was operating out of an ecclesiology of communion.<sup>16</sup>

Francis has developed this theme of communion from the beginning of his pontificate, and he has connected it intrinsically with the mission of the church. For Francis, “communion” is almost more of a verb than a noun. Communion is something that we must practice—something we must do. We do that especially by entering into solidarity with others, far and near, including those who live on the fringes of our society and of the world. In a 2013 General Audience, Francis offered the following observation: “It is necessary to seek to build communion, to teach communion, to get the better of misunderstandings and divisions, starting with the family, with ecclesial reality, in ecumenical dialogue too. Our world needs unity; this is an age in which we all need unity. We need reconciliation and communion, and the Church is the home of communion.”<sup>17</sup> In a homily that Francis gave to the bishops, priests, religious, and seminarians gathered for the World Youth Day celebration in Rio de Janeiro, he said: “Be servants of communion and the culture of encounter! I would like you to be almost obsessed about this.

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12 Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, trans. Thomas Hoebel (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 21.

13 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.

14 Dennis Doyle, *Communio Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 13.

15 Doyle, *Communio Ecclesiology*, 13.

16 See Joseph Ratzinger, “Universality and Catholicity,” in *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 131-141; Walter Kasper, “The Universal Church and the Local Church: A Friendly Rejoinder,” in *Leadership in the Church: How Traditional Roles Can Serve the Christian Community Today*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 158-175.

17 Pope Francis, General Audience, November 25, 2013, in *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014), 28.

Be so without being presumptuous, imposing ‘our truth,’ but rather be guided by the humble yet joyful certainty of those who have been found, touched, and transformed by the Truth who is Christ, ever to be proclaimed.”<sup>18</sup>

Francis emphasizes that the communion that believers are called to foster in the church and the wider world entails a unity that encompasses a reconciled diversity. It is the presence and action of the Holy Spirit that creates this communion. Likening the Spirit to the “maestro” of an orchestra, he envisions the Spirit as creating a magnificent harmony amidst difference. Uniformity, he insists, kills life, while the communion created by the Spirit respects difference and in so doing breathes life into the ecclesial community. In the words of Francis, “The life of the Church is variety; and when we want to impose this uniformity on everyone, we kill the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>19</sup>

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis appeals to the reality of communion on both the personal and ecclesial levels. In the personal sphere, the summons to realize our call to communion with others serves as the antidote to individualism. He asserts that through friendship with God “we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption” (EG 8). He speaks of “the individualism of our postmodern and globalized era,” which leads to “a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships.” The ministry of the church should “bring out more clearly the fact that our relationship with the Father demands and encourages a communion which heals, promotes and reinforces interpersonal bonds” (EG 67). Francis thinks that the world is “wounded by a widespread individualism which divides human beings,” and so he challenges Christians in communities throughout the world “to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion” (EG 99). At the end of the section of the exhortation on the economy and the distribution of income, the pope seeks to assure those who may be offended by his teaching that he speaks to them with the best of intentions. He says, “I am interested only in helping those who are in thrall to an individualistic, indifferent and self-centered mentality to be freed from those unworthy chains and to attain a way of loving and thinking which is more humane, noble and fruitful, and which will bring dignity to their presence on this earth” (LG 208). For Francis the Christian understanding of the human person as a being who is called to build communion with others represents a prophetic word in the face of the individualistic mindset which is pervasive in the contemporary world.

On the ecclesial level, Francis quotes John Paul’s observation in *Christifideles Laici* that “communion and mission are profoundly interconnected” (EG 23; CL 32). He then addresses local, or particular, churches and encourages bishops to foster “a dynamic, open and missionary communion” in their diocesan churches (EG 31). Francis does not elaborate on the meaning of the phrase “missionary communion,” though the context suggests a united commitment to evangelization that utilizes the gifts of all believers and includes “pastoral dialogue” among all the members of the local church. As in the writings of John Paul II, it appears that Francis thinks that the communion which the church is impels to mission, and that the goal of mission is the building of communion within the church and in the wider world.

### Recent Critiques of *Communio* Ecclesiology

In recent theological literature, there has been some critique leveled at ecclesiologies of communion. It appears to me that this critique encompasses at least two dimensions. First, it is argued that *communio* ecclesiology after Vatican II, especially as presented in statements of the magisterium, became focused on *hierarchical* commu-

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18 Pope Francis, Homily, World Youth Day, Mass with Bishops, Priests, Religious, and Seminarians, July 27, 2013, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130727\\_gmg-omelia-rio-clero.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130727_gmg-omelia-rio-clero.html).

19 Pope Francis, General Audience, October 9, 2013, *The Church of Mercy*, 35.

nion—unity with the hierarchy of the church in faith and life.<sup>20</sup> Particularly during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, critics suggest that this focus on hierarchical communion obscured and minimized Vatican II's teaching on the church as the people of God. Second, the argument is also made that *communio* ecclesiology tends to become so concerned with the inner life of the church (and thus self-absorbed in its own way) that it neglects mission. It forgets that the church is missionary in its very nature. I will briefly examine these critiques and explore whether they apply to the ecclesiological vision articulated by Pope Francis.

In the decades after Vatican II, there has sometimes been a conflict between those who focused on the council's view of the church as the people of God and others who espoused communion ecclesiology, which usually highlighted the biblical image of the Body of Christ. Doyle notes that, among the communion ecclesiologists whom he studied, some "have explicitly stated that the Mystical Body of Christ image should have priority over what they call the more 'sociological' People of God." He lists Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, and John Paul II as among this group.<sup>21</sup> In a recent essay that includes a strong critique of *communio*-ecclesiology, Australian theologian Neil Ormerod cites Doyle's observation about theologians who have downplayed the notion of the church as the people of God.<sup>22</sup> Ormerod suggests that the tendency to dismiss the people-of-God concept as "sociological" leads to an ecclesiology that "tends to reinforce the status quo, and fails to give adequate accounts of power and social change." These *communio* ecclesiologies "tend to paper over tensions and conflicts, and when they arise, those who 'cause' them can be accused of 'breaking *communio*' with the church at large." As an example of this dynamic, Ormerod recalls Rome's removal of the Australian bishop William Morris from the office of bishop for statements he made about married and women clergy.<sup>23</sup>

Even Walter Kasper, who devotes a substantial section of his volume on ecclesiology to the concept of the church as the people of God, is very careful to distinguish a "theological" understanding of this concept from a "sociological" rendering of it. In his discussion of the biblical concept of the people of God, Kasper emphasizes that the Bible "does not use the sociological-national term *dēmos*, which is found in language regarding democracy."<sup>24</sup> Rather the biblical word is "the salvation-historical term *laos* in the sense of the people chosen by God and set apart from all other nations, or more precisely from the heathen nations (*ethnoi*; [sic])."<sup>25</sup> Kasper refers to sociological and political misconstruals of the concept of the people of God in the history of the church, such as that of Eusebius of Caesarea, who identified God's people with the Constantinian empire. In his interpretation of the church as the people of God, Kasper excludes "a democratic understanding which does not want to understand the term 'people' in the biblical sense of *laos* but in the profane sense of *dēmos*, and which tries to deduce from that some kind of democratization of the Church."<sup>26</sup>

The argument that communion ecclesiology minimizes mission is vigorously proffered by Ormerod and hinted at in a more nuanced way by Stephen Bevans. In an essay in which he offers the building blocks for a "missionary ecclesiology," Bevans argues that the communion ecclesiology favored by John Paul II and Benedict XVI is

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20 See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," (28 May 1992). [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_28051992\\_communiois-notio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communiois-notio_en.html).

21 Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 18.

22 Neil Ormerod, "A (Non-*Communio*) Trinitarian Ecclesiology: Grounded in Grace, Lived in Faith, Hope and Charity," *Theological Studies* 76 (September 2015): 448-467.

23 Ormerod, "A (Non-*Communio*) Trinitarian Ecclesiology," 455. The reference to Morris is found in n. 34.

24 Kasper, *The Catholic Church*, 120.

25 Kasper, *The Catholic Church*, 120.

26 Kasper, *The Catholic Church*, 120.

different from the missionary focus of Pope Francis.<sup>27</sup> As we will see below, however, Bevans strives to integrate *communio* and *missio* in his ecclesiological proposal. Ormerod is more strident in his critique. He argues that *communio* ecclesiologies “are generally fairly weak on the question of mission.”<sup>28</sup> He quotes a statement made by the distinguished missiologist Louis Luzbetak: “To get lost in the joy and blessing of Christian fellowship means to forget the kingdom for which the church exists; it is also to forget the church’s mission.”<sup>29</sup> Ormerod proceeds to argue that, while we may experience a taste of the full communion with one another and God that is the goal of mission, “the mission draws us out of the intimacy of communion and into the struggle to actualize the kingdom, a struggle that transforms both the world and the church.”<sup>30</sup> Like communion ecclesiologists, Ormerod also envisions the church as the icon of the Trinity, and thus he aspires to construct a Trinitarian ecclesiology. But his focus is on the two missions of the Son and the Spirit, which are grounded in the two Trinitarian processions of the Son from the Father and the Spirit from the Father and the Son. The church participates in the missions of the Son and the Spirit. This approach, he thinks, foregrounds *missio* as the primary task of the church and the very reason for the church’s existence.

### ***Communio* in Francis in the Light of the Critiques**

Is Francis’s appeal to the notion of *communio* in his ecological theology and his ecclesiology susceptible to these two critiques of ecclesiologies of communion? Does he downplay Vatican II’s teaching on the church as the people of God? Do his repeated allusions to *communio* as a reality and a task lead him to obscure the missionary nature of the church?

Juan Carlos Scannone, a prominent Argentinian theologian who has influenced the thought of Pope Francis (he is cited in a note to chapter four of *Laudato Si’*), has written about the development of the *teología del pueblo* in Argentina after Vatican II.<sup>31</sup> He argues that this form of theologizing has made an impact on Francis. Scannone describes the way in which this method of theology grew out of the work of a commission comprised of bishops, theologians, and experts in pastoral ministry after the council. It drew on the theology of the people of God contained in the conciliar documents. This “theology of the people” centered on the dialogue between theology and culture, particularly the cultural expressions of ordinary people. Though distinct from liberationist theology, exponents of *teología del pueblo* were closely attuned to the concerns of the poor and their struggle for justice and peace. As Scannone puts it, these theologians realized that the option for the poor and the option for culture coincided.<sup>32</sup> Scannone proceeds to elucidate the ways in which the influence of the *teología del pueblo* is evident in the writings of Pope Francis, particularly in *Evangelii Gaudium*. He highlights the pope’s frequent use of the term “God’s faithful people.” In addressing the role of charisms in the church, Francis speaks of the ways in which these gifts enrich “the life of God’s holy and faithful people for the good of all” (EG 130). And Scannone explores Francis’s discussion of culture and the inculturation of the gospel. Scannone reports that when Bergoglio was a seminary rector in 1985, he organized the first congress in Argentina on the evangelization of culture and the inculturation of the gospel.<sup>33</sup>

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27 Stephen Bevans, “Beyond the New Evangelization: Toward a Missionary Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century,” in *A Church with Open Doors*, 3-22, at 12.

28 Ormerod, “A (Non-*Communio*) Trinitarian Ecclesiology,” 456.

29 Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 337; cited by Ormerod on 456.

30 Ormerod, “A (Non-*Communio*) Trinitarian Ecclesiology,” 457.

31 Juan Carlos Scannone, “El Papa Francisco y La Teología del Pueblo,” *Selecciones de Teología* 54 (2015): 39-50.

32 Scannone, “El Papa Francisco,” 40.

33 Scannone, “El Papa Francisco,” 44.

Scannone's account of the impact that the Argentinian "theology of the people" had on Francis is validated by a careful reading of the first part of the third chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Emphasizing that it is the entire people of God that proclaims the gospel, Francis says that the church "is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way to God" (EG 111). He asserts that "[b]eing Church means being God's people, in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love" (EG 114). The people of God is incarnate in all the peoples of the earth, with their distinctive cultures. Acknowledging that grace presupposes culture, Francis affirms that "God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it" (EG 115). Cultural diversity is not a threat to the unity of the people of God because the Holy Spirit "builds up the communion and the harmony of the people of God" (EG 117). Drawing on the document of CELAM produced at Aparecida, the pope highlights the importance of attending to popular piety, even quoting Aparecida's reference to "the people's mysticism" (EG 124).<sup>34</sup> Francis observes, "Popular piety enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on" (EG 123). Francis's approach to culture and especially to popular piety is a clear outgrowth of his attention to the teaching of Vatican II about the church as the people of God.

The pope's appreciation for this conciliar teaching is also evident in his emphasis on dialogue in the church and his references to the *sensus fidei*. His appreciation for the importance of dialogue became clear in his opening address at the synod on the family, where he encouraged honest and open dialogue among the participants.<sup>35</sup> Richard Gaillardetz takes note of a statement Francis made in his well-publicized interview with editors of Jesuit magazines. Francis said, "When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit."<sup>36</sup> Gaillardetz comments on Francis's statement by stating, "Francis is saying that we can be confident of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the bishops *on the condition that they are open to listening to others.*"<sup>37</sup> When addressing the duty of the bishop to foster a sense of missionary communion in the diocesan church, Francis says that the bishops will have to encourage the means of participation proposed in the *Code of Canon Law* "and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear" (EG 31).

This call to pastoral dialogue in the church is given a doctrinal basis in Francis' appeal to the teaching of Vatican II about the *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God (LG 12). The council's teaching that the whole body of the faithful has an anointing that comes from the holy one means that "[t]he people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*" (EG 119). The presence of the Spirit within the community "gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression" (EG 119). Among those who share in the *sensus fidei* are the poor who, as Francis insists, have much to teach the rest of the church. "Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them" (EG 198). This teaching about the *sensus fidei* of the entire people of God is not, of course, new with Francis. Nevertheless, given the broader context of his summons to foster dialogue within the church at all levels, his appeal to the *sensus fidei* gives this conciliar doctrine a prominence that it did not have during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It also shows that his *communio*-ecclesiology integrates a strong affirmation of

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34 See Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document*, June 29, 2007, 262.

35 Greeting of Pope Francis to the Synod Fathers During the First General Congregation of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 6, 2014), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141006\\_padri-sinodali.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141006_padri-sinodali.html).

36 Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis," trans. Massimo Faggioli, Sarah Christopher Faggioli, Dominic Robinson, Patrick Howell, and Griffin Oleynick, *America* 209, no. 8 (September 30, 2013), 22, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

37 Richard Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 122 (emphasis author's).

Vatican II's teaching about the church as the people of God. And it reflects a dynamic view of church that does not simply reinforce the status quo.

Ormerod's assessment of *communio* ecclesiologies as generally weak on the question of mission does not seem to be applicable to the ecclesiological vision articulated by Francis in his writings thus far. It has become clear that Francis wants to reinvigorate the church with a missionary impetus. His use of the term "missionary discipleship"—borrowed from the Aparecida document he helped to draft as Archbishop of Buenos Aires—makes that evident. Gaillardetz observes that Francis's use of that term emphasizes "the fundamentally centrifugal thrust of the church's activity and the need for Christians to enter into a deeper and more profound solidarity with the world."<sup>38</sup> Gaillardetz argues that Francis's "emphasis on the centrifugal impetus of the church marks an orientation that was not nearly as pronounced with Pope Benedict."<sup>39</sup> Bevans argues similarly, concluding that what Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* about mission "seems to lead the church beyond the [2012] synod's theme of new evangelization toward a vision of the church as going forth as a 'community of missionary disciples.'"<sup>40</sup>

This centrifugal impetus of the church is evident in many of Francis's addresses and writings. Francis views Jesus as someone who was always on the move, always going to the next town or village to proclaim the Good News and to encounter others, even when it was risky to do so. In a homily to the bishops of Brazil he said, "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! To go out as ones sent. It is not enough simply to open the door in welcome because they come, but we must go out through that door to seek and meet the people."<sup>41</sup> The pope acknowledges that this going forth to the world, especially to the "existential peripheries" of society, is risky. But he says that he would "prefer a thousand times over a bruised church to an ill church."<sup>42</sup>

This missionary impulse permeates *Evangelii Gaudium*. At the beginning of the first chapter of this apostolic exhortation, Francis observes that, in fidelity to Jesus, "it is vitally important for the church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear" (EG 23). The pope dreams of a "missionary option," a missionary impulse that will transform everything else in the church—customs, practices, schedules, language, and structures. Known for his efforts to reform the Vatican Curia, Francis asserts that the renewal of the church's structures must be undertaken with a view to making them "more mission-oriented" (EG 27). In the section of the document where he discusses the church as the people of God, Francis observes, "In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples" (EG 120). He interprets the gospel passage about Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 as the story of someone who became a missionary immediately after her encounter with Jesus. So he can say, "Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are 'disciples' and 'missionaries,' but rather that we are always 'missionary disciples'" (EG 120). Thus for Francis the following of Jesus necessarily entails being sent forth by Jesus to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. One dimension of this evangelizing task of the disciple involves an activity we have already discussed—solidarity. Commitment to solidarity with others, particularly the poor and other marginalized people, is integral to the mission of the church. Francis teaches that solidarity means more than "a few sporadic words of generosity"; it entails "the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few" (EG 188). By entering into solidarity with the poor and other suffering people we are evangelizing, even

38 Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council*, 116.

39 Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council*, 117.

40 Bevans, "Beyond the New Evangelization," 10.

41 Pope Francis, Homily for the Mass with the Brazilian Bishops, July 27, 2013, *The Church of Mercy*, 60.

42 Pope Francis, Address to the Participants at the International Congress on Catechesis, September 27, 2013, *The Church of Mercy*, 15.

though solidarity is not the totality of evangelization. Francis has sought to embody this evangelizing activity of solidarity through many symbolic actions, such as celebrating Holy Thursday liturgy with persons who are incarcerated and traveling to the island of Lampedusa to highlight the plight of refugees.

In his essay outlining a missionary ecclesiology, Stephen Bevens says, “The challenge of a missionary ecclesiology is to keep a balance between the ‘centrifugal’ nature of the church lived out in mission and a more ‘centripetal’ aspect of the church expressed in the understanding of the church as communion. One might characterize the church, a community of missionary disciples, as a ‘communion-in-mission,’ a dynamic interplay of communion and mission.”<sup>43</sup> I believe that, thus far in his pontificate, Pope Francis has endeavored to do precisely what Bevens describes. The “centripetal” movement toward communion, present in his ecological theology and his ecclesiology, is infused with an abiding sense of mission -- with a “centrifugal” impetus. Francis’s ecclesiology, then, is not characterized by the kind of inward-looking obsession that Ormerod criticizes in other *communio* ecclesiologies.

## Concluding Remarks

We have seen that the theme of communion is central to the thought of Pope Francis in the areas of ecology, theological anthropology, and ecclesiology. In *Laudato Si’* Francis integrates the capacity to enter into communion with others into his description of the nature and the nobility of the human person. He also extends this capacity for communion beyond other humans to the whole of creation, highlighting the intrinsic connection between care for other human beings and care for the earth as our common home. For Francis, the call to communion is a prophetic word in a world plagued by a spirit of individualism and indifference. Ultimately, the impulse toward communion, which is intrinsically human, is grounded in the reality of the Creator—the Triune God who is a personal communion of life and love.

The themes of communion and solidarity permeate Francis’s writings and addresses, playing an especially central role in his vision of church. His *communio* ecclesiology is rooted in the teaching of Vatican II and is related to the thought of his predecessor popes. At the same time, the ecclesiology of Francis is also characterized by a vibrant acknowledgment of the church as the pilgrim people of God. As such, it recognizes the need for ongoing dialogue in the church at all levels, and it pursues reform in the structures of the church. While Francis does not propose a view of the church as a democracy, he does insist that every voice in the church must be heard. Moreover, Francis’s *communio* ecclesiology embraces a strong sense of mission; he adheres to the teaching of *Ad Gentes* that the church is “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). In Francis’s church every member is “sent forth” to proclaim the gospel. Thus, he envisions the church as a communion-in-mission.

There are at least two current pastoral realities that suggest to me the need to pay close attention to the “communion” dimension of “communion-in-mission”—even in the face of theological critiques of *communio* ecclesiology. These pastoral concerns may relate more readily to the church in the United States than to other sectors of the world. The first is the growing number of Catholics, especially young adult Catholics, who no longer participate in the life of the church with any regularity.<sup>44</sup> This is a complex phenomenon that does not admit of a simple explanation. Nevertheless, one of the causes for this movement away from participation that is sometimes cited is the experience of a lack of “communion” in parish and diocesan settings. Pope Francis himself alludes to this experience in *Evangelii Gaudium*, advertent to the spread of fundamentalist religious movements, which attract a significant

<sup>43</sup> Bevens, “Beyond the New Evangelization,” 14.

<sup>44</sup> See the report of the Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. For an in-depth study of the religious practices of young adult Catholics in the U.S., see Christian Smith, Kyle Longest, Jonathan Hill, and Kari Christoffersen, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

number of Catholics. Francis says that this is due, at least in part, “to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems” (EG 63). He notes that in many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach. In the face of the exodus of younger Catholics from the church, it appears that the challenge of evangelization includes the need to create a more vital spirit of *communio* at the local level.

Second, and not unrelated to the first concern, the phenomenon of the mostly younger “neoconservative” priests now ministering in parishes as pastors or parochial vicars also gives one cause to reflect on communion at the local level. It appears to me that the approach of many of these priests to the practice of the faith, and their view of what it means to be truly Catholic, reflects an individualistic spirituality. While these pastoral leaders certainly urge Catholics to gather in church for worship, they seem to be focused most intensely on individual reception of the sacraments and forms of personal devotion. Celebration of the sacraments and personal devotion are both essential to Catholic identity. But it seems that this focus can become a narrow one that minimizes the call to build vital communities of faith at the local level—communities that create a sense of belongingness.

I believe that Francis teaches us that a whole and balanced view of the church necessitates both the centripetal movement of *communio* and the centrifugal impetus of *mission*.