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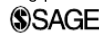


## Poverty and Economic Justice in Pope Francis

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### Abstract

This article discusses Pope Francis’s teaching on poverty and economic justice with reference to his *Evangelii gaudium* and *Laudato si’*. This teaching is developed through three emphases of the pope: (1) a *compassionate church*, moved by the suffering and injustice in the world; (2) a church whose mission is to *accompany humanity* with the leaven of the Gospel in order to bring about a radical conversion of hearts and worldly systems and institutions; and (3) a *transformative missional praxis* that brings about integral salvation through solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and a prophetic commitment to human and cosmic flourishing.

### Keywords

Social justice, poverty, Pope Francis, mission, Catholic social teaching, God’s kingdom, Africa

In his bull for the celebration of the Year of Mercy in 2015,<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis asks Christians to become healers of wounds in people’s lives because the mission of the church is to “heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care. Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! . . . Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help.”<sup>2</sup>

This key passage will guide my development in this essay of the teaching and practices of Pope Francis on poverty and economic justice in the world. I will draw most

of my citations from two works of Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (EG) and *Laudato si'* (LS), as well as from his homilies and interviews, while referring readers where necessary elsewhere for further reading. My goal is to offer a framework for understanding Pope Francis's teaching on poverty and economic justice within the larger context of the mission of the church today. This framework represents three constants in the teaching and pastoral ministry of Pope Francis. First, is his call for a poor and merciful church that reaches out to all people, especially those who suffer and are far from God and from love. This kind of church takes account of all that happens in the world and in the lives of all of God's people. This sensitivity is to be developed through a theological aesthetics that sees God in all things and all things in God via a culture of encounter. Second, Pope Francis wants the church to be a walking companion with humanity and creation through the art of accompaniment. This constant is particularly directed to all those who suffer as a result of unjust structures and institutions; it is to be accomplished through a humble and vulnerable mission and a ministry of mercy, tenderness, and compassion. Third, he is leading the church to daily actions through a transformative missional praxis that is capable of bringing about a new reality in the lives of people by the offer of integral salvation.

### **A call for missional conversion**

All these three dimensions can be realized only through Pope Francis's call for missional conversion in his programmatic document *Evangelii gaudium* (11, 13–15, 25–35). Pastoral ministries guided through missionary conversion will lead to a transformative missional praxis understood as the genuine newness and change in the lives and contexts of people when they come in contact with Good News of salvation in all its fullness and richness. In the citation above, one can immediately identify how these three dimensions offer interpretative keys and reveal rich categories for unpacking Pope Francis's teaching on poverty and economic justice in the world.

*"Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world."* This aspect of "seeing eyes," "touching hands," and "feeling hearts" is at the heart of Pope Francis's theological aesthetics, that is, the Jesuit spirituality of seeing God in all things. The truth of the inner Word of love is revealed as a person who once walked the earth and who is now encountered in the least of the brethren (Matt. 25:31–46). The poor are the most concrete manifestation of the face of God in history. Thus, the main source of theology today should be the lives and contexts of the poor because they offer pastoral agents, theologians, and missiologists a direct access to God made man. By stepping into the chaos of people's lives and by embracing fully the complexities and ambiguities of history, the church becomes a light to the nations and a faithful instrument for the mission of God in history.

*"Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new!"* This call for a revolution of tenderness is key for understanding the missional conversion that Pope Francis proposes to the church. It demands a radical and ongoing conversion from indifference to sin, human suffering, or evil in personal, communal, and global systems to solidarity with the poor and

repentance and reconciliation. The Good News of repentance is essential to the proclamation of the church and decisive for the mission of welcoming God's reign for a new heaven and a new earth. This proclamation requires that the church and her members be freed from enslavement to structures and systems or entanglement with worldly powers and structures of sin and injustice. The church's missional conversion, in the teachings of Pope Francis, is to be embraced through the art of accompaniment—an incarnational momentum—which brings the church closer to all those who are searching for God and makes the church one with all of God's people in their joys and sorrows.

*“Heal these wounds, . . . assuage them with the oil of consolation, . . . bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care.”* These imperatives convey the aspect of action. It is not enough to see the wounds and recognize the suffering and injustice in the world and how they lead to violence, war, sadness, pain, and moral confusion. It is also crucial for the church to make a choice borne of faith and fidelity to her mission to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth and thus bring about justice, peace, and righteousness on the earth. In *EG* 187 Pope Francis is so clear and insistent that transformative missional praxis emerges in history when the church is faithful to her identity as a poor and merciful church when he writes, “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and come to their aid.”

### **A call for a new direction**

Those who read Pope Francis's teaching on economy and on poverty in the world without appreciating his basic framework often fail to understand him. This framework comprises his theological aesthetics (a church that is compassionate), his call for missional conversion of the church and her members (through the art of accompaniment), and the practices that he proposes for a transformative missional praxis (daily action through a revolution of tenderness). This lack of understanding occurs because people view him through the often polarizing theological camps regnant in modern Catholicism (i.e., traditionalists vs. progressives). I argue that when it comes to issues of economics, politics, culture, and the movement of history, Pope Francis's central message and ministry are continuous with the missionary impulse of the Gospel and are modeled after the priorities and practices of the Lord Jesus Christ in his words and deeds. Pope Francis thus speaks from the heart of the church to the world, and from the heart of the world to the church.

He demonstrates clearly that what happens in the world and how the common good is promoted, preserved, and protected is central to the mission of the church. In this regard, the identity of the church and the sites in which the church is found are decisive for the credibility and fidelity of the church to the mission of bringing about God's reign in history. Thus, to minimize or dismiss this message as progressive, liberationist, or Marxist ideals and ideologies is to misread the prophetic and social edge of the Gospel, which is irreducible to the forms and manner in which it is presented by Pope Francis



