12 Ways Catholicism is More Radical Than Pope Francis

If you think the new Pope is radical, what about the church doctrine that the poor are in charge? That God is feminine? That charging interest is a sin?

These are interesting times to be Catholic. Pope Francis has put a spirit of change in the air, a kind of change that brings the faith back to its roots. When I became Catholic as a teenager, the sex abuse scandals were going from bad to worse; the Catholic legacy of outward social justice and inward contemplation drew me to the church, but they were mostly obscured from public view. That has begun to change, finally—though the recent United Nations report on sex abuse is another reminder that there is still a long, long way to go.

Francis’ call for a church with open doors and concern for the poor is just a tiny glimpse of what might be in store. There’s a lot more where that came from. The Catholic Church is many things, and it has a lot to ask forgiveness for, but part of it is also a 2,000-year effort to devise a social order based on love. This is neither Democratic or Republican. It’s meant to be as universal as it is radical, and Francis has only scratched the surface.

The poor are the bosses.
Catholics, but often without really hearing the words. Jesus said that what we do for the least among us is what we do for him; the justice of a society, then, is not to be measured by the wealthy, or even the middle class, but the poor.

What if the State of the Union were delivered by a homeless teenager in Detroit or the Bronx? When our picture of society privileges the most vulnerable, we start seeing every aspect of it upside down.

Usury: not okay.

On January 29, Francis referred to usury as “a dramatic social ill.” This isn’t a word we’ve heard much of for a few centuries, but throughout much of Catholicism’s history—as well as that of Judaism and Islam—the church has considered profiting from the crippling debt of others a grave sin. Francis was denouncing egregious Italian loan-sharks, but this concept implicates our whole economy when bankers make billions designing loans that can make lifelong entrapment in debt the price of attending college, receiving medical care or owning a home.

Labor is about people.

Jesus was a carpenter; the Apostle Paul made tents for a living, even though his followers could’ve supported him. Their examples, and the experience of ordinary Catholics, have resulted in the church’s commitment to the fundamental dignity of work and workers—including migrants forced to cross borders to earn a better wage. The people hired in a business are not disposable assets. They are the heart of the organization, and the church upholds their right to form a union to ensure they are treated as such. At a time when “right to work” has become a byword for union-busting, this is radical indeed.

Anarchy, almost.

It might come as a surprise for a church known for its centralized authority, but Catholic social teaching calls for “subsidiarity,” or local autonomy, whenever possible. Even the pope is technically just one bishop among the others, which is why Francis has called for the Vatican to share more power with bishops. The economic theory of distributivism—held by Catholics as varied as G.K. Chesterton and Dorothy Day—proposes a society where the means of production are controlled by cooperatives of families and small collectives, not corporations or governments.

You can’t own everything.

The Book of Acts says that in the earliest church, “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common.” While the church since then has allowed private property, property should never be allowed to trump the common good. A cathedral in the center of a city symbolizes the Catholic belief that the most beautiful and valuable assets
privatize every resource and turn it into a profitable market. It's also why the church, under Pope Benedict, identified environmental pollution among the "new forms of social sin."

**War is really, really hard to justify.**

Catholic pacifists have lamented the church’s official espousal of just war theory, but the conditions for a just war are far stricter than anything recent U.S. presidents have been able to satisfy—which is why the Vatican has consistently denounced their wars. Ever since Jesus told Peter to put down his sword, there has been a vibrant tradition of Christian non-violence. On January 18, in fact, a Vatican commission released a document focused on “the relationship between the revelation of God and a non-violent humanism.”

**Universal means universal.**

“Catholic” literally means universal, even if it’s often used to refer to a hierarchy of mostly old white men devoted to vestiges of European feudalism. But if you visit Catholic communities around the world, the ways they differ are as striking as what they have in common. Alongside a sad history of participating in colonialism, the church has also been learning from indigenous traditions it encounters and incorporating them into a global faith. In the 20th century, the Vatican finally acknowledged that there is truth in other religions, but this came after centuries of borrowing from them left and right.

**God is female, too.**

One of the most striking ways Catholicism has learned from non-Christian cultures is in ways of worshiping the feminine aspects of God. Since the fifth century, it has affirmed Mary as “mother of God,” and through devotion to her and other female saints, Catholics have seen much more to God than just “He” and “Lord.” Medieval mystics experienced visions of Jesus as a lactating mother. Despite the patriarchal makeup and outlook of the church hierarchy, which has yet to change under Francis, popular Catholicism harbors a deep recognition that non-males equally reflect God’s image.

**“Family values”? Yes and no...**

For all the Christian talk out there about family values, early Christianity posed a challenge to the traditional family values of the Romans—and to the nuclear family of today. Many of the most important early Christians were women who joined the church to escape a lifetime of near enslavement in marriage. And while women’s religious orders ever since have had to answer to male leaders, they’ve often allowed women more autonomy than was possible in mainstream family life. Catholicism supports those who choose to give family life a go, but it has also encouraged a wide range of alternative arrangements, celibate and otherwise, that are radically distinct from normal family life. These alternatives
in this they follow Jesus, who loved his human parents but referred to God as his real parent and called all those who act on God’s love his siblings.

**Everybody’s accountable—even the Pope.**

Part of what makes the church’s ongoing cover-ups so disturbing is its failure to practice the accountability that Catholics are supposed to learn in the confessional. We’re all flawed, but we embrace the consequences of our actions. Church teachings on abortion and divorce come partly out of this: the need to follow through on our decisions that affect the lives of others. Too often, the church has expressed these teachings through guilt and condemnation, rather than by showing people the compassion they need in difficult times. Until leaders like Pope Francis show real accountability themselves, they’ll have a hard time teaching it.

**The people are usually right in the end.**

Cardinal John Newman, a 19th-century English convert, wrote a famous essay celebrating the tradition of “consulting the faithful on matters of doctrine.” It focuses on an ancient theological debate (whose details would probably sound ridiculous) in which bishops and theologians clung to heresy while ordinary believers held to what would finally be recognized as truth. It’s an often-repeated story. At a time when many Catholics disagree with official teachings on contraception and other issues, church leaders are in a tricky spot. The original word for “church” in Greek, after all, means “assembly”—a body in which all people’s voices are heard. These include, thanks to the church’s deep respect for tradition, the voices of the dead.

**And then, silence.**

For all these enticements to prophetic ranting and raving, the Catholic tradition of social justice has always depended on prayer. Becoming a Catholic activist means learning to make contemplation and action mutually reinforcing, not opposed. People fighting for social change often act impressively for a while, only to burn out when the revolution doesn’t happen. But radical Catholicism assumes that the struggle is lifelong and ongoing, so one should balance accordingly—personal courage with community, work with rest, poverty with feasting, speech with silence. No one is exempt. For all that a pope can do, the church is really its people, and it will only ever be as radical as we are.