

Joyous gospel

December 9, 2013



RNS / Paul Haring / Catholic News Service

Although Pope Francis's 50,000-word apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel") was addressed to "bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful," secular news media were quick to comment on it. They were interested especially in the pope's critique of unfettered capitalism, consumerism and globalization.

What the pope has to say about economics is particularly salient at a time when the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer in industrialized countries. This imbalance between the rich and poor, the pope said, "is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. . . . In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule." This system not only rejects ethics; it rejects God as well.

Francis declared that "the worship of the ancient golden calf has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose." And it is not just the speculative investors on Wall Street who worship the golden calf, said Francis. Some among the "consecrated"—the ranks of clergy—are also seduced by it.

Radio host Rush Limbaugh called the document “pure Marxism,” though the pope is, of course, following Jesus, not Marx. Like Jesus, he shows particular concern for the poor and thinks society should too.

But the media’s focus on economics ignored the larger theme of the document, captured in the title. Francis is calling the church to live out of the joy of the gospel and to share that joy with others.

As Francis sees it, the joy of the gospel is rooted in an experience of God’s love in Jesus, and rather than save people out of the world, the gospel gets them involved in the messiness of the world. This gospel does not save isolated individuals; it saves individuals within the web of community. It is a gospel not for the few, but for all. “The gospel joy which enlivens the community of disciples is a missionary joy,” says the pope. It is a joy that can’t be suppressed.

The pope’s proclamation of the joy of the gospel is especially apt in this Christmas season, when we celebrate how God got intimately involved in the messiness of the world by becoming fully human. The joyful good news of God’s love in Christ came to a couple in a barn and to ordinary shepherds, who joyfully embraced it and shared it.