The words and actions of Pope Francis continue to attract the attention of Catholics, other Christians, and people of other religious traditions from around the world. His quiet role in encouraging the restoration of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba was noted in a front-page article of the New York Times story that reported that remarkable event.¹ For Catholics, the pope's vision of what it means to be church in today’s world has slowly emerged since he became pope in March of 2013. The ecclesiological perspective of Francis is both refreshing in its vitality and daunting in the challenges it presents to the Christian community and the individual believer. It is, I think, worthy of exploration and sustained reflection.

While Pope Francis has not authored a systematic treatise on the church, a number of salient ecclesiological themes are present in his writings and in the talks he has given. In this essay, I discuss three of those key themes: (1) the church as communion, (2) a church in solidarity, (3) a servant church. I believe that these themes, taken together, reflect the vision of church that Francis proposes. They also represent a challenge to the Christian community to revitalize its understanding of what it means to be church in the contemporary world.

The Church as Communion

The theme of communion was central in the teaching of Vatican II about the nature and mission of the church. In the first chapter of Lumen Gentium—the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church—the council 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).² This same constitution acknowledges 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 and serve him in holiness.” It proceeds to affirm that the messianic people of God has been established by Christ as “a communion of life, love and truth” (LG 9). Gaudium et Spes—the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World—teaches that the risen Christ, through the gift of the Spirit, established a new communion among the members of his body, “in which everyone as members one of the other would render mutual service in the measure of the different gifts bestowed on each” (GS 32).

¹ New York Times, December 18, 2014, 1
The ecclesiology of communion has been prominent in official church teaching during the past fifty years. The 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, reflecting on Vatican II twenty years after the close of the council, concluded in its Final Report that “the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the council’s documents.” This conception of church was also a significant feature of the teaching of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. John Paul II offered an incisive observation about the church on the eve of the new millennium when he said, “To make the church the home and school of communion: that is the challenge facing us in the new millennium.” In Deus Caritas Est, Benedict XVI connected communion with Christ in the Eucharist with the summons to communion with all Christians: “I cannot possess Jesus Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus towards unity with all Christians.” In the writings of these popes communion and mission are inextricably linked. The communion of the church, rooted in the communion of the Trinity, gives rise to mission; and the goal of the Christian mission is that all people be brought into communion with God and with one another.

The ecclesiology of communion conceives of the universal church as the communion of local, or particular, churches. It highlights the teaching of Lumen Gentium about the significance of particular churches, especially the council’s affirmation that the church of Christ “is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament” (LG 26). Bishops are “the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular churches, which are constituted after the model of the universal Church.” The constitution proceeds to complement this statement by affirming that “it is in these [particular churches] and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists” (LG 23). An ecclesiology of communion, then, is closely connected with what Vatican II taught about episcopal collegiality. It also upholds the essential significance of the inculturation of the gospel, since each local church must incarnate the gospel in its own context and, in so doing, it contributes to the wealth and beauty of the universal church. This ecclesiology places the celebration of the Eucharist at the very center of the life of the church. In his study of various expressions of communion ecclesiology, Dennis Doyle observes that this ecclesiology “places a high value on the need for visible unity as symbolically realized through shared participation in the Eucharist,” and it “promotes a dynamic and healthy interplay between unity and diversity in the church, between the universal and the local churches.”

It is clear that Pope Francis has been significantly influenced by the understanding of the church as communion. He frequently describes the Christian life as a call to communion with Christ and with others. Francis emphasizes the importance of fostering collegiality in the church at all levels. During a ceremony of blessing and the bestowing of the pallium on metropolitan archbishops that took place just a few months after his election as pope, he cited the description in Lumen Gentium of the college of bishops as the expression of the variety and unity of the people of God (LG 22). Francis urged these bishops, “Let us go forward on the path of synodality and grow in harmony with the service of the primacy.” In his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, Francis quotes a well-known passage from the encyclical of John Paul II Ut Unum Sint about the need to find “a way of exercising the primacy which,

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4 Pope John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 43.
5 Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, 14.
7 Doyle, Communion Ecclesiology, 13.
while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.”9 Francis com-
ments on this passage by acknowledging the need for the “pastoral conversion” of the papacy and the central struc-
tures of the universal church, and he asserts that “excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates
the church’s life and her missionary outreach.”10 In his 2013 interview with Anthony Spadaro, S.J., Francis recalled
his practice as archbishop of Buenos Aires of hosting frequent meetings with the auxiliary bishops and with the
priests of the archdiocese. He spoke of the way in which these meetings helped him to make the best decisions. He
then proceeded to suggest that consistories of cardinals and synods of bishops need to have a less rigid format, so
that they can be real consultations.11 In that same interview he expanded the call to collegiality beyond the realm
of cardinals and bishops when he remarked: “We must walk together: the people, the bishops and the pope. Syno-
dality should be lived at various levels.”12 This commitment to a collegial approach to ecclesial leadership seems to
have been borne out by the way in which Francis has appealed for open, honest exchange between participants at
the Synod of Bishops on the Family.

A vision of the church as communion is also evident in the way in which Francis describes the catholicity of the
church.13 In a general audience, he enumerated three characteristics of the church’s catholicity: first, the church is
the space in which the faith is proclaimed to us in its entirety; second, the church is universal—it is spread to every
part of the world and proclaims the gospel to everyone; and third, it is “the home of harmony.”14 Francis often com-
ments on the presence and action of the Holy Spirit as effecting harmony amidst diversity. The Holy Spirit is “the
One who creates unity in diversity, because the Holy Spirit is harmony and always creates harmony in the Church.
And harmonious unity in the many different cultures, languages and ways of thinking.”15 He likens the church to
an orchestra, with a rich variety of instruments playing together to create a magnificent harmony. The Holy Spirit
is the true “maestro” of this orchestra.16 Francis criticizes those who equate unity with uniformity. Uniformity, he
asserts, kills life. He says, “The life of the church is variety, and when we want to impose uniformity on everyone,
we kill the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”17

On a more personal level, the ecclesiology of communion gives birth to a spirituality of communion that is evident
in the words and actions of Pope Francis. So, he chooses to live, not alone in the traditional papal apartment, but
in the “house of Saint Martha”—the saint famous for the hospitality that she extended to Jesus at the family home
in Bethany. Francis remarked, “I was always looking for community. I did not see myself as a priest on my own. I
need a community.”18 He reminds us that our ultimate destination is the reign of God, which will mean “full com-
munion with the Lord, familiarity with the Lord, entry into his own divine life, where we will live in the joy of his
love beyond measure, a full joy.”19 On our way to that destination Catholics and other Christians are summoned to
make life in the church an experience of communion.

Francis speaks of our tendency to create a “privatized” church, a church confined to our own group, our own coun-
try, or even our own friends. He sees this tendency as selfish and as an expression of the individualism so prevalent

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9 See Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 32. The quote from Ut Unum Sint is from n. 95.
10 Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 32.
12 Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” 28.
16 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 35, October 9, 2013.
17 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 35, October 9, 2013.
18 Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” 17.
in Western cultures, which Francis repeatedly criticizes. Reacting to that tendency, he speaks with a sense of urgency: “It is necessary to seek to build communion, to teach communion, to get the better of misunderstandings, 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.”

In his 2014 apostolic letter on consecrated life, he exhorts consecrated women and men to become “experts in communion.” Francis asserts that in a polarized society, where people of different cultures have difficulty getting along and inequality abounds, consecrated persons “are called to offer a concrete model of community that, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing our respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters.”

The pope’s grounding in an ecclesiology and spirituality of communion is also evident in his well-known exhortations to foster a “culture of encounter.” Commenting on the pope’s use of this phrase, James Fredericks points out that the Spanish word for “encounter”—encuentro—has a deeper meaning than the English term. It connotes a meeting that is profoundly personal and transforming. Francis emphasizes that this culture of encounter should begin with the church. He exhorts us to go to “the outskirts”—to take the risk of encountering those who are different from us, especially those who may have become alienated from the church. He views Jesus as someone who was always on the move, moving out to encounter others even when it was risky to do so. Francis calls Christians to imitate Jesus by leaving ourselves behind and going out to encounter others. He acknowledges that there is always risk involved in such bold outreach, but he says that he would “prefer a thousand times over a bruised Church to an ill Church.” He seems to see the most dangerous temptation in the modern world, both for individuals and the church, as the enticement to self-absorption—to remain locked up within ourselves. Individually and communally, Christians are called to break through that self-absorption and take the risk of encounter. This conviction is integral to the pope’s vision of evangelization. In a homily delivered to the bishops of Brazil, Francis said, “We cannot keep ourselves shut up in our 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 doors in welcome because they come, but we must go out through the door to seek and meet the people!”

While Francis does not think it is enough simply to open the doors of churches to those who come to them, he does drive home the essential importance of creating a welcoming atmosphere in parishes. In Evangelii Gaudium, he adverted to the phenomenon of Catholics being attracted to fundamentalist churches. He associates this attraction with the lack of a sense of belonging (of communion) felt by many baptized Catholics. 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.” He observes that “in many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach.” In an address to newly appointed bishops, Francis urged them to welcome magnanimously: “May your heart be large enough to welcome all the men and women you come across during the day and whom you go and seek out when you go about to your parishes and to every community . . . the Church is a good mother who always welcomes and loves.” For Francis, an ecclesiology of communion entails the concrete practice of fostering communion at the local parish and diocesan levels.

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20 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 28; November 25, 2013.
23 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 16; address to participants at the International Congress on Catechesis, September 27, 2013.
24 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 19; September 27, 2013.
25 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 60; homily for the Mass with the Brazilian Bishops, July 27, 2013.
26 Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 63.
27 Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 63.
28 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 85; address to newly appointed bishops, September 19, 2013.
A Church in Solidarity

The ecclesiology and spirituality of communion that is evident in the thinking of Francis shapes the other dimensions of his vision of the church. And so, a church that is communion must be a church that is in close solidarity with others, especially the poor and suffering of the world. Francis has attempted to exemplify this solidarity by means of symbolic actions that have received widespread coverage by the media. He exhibits a sense of simplicity in his papal attire, including not particularly attractive shoes. On Holy Thursday, he visits a detention center for youth and washes the feet of the young people incarcerated there, boys and girls, Christian and non-Christian. On his birthday, he invites a small group of homeless people to morning Mass and breakfast. Not long after his installation as pope, he visits the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, where migrants from Africa attempt to make their way to Europe, many of whom lose their lives along the way of that perilous journey. One day he shows up at the cafeteria where ordinary Vatican workers have lunch, tray in hand at the end of the line, joining a table of these blue collar workers for a meal.

These are touching moments, symbolic actions, anecdotes that seem to delight the press. But is there more here—more than “grandfatherly” kindness? There does indeed seem to be more here, and it is central to the vision of Pope Francis for the evangelizing mission of the church. The word “solidarity” is found so often in the talks he gives in many different venues. For Francis, the call to solidarity with the suffering and marginalized of our world is not a sideline activity reserved for members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society or Catholic Relief Services. It is integral to the evangelizing mission of the church. It is indispensable.

Francis likes to highlight the poverty of Christ. He cites the famous verse from 2 Corinthians 8:9, where Paul is exhorting the Christians in Corinth to be generous in aiding Jerusalem Christians who are in need. Paul writes, “For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” In 2007, Benedict XVI had cited this same New Testament verse in his opening address to the conference of bishops from Latin America and the Caribbean at Aparecida, in which he asserted that “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty.” In Francis’ Lenten Message for 2014, he said, “The poverty of Christ that enriches us is his taking flesh and bearing our weaknesses and sins as an expression of God’s infinite mercy to us. The poverty of Christ is the greatest treasure of all.” Francis claims that “God’s wealth passes not through our wealth, but invariably and exclusively through our personal and communal poverty, enlivened by the Spirit of God.” He proceeds to exhort Christians to imitate Christ by confronting the poverty of our brothers and sisters, “to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it.”

The pope has drawn a certain amount of criticism because of statements in which he seems to denounce the prevailing mindset of the so-called “First World,” as well as the global economic system. He has at times made some provocative statements on these matters. He observes that “solidarity” is seen as a bad word by many people. He critiques the “culture of waste” that entices us to discard not only the goods of the earth but human beings who are considered to be “disposable.” Francis insists that human ecology and environmental ecology belong together. In a speech given to the Vatican diplomatic corps, he included a strongly worded section on attention to the poor and other suffering people. He told these diplomats, “We cannot be indifferent to those suffering from hunger, especially children, when we think of how much food is wasted every day in many parts of the world immersed in...”

what I have often termed ‘the throwaway culture.’ Unfortunately, what is thrown away is not only food and dispensable objects but often human beings themselves, who are discarded as ‘unnecessary.’”

The pope proceeds to cite examples of this attitude, among them abortion, the conscription of child soldiers, and human trafficking.

The fourth chapter of Evangelii Gaudium—on the social dimension of evangelization—is especially noteworthy for its critique of modern society and its reflection on the call to solidarity with the poor. Francis states it very directly: “Each 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.”

The pope says that “solidarity” is a term that is “poorly understood”; it means more than “a few sporadic acts of generosity.” Solidarity 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.”

Francis calls for the conversion of both human hearts and economic structures in ways that will generate and effect global solidarity. He exhorts all Christians to think beyond national boundaries to consider the world as a whole; as he says, “With due respect for the autonomy and culture of every nation, we must never forget that the planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity.” Quoting John Paul II, Francis asserts that God shows the poor “his first mercy.” And Francis emphasizes that the poor have much to teach other Christians; we need to allow ourselves to be evangelized by the poor.

On December 2, 2014, Pope Francis gave expression to the church in solidarity by addressing the stark reality of human trafficking and other modern forms of slavery. He joined with other Christian representatives as well as leaders of the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist faiths in issuing a joint declaration for the eradication of modern slavery. Francis was the first to sign the pledge “to do all in our power, within our faith communities and beyond, to work together for the freedom of all those who are enslaved and trafficked so that the future may be restored.”

The declaration stated that “modern slavery, in terms of forced labor and prostitution, organ trafficking, and any relationship that fails to respect the fundamental conviction that all people are equal and have the same freedom and dignity, is a crime against humanity.” This initiative manifests the commitment of Pope Francis to work with other religious leaders in the effort to effect solidarity with those who are oppressed.

The words of Pope Francis about solidarity with the poor and other marginalized people are very challenging, especially for Christians who live in the developed world. For Francis, in expressing our solidarity with those in need we are evangelizing, even though this is not the totality of the work of evangelization. Some in the media and within the church have expressed alarm at the pope’s vigorous critique of the capitalist system. It seems that Francis, like his predecessors, is more adept at identifying the defects and excesses of capitalism than he is at providing systemic alternatives. He does not see his role, or that of the church, as one of crafting an alternative economic system. And in Evangelii Gaudium, Francis calls business a “noble vocation”—all the while reminding those in business to serve the common good.

In his call to the church to become a church “in solidarity,” Francis is exhorting Christians to recognize that no human being is disposable. And that means that we have to think beyond the narrow boundaries of nation and region in order to develop a more global approach to solving the world’s

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34 Evangelii Gaudium, n. 187.
35 Evangelii Gaudium, n. 188.
37 See the report of this meeting and declaration in “Signs of the Times,” America 211, 19 (December 22-29, 2014), 10. For the address given by Pope Francis at this meeting, see http://www.news.va/en/news/religious-leaders-gathered-in-the-Vatican-for-the
40 Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 203.
problems. We must find ways to include the economically poor and other marginalized people—to include them in our thinking and praying, in our neighborhoods and towns, in our parish communities, and in the development of political and economic structures that are more just.

A Church of Service

In his well-known work *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles listed as a fifth ecclesiological model the church as servant. He rooted this notion in the teaching of Vatican II, particularly the description of the church’s mission in *Gaudium et Spes*. This pastoral constitution depicts the ministry of Jesus as that of service to others, and it calls the church to imitate the Lord by serving the world, especially by fostering the brotherhood and sisterhood of all (GS 3). Dulles discusses this vision of the church as servant as it is expounded in the work of a number of theologians, most notably Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The ecclesiological vision of Pope Francis places the theme of service front and center—the call to humble service to fellow members of the church and to the wider world. The discussion of solidarity above makes it clear that Francis summons the church to emulate Jesus in reaching out to those who are most in need throughout the world. This solidarity must be expressed in concrete actions that respond to the needs of real people. Francis also exhorts those who minister within the church to see their role as one of offering faithful, generous service to those to whom they minister. He repeatedly challenges the motivations, attitudes and actions of those who lead God’s people. In a talk that he gave to the priests of Rome, he acknowledged that some of those priests had written or even phoned him, complaining that he has a tendency to “bash” priests. He insisted that he was not there to bash them. It is true, however, that he presents serious challenges to church leaders. In one address, he labeled careerism in the church a “form of leprosy.” He employed similar “illness” metaphors in his strongly worded 2014 Christmas message to the Roman Curia, enumerating a number of spiritual “maladies” exhibited by church leaders who approach their ministry in a self-serving manner.

Pope Francis likes words. In his homilies and other talks, he often focuses on one or more words. He unpacks and elaborates on these words in order to make his point. With regard to ecclesial leadership, he favors words that bespeak *accompaniment*, *walking with* others, *journeying alongside* them. This is the context for his references to the “smell of the sheep.” Church leaders should be so close to the people they shepherd that they are marked by their very “scent.” In his intriguing comments about the liturgical homily found in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis emphasizes that those who preach must first listen to the people in the pews. If they are to proclaim the word of God, they must share in the lives of the people to whom they preach and pay loving attention to them. In a talk to the priests of Rome, the pope addressed a number of questions to his audience: “And you, dear brothers, I ask you, do you know the wounds of your parishioners? Do you perceive them? Are you close to them? It’s the only question.” In a conference that he gave to the clergy at Assisi, Francis built his message on the word “walking.” He said that it is one of his favorite words, and he mused, “What can be more beautiful for us than walking with our people?”

43 Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, 115; address to the community of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, June 6, 2013.
47 Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, 75; address to the clergy in the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, Italy, October 4, 2013.
48 Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, 75; October 4, 2013.
Another of Francis’ favorite “word-plays” is to contrast the image of the “manager” or “intermediary” with that of a “mediator.” In a speech to the Congregation of Bishops about the role of the bishop, he said that “we do not need a manager, a chief executive of a company . . . we need someone who knows how to raise himself to the heights of God’s gaze over us in order to lead us to him.” In an ordination homily, he instructed those to be ordained: “You are pastors, not functionaries. Be mediators, not intermediaries.” I am not aware of any text in which the pope offers a detailed explanation of this distinction between mediators and intermediaries/managers. But his point seems to be grounded in his vision of pastoral ministers as facilitators of God’s grace. A mediator is someone who is able to facilitate a mutual encounter. It seems that Francis is calling pastoral ministers to see their primary role as one of reflecting the presence of Christ to the people they are called to serve. Ministers are there to help facilitate an encounter between the Lord and his people. This does not mean that church guidelines and policies are meaningless. But he is summoning those who lead in the church to envision their foundational role as one of mediating an encounter between the risen Jesus and the people they serve.

This stress on servant leadership is related to a point that Francis makes about the church’s method of evangelization in the modern world. He urges evangelizers to adopt an approach of enticing others to the gospel and the church—a method of attraction, of persuasion. Rather than just bemoaning the secularization of our society, or denouncing those who do not practice any religious faith, he wants Catholics to present the Christian faith and Christian life as something that is exquisitely beautiful, as a gift that no one would ever want to be without. He says that bishops should be “men who are guardians of doctrine not in order to measure how far away the world lives from the truth it contains, but in order to attract the world, to enchant it by the beauty of love, to seduce it with the offer of freedom given by the Gospel.” He argues that the church does not need apologists or crusaders for the gospel, “but rather humble and confident sowers of the truth who know that it is always given to them anew and who trust in its power.” In Evangelii Gaudium, Francis includes a brief section on the hierarchy of truths, a principle taught in the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II (UR 11) and one that appears to be very important to Francis’ theology and pastoral approach. Francis reminds his readers that, though all revealed truths derive from the same source and are to be believed with the same faith, certain truths of the Christian faith “are more important for giving a direct expression to the heart of the Gospel.” He proceeds to say that in this basic core of truths, “what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.” So for Francis, integral to the service that the church offers the world is an engaging, persuasive presentation of the truth and beauty of the gospel.

Conclusion

It will be interesting and instructive to follow the way in which Pope Francis’ vision of the church develops as he continues in his role of Bishop of Rome. One can only presume that events in the world and in the church, e.g., the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops on the Family in the fall of 2015, will influence the ecclesiology that he has articulated in the first two years of his papacy. It seems, however, that the three themes addressed here will continue to characterize his ecclesiological vision: the universal church as a communion of local churches that is a sign and instrument of communion with God and with others; a church summoned to express and to effect solidarity with all women and men, especially with the poor, the marginalized, and other suffering people; the church as servant, in which ministry ad intra and mission ad extra is imbued with the spirit of faithful, humble service exemplified

50 Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, 90; homily, April 21, 2013.
51 Pope Francis, “Bishops Should be Evangelists, not CEOs,” 668.
52 Pope Francis, “Bishops Should be Evangelists, not CEOs,” 668.
53 Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 36.
54 Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 36.
by Jesus in his ministry. The ecclesiological vision articulated thus far by Francis is deeply rooted in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It sets the bar very high in its description of individual and communal life within the church. At the same time, such a challenging view is revitalizing because of the profound hope for the church and the world reflected in it.