

## An Examen in the Spirit of Pope Francis

SEP 15, 2015 PATRICK KELLY, S.J.

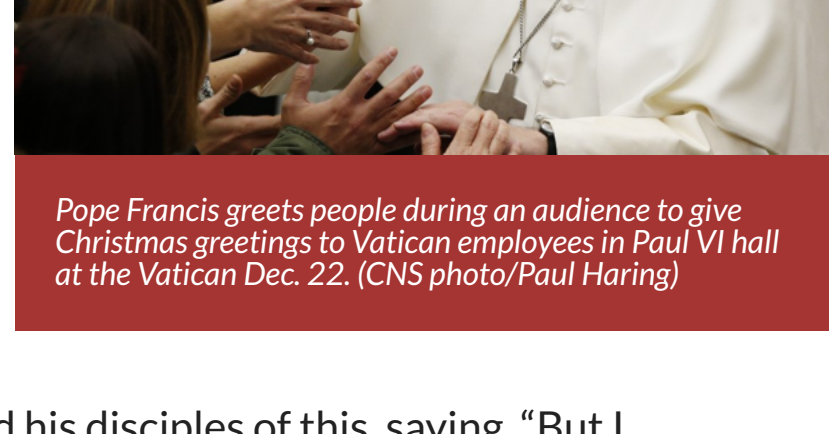
*A beautiful homily, a genuine sermon must begin with the first proclamation, with the proclamation of salvation.... Then you can draw a moral consequence. But the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives. Today sometimes it seems that the opposite order is prevailing. — Pope Francis*

With these words, published in an interview in *America* (9/30/13), Pope Francis opened up a whole new way of thinking about what it means to be Catholic. He reminded us that an encounter with the saving love of God is the essence of our faith, more fundamental than anything else. Commentators in the United States took particular notice of his saying in the interview that it is not necessary to talk about abortion, same-sex marriage and contraception “all the time.”

Francis is visiting the United States this month, and the 2016 presidential campaign is already underway. Perhaps this is a good time to do an Ignatian examen on our personal lives and common experience. But what would we attend to if, as Francis says, we should not focus only on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage and contraception? The following are some suggestions that come from themes in the pope’s writings and addresses and that seem to have a particular relevance for us.

### Joy

It is significant that the first major document that Pope Francis authored was titled “The Joy of the Gospel.” Francis embodies this joy, particularly when he is with the people of God. He has criticized an approach to the Christian faith that is always in a lenient mode and never arrives at the joy of Easter. We don’t have to always look like we are coming back from a funeral, he says, or be “sourpusses.” The joy of the Gospel flows, Francis says, from an experience of “the infinite love of God, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ” (JG, No. 7). Francis reminds us that for people of faith, even experiences of suffering and loss cannot extinguish joy. This is because Jesus, who himself experienced suffering and death



*Pope Francis greets people during an audience to give Christmas greetings to Vatican employees in Paul VI hall at the Vatican Dec. 22. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)*

on a cross, is with us in our suffering. Near the end of his life, Jesus reassured his disciples of this, saying, “But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16:22).

**Examen:** Do I consider joy to be central to my Christian faith? If so, how and in what circumstances have I experienced this joy? Is my parish, school or university a place of joy, rooted in an encounter with God’s love in Christ? Is there joy in our family life? Do we take time to pray together, to recreate, laugh and play with our children? What are the dynamics in our parish, school or civic contexts that can drain us of the joy that is rooted in an experience of God’s saving love?

### Wealth Inequality

Pew Research Center data shows that the gaps between America’s upper-, middle- and lower-income families have reached their highest levels in 30 years. In 2013, the median wealth of upper-income families (\$639,400) was nearly seven times the median wealth of middle-income families (\$96,500). And upper-income families had a median net worth that was nearly 70 times that of lower-income families. During these times of stagnation or hardship for most Americans, minorities suffer more than the rest. According to 2007–2011 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the highest national poverty rates were for American Indians and Alaska Natives (27.0 percent) and for African-Americans (25.8 percent); it was lowest for those who identify as white (11.6 percent).

In the United States a single person earning an income of about \$30 per day is considered to be living in poverty. It is stunning to realize that for most people in the world, \$30 per day would be 10 times what they are currently living on. Worldwide, more than one billion people are now living on \$1.25 a day or less, and about three billion people live on less than \$2.50 a day. According to UNICEF, 6.3 million children under the age of 5 died in 2013—that is, 17,000 children each day—and over half of these deaths were due to undernutrition.

**Examen:** Do I tend to succumb to a narrow market-oriented mentality in my life, in which everything is evaluated solely in market terms? Or do I make use of principles from my faith, such as the dignity of the person, the common good and love for the poor to provide a context within which to think about economic realities? Do my employees earn a just wage, on which they can reasonably raise a family? Am I aware of the extent of poverty in the world, which many of my brothers and sisters in Christ are experiencing? Do I let this touch my heart and move me to action, or have I become indifferent to their plight?

### Pride and Prejudice

As Ignatius points out, wealth—and the honor from the world that automatically comes with it—leads to “surging pride.” In the pride system, people with money and power are important. Minorities, poor people (especially from other countries), immigrants, the disabled, the elderly and the unborn don’t count. They become, as Francis says, “disposable” in a throwaway culture. We are indifferent to their plight.

We are in the middle of a much-needed conversation about race relations in this country, a conversation not made less urgent by the election (twice) of an African-American president. Because of new video technology, we now have direct evidence of a deeply troubling pattern of police mistreatment and unwarranted shootings of African-Americans. This spring, nine African-Americans were murdered at a Bible study at Emanuel Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Scandalously, we have had to be reminded in the context of these events that “Black Lives Matter.” The mass shooting in Charleston also raised, once again, the issue of gun control. We were reminded that, even in the face of repeated mass shootings, including some of very young children, our political leaders cannot muster the courage to enact laws that will keep our citizens safe.



*Migrants from Guatemala deported from the U.S. arrive at La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City, July 10. A growing wave of families and unaccompanied minors fleeing Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are streaming by the thousands into the U.S. (CNS photo/Pakal Koban, Reuters) (July 14, 2014)*

One of the most dramatic stories of the past few years concerned children trying to gain entrance at our border after fleeing gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. These young boys were literally running for their lives. But we tend to view the presence of these children only in legal or national security terms, rather than as the human and refugee crisis that it is. Candidates in the upcoming presidential election have not mentioned this human crisis yet, nor offered proposals for working with the countries of origin. Instead, most of the emphasis has been on tighter border security, with some Republicans going so far as to demand a literal wall across our entire border with Mexico.

**Examen:** Is my identity connected to how much money I have and the honor and esteem in which I am held as a result? Do I harbor prejudicial attitudes toward people of other races? What happens in my heart when I see videos of police mistreating or unjustly shooting African-Americans? As a Catholic, do my pro-life commitments extend to issues of gun control? Do I have compassion for the children, many of whom are my fellow believers in Christ, fleeing gangs in their home countries? Or does my compassion end at the borders of my own country?

### The Environment

While many of Francis’ words are challenging, his encyclical on the environment may ask the most of U.S. Catholics, because he is inviting us to think in a very different way about our faith. In the spirit of St. Francis, the pope is exhorting us to pay attention with a new kind of reverence to the earth and all the creatures that inhabit it. He is asking us to notice the damage we are doing to the earth and to other species, and the way this damage is related to our patterns of production and consumption. He points out that the poor, who often live off the land and are dependent on agriculture, fishing and forestry, have nowhere else to turn when rivers and lakes are polluted, or when there is massive deforestation. According to Francis, the wealthy nations who bear most of the responsibility for these problems owe the poor nations an “ecological debt.” He is inviting us to ask for the grace to hear the “cry of the land” and the “cry of the poor.”

**Examen:** Do I provide opportunities for my children to experience the beauty and wonder of God’s creation, through camping, hiking, swimming? Can I perceive the risen Christ, “in whom all things consist” (Col 1:17), in creation drawing all things to himself?

Are there ways I can live more simply, out of care for the environment and in solidarity with the poor? Do I view the earth and its creatures selfishly, only in relation to what I need and want at the moment? Am I aware of how environmental degradation affects the poor?

### Clericalism

Judging from where he directs his strongest criticisms, Francis seems to think priests, bishops and cardinals are the ones most in need of an examen. “I believe this is a time for mercy,” he said in an interview after World Youth Day in 2013, given “the not good witness of some priests.” He spoke of “the problem of clericalism, for example, which have left so many wounded, so many wounded,” adding, “The Church, which is mother, must go and heal the wounded, with mercy.” If we think that entering the priesthood or religious life somehow automatically makes priests holy, the recent history of the church in the United States should more than give us pause. If priests are not attentive to Jesus’ way and prayer, it is very easy to instead carry the values “of the world” into religious life or the parish. Francis calls this “spiritual worldliness.”

Clericalism is a male phenomenon, and a part of its dynamic is to exclude women. Francis has repeated what John Paul II said about women in the priesthood not being open to discussion. He has emphasized the importance of having women in important positions in the church, where decisions are being made. Our current reality as a church in the United States helps us to appreciate the urgency of this matter. One can assume that if there were mothers present at diocesan decision-making meetings in the early days of the sexual-abuse scandal, there would have been more emphasis on putting the protection of children first, rather than the protection of the image of the church’s hierarchy.

**Examen:** As a priest or male religious: Do I fundamentally understand my life and ministry in terms of status and power? Or as a call to humble service with Jesus, especially to the poor and those on the margins of society? Am I paying attention to the gifts of women in my parish or diocese and thinking about how the Spirit is inviting them to be of service to the body of Christ in meaningful, decision-making roles?

**As a layperson:** Do I rely in an overly deferential way on the parish priest, keeping me from living out my own baptismal call to be priest, prophet and king?

### Sexuality

Everyone knows that priests and bishops in the United States have failed in a dramatic fashion in this area and have caused untold harm to young people. With the sexual-abuse scandal, we have “hit bottom” (as they say in 12-step programs) as a religious institution. We have been experiencing desolation as a community. The way we had been doing things is broken, not working. But there can be a grace in hitting bottom and in the experience of desolation—if priests and bishops have the openness and humility to learn from it. With respect to sexuality itself, we have learned that what is needed is integration of sexuality, and this is not easy. In order for sexuality to be integrated meaningfully into a life of love and service, it must first be accepted. In pre-Vatican II seminaries it would have been difficult for gay seminarians to accept their sexuality, given that it was not a possible to talk openly about being gay in such an environment. Francis’s response when he was asked about a gay priest—“Who am I to judge?”—is relevant here. Notice that his approach is based on a fundamental respect for and acceptance of the person. This is a prerequisite for integration.

It is important to reframe sexuality as a gift from God. If God is “in all things,” then surely God is present in this fundamental dimension of human existence. In order to discern how God is present in this dimension of life, we need more input based on the lived experiences of laypeople. Francis has tried to get such input through questionnaires preceding the sessions of the Synod on the Family and by having laypeople address the bishops about their own experiences in the area of sexuality. In the long term, we need the help of lay theologians in developing an adequate theology and spirituality of sexuality.

**Examen:** For a priest or bishop: Do I model Jesus’ compassionate approach with people who are struggling with their sexuality? In my preaching, do I portray sexuality only in negative terms, as always associated with sin?

**For all:** In my own life, do I appreciate that sexuality is a gift given to me by God? Do I make choices so that this gift is integrated meaningfully into a life characterized by love and service? In what ways have I experienced God’s presence in my relationship with my spouse? Is my sexuality an area of life in which I primarily experience joy and gratitude, or fear, anxiety and desolation?

Francis has redirected our attention to God’s love and salvation in Christ, which is poured forth into all of creation, and the encounter with which brings about a deep joy in our hearts. He has invited us to move away from an exclusive focus, even an obsession, on individual sin and issues pertaining to sexuality. This move has allowed for the development of a morality that is global, even cosmic, and that connects more meaningfully with spirituality. Hence, it provides an attractive life project to which we can be committed. For this gift, perhaps we could close our examen with a prayer of gratitude.

**Patrick Kelly, S.J.,** is an Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Seattle University, and author of *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times*.

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

Share with friends or tweet at us

0????00

SHARE

TWEETS



## Memories of Getting to See the Pope

SEP 27, 2015 JOSEPH MCAULEY

Of all of the memories of that day, I will remember the people who came to see Pope Francis the most.

READ POST

CITIES

New York  
Philadelphia  
Washington

EVENTS

Masses & Prayers  
Speeches  
Visits

TOPICS

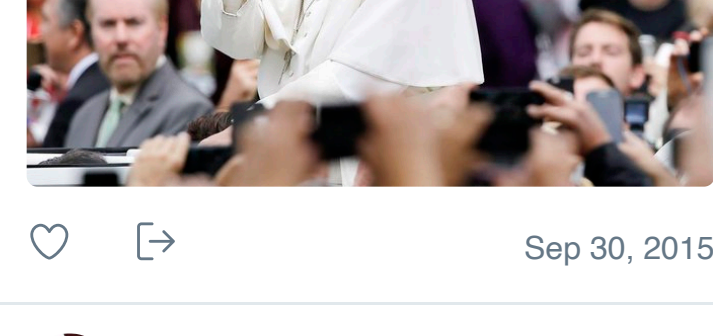
Before the Visit  
Response & Analysis

STAY CONNECTED

America Magazine @americamag  
Replying to @americamag  
Pope Francis: “Pray for the dead, for the members of the families of the Christian minorities and other ethnic groups in this dear country.”

Mar 28, 2016

America Magazine @americamag  
Replying to @americamag  
Pope Francis: “Going from Cuba to the U.S. was a symbolic step, a bridge that, thanks be to God, is being rebuilt.”



Sep 30, 2015

America Magazine @americamag