

Pope prompts talk about abortion, women's roles in the church



The Feast of the Annunciation marked by the Catholic Church falls not long after the vernal equinox, in time for the arrival of new spring growth. It commemorates the biblical story of when a young, unmarried virgin living in poverty, Mary, found herself “greatly troubled by the words” pronounced by an angel. She’d been divinely selected for an “immaculate” conception, with assurance she’d give birth to the masculine incarnation of a paternal, all-powerful God.

On this year’s Day of Annunciation, the Vatican released Pope Francis’ formal words of encouragement for Christian community members, a far-ranging document “crowned” by a renewed declaration that Mary, “blessed above all other saints,” be the one Christians turn to for both solace and guidance. She was, said Pope Francis, penultimate in her ability to embody, live and extend the teachings of Jesus.

The Pope’s apostolic exhortation “*Gaudete et Exsultate*” (“Rejoice and Be Glad”)

published earlier this month isn't official church doctrine, but his wording generated worldwide reverberations, including here at home, where New Mexicans with religious affiliations remain predominantly Catholic. As a Vatican correspondent noted in *Crux* magazine (published in partnership with the conservative-leaning Catholic fraternal organization Knights of Columbus), "in the course of the [exhortation], Francis ... delivers a full frontal critique of a form of Catholic pro-life activism that becomes focused on the abortion issue at the exclusion of other matters, such as immigration."

While conservative Catholics with clear-cut views may have bristled at the Pope's message, others, including non-Catholic people of faith, found it non-controversial.

"What jumped out at me right away was the fact that one paragraph has gotten so much attention," said Joan Lamunyon Sanford, executive director of the New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. As someone with religious beliefs outside of Catholicism, she said she was moved by the Pope's emphasis on the role of women in pursuits of holiness. She also found that the flare of controversy at the Pope's mention of specific words like "abortion" and "immigration" actually reinforced his other messages.

"To me, that goes right to what the Pope was talking about, meaning the single-minded pursuit of making abortion illegal at the expense of people who are already born and suffering. This whole document is about so much more: community, making sure that others see the face of God ... in how we treat our neighbors, in how we especially care for the stranger, the migrant, our elders."

Voter focus on a single issue like abortion is, at least for now, not a far-removed anomaly. A Gallup poll released in May 2015 found that "the percentage of Americans who say they would only vote for a candidate who shares their views on abortion has been edging up," to a total that year of 21 percent. White, Christian, conservative voters, women included, have stayed nearly steadfast in their support of President Donald Trump since they helped turn the 2016 election in his favor. Despite his previously stated "pro-choice" stance, Trump told attendees of this year's annual March for Life his administration was "with you all the way."

To spread or to partition the good word

New Mexico for nearly a decade has been the declared “mission field” for some of the country’s most strident activists opposed to abortion.

Bud and Tara Shaver, an activist couple with ties to Operation Rescue, relocated to Albuquerque in 2010 upon invitation from Father Stephen Imbarrato, a Catholic Priest Associate with the group Priests for Life. The group is not officially affiliated with the Catholic Church and has a history of controversy over tactics as well as organizational financials.

The Shavers publicly labeled Albuquerque the “late-term abortion capital of the world,” centering many of their networked efforts on the University of New Mexico and the medical practice of abortion provider Southwest Women’s Options. With a stated goal of making New Mexico “abortion-free,” the Shavers have continued to work with Imbarrato, whose rhetoric and activism overlaps theirs in both urgency and focus.

In late 2016, Imbarrato was charged with criminal trespass and obstruction of justice following his arrest as part of the “Red Rose Rescue” campaign, a movement which has provoked pushback, including from others opposed to abortion. Imbarrato and other Red Rose Rescue activists entered facilities that perform abortions to approach women in the waiting rooms with prayers and flowers attached to notes urging the women to contact faith-based pregnancy centers. The judge in Imbarrato’s case dismissed the obstruction of justice charge and imposed a time-suspended \$500 fine for trespassing.

During the run-up to the presidential election, the Archdiocese of San Diego publicly distanced itself from Priests for Life after pamphlets were inserted into church bulletins warning parishioners that voting for Democrats posed a peril to their mortal souls. And in a Sunday broadcast on a live video feed the week of the election, the national director of Priests for Life, Frank Pavone, caused an outcry when he placed the remains of an aborted fetus on a church altar.

Singular focus on abortion was reinforced in Imbarrato’s homily during an October 2016 mass broadcast on the EWTN Catholic television network, shared on Facebook and the Priests for Life website the morning the Pope’s exhortation was released. Imbarrato told the audience that when it comes to his civic

participation, “I’ve had to vote for people I wasn’t totally comfortable with, but I’ve never, ever had a difficult decision. ... I’ve never, ever had to go beyond the issue of abortion to make my decision, in any race, ever. It’s always been clear. One issue: abortion. ... For us Catholics, there really should be no other issue upon which we decide who to vote for.”

Imbarrato said in an emailed statement to *NM Political Report* that the Pope’s newest teachings on holiness were timely, given this year’s 20-year mark since the “Living the Gospel of Life” statement was published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. From Imbarrato’s perspective, the Pope’s latest wording is a clear reaffirmation of what the church has always taught.

“Legalized abortion in this country is a constitutional crisis for which no one in our government has ever taken responsibility,” Imbarrato wrote. He added that the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision 45 years ago ushered in “government-sanctioned and funded daily mass murder of thousands of innocent preborn.”

Ending what he refers to as an “American Holocaust” (a term exerted in the political sphere years ago by former North Carolina U.S. Senator and partisan Republican vanguard Jesse Helms) has to be decisive. “Nothing is more important,” Imbarrato wrote.

Catholic leaders in the United States have long echoed the importance of opposing abortion, though in differing terms. Imbarrato pointed to the USCCB’s “Living the Gospel of Life” statement based on Pope John Paul II’s 1995 *Evangelium Vitae* encyclical, a doctrine Imbarrato and many other Catholics consider infallible. “The leaders of the Church here in our country affirm over and over that the foundational and pre-eminent issues facing us are abortion and euthanasia,” he wrote.

Such views aren’t universal among U.S. churchgoers, though gaps between them may be widening. A Pew Research Center survey of Catholics in the U.S. released just before the Pope signed his name to the exhortation last month found “signs of growing polarization along partisan lines in Catholics’ views of Pope Francis.” In November, the USCCB elected Kansas City Archbishop Joseph Naumann, an abortion hardliner, as chairman of their Committee on Pro-Life Activities.

Attempts to hear more about the Pope’s teachings and their implications for local anti-abortion activism apart from high-profile figures like Imbarrato were

unsuccessful. New Mexico Alliance for Life did not respond to repeated requests for an interview with Executive Director Elisa Martinez or another representative. The evangelical parachurch for Focus on the Family conducts “Christian values”-based state policy work with Family Policy Alliance of New Mexico, including anti-abortion organizing. An unnamed “media team” member said via email that the group doesn’t comment on denominational matters.

Geographical and ideological diversity

Rev. Mike Demkovich, the Archdiocese of Santa Fe’s Episcopal Vicar for Doctrine and Life said he finds it illuminating to view the Pope’s teachings through the frame of history. During an interview with *New Mexico Political Report*, he also stressed that Christians and non-Christians alike should view the Pope’s new writing as “more pastoral than it is dogmatic.” The church is called to continuity and tradition “with a capital-T,” said Demkovich, with the ways in which its teachings are lived and handled varying from place to place and according to individual circumstances.

“You can appreciate that the reality of the faith being lived in Africa is different than the faith being lived in Canada, or the United States, or in Vietnam. How the faith is lived falls under the pastoral—meaning the care of the pastor, the gentle shepherding of people on the journey. This exhortation [*‘Gaudete et Exultate’*] is meant to be a help for people, especially nowadays when it seems there’s such divisiveness and contention.”

Demkovich also said that while the media often highlights Pope Francis’ “easy-going” and transparent personality, he is not radically different from earlier, more conservative popes. In fact, said Demkovich, the Pope’s wording ties contemporary events to traditional beliefs in ways that directly reference formal doctrines put forth by both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict, among other much earlier predecessors. And like those before him, Pope Francis has met fierce criticism from followers intent on reforms to counteract the church’s systematic history of child abuse.

Varied beliefs are inevitable in a diverse society like ours, said Lamunyon Sanford with the New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. When she meets people of faith whose understanding of God moves them to make the abolition of abortion their top priority, she believes they should follow it. “We

should all be passionate about what our God reveals to us.”

Passion for and pursuit of a holy life moves members of the interfaith coalition she represents to ensure abortion and contraception are affordable and accessible, said Lamunyon Sanford. “It leads us to trust women, families and people who are pregnant to prayerfully discern what the place of that pregnancy is in their lives.”

Coalition members also base their work on a commitment to ensuring families remain whole with access to resources they need to stay healthy, Lamunyon Sanford said.

“If they can welcome a new life, without jeopardizing that life and the lives of others, they’re the best judge of that. Not me, not the Pope, not any other activist.”

Even subtle allowances for gradations in the Catholic church’s vision and its application to the everyday lives of adherents may have resonance with followers of Christ here in New Mexico, including for rural residents who tend to be painted in overly broad brushstrokes.

In January 2017, public policy groups Young Women United and Strong Families New Mexico—in collaboration with the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico and Planned Parenthood—teamed up with pollster Latino Decisions to survey more than 1,700 adults in 13 rural counties.

Close to three-fourths of those surveyed—74 percent—said they agree “personal decisions about abortion need to remain with New Mexican women, their families, and their medical providers,” including 69 percent of Republicans, 82 percent of Democrats and 64 percent of independents. A majority, 56 percent, of respondents said they “believe that New Mexicans need access to reproductive healthcare, including abortion, across our rural state.”

Pope Francis’ exhortation may speak to this range, including his emphasis on deeply personal matters that extend beyond easy, clear-cut answers. Rev. Dekovich with the Santa Fe Archdiocese explained that two of the more antiquated references in “*Gaudete et Exsultate*” were the Pope’s way of calling out contemporary ways of thought that he said act as “subtle enemies of holiness.”

“When somebody has an answer for every question,” Pope Francis wrote, “it is a sign that they are not on the right road. They may well be false prophets, who use religion for their own purposes, to promote their own psychological or intellectual theories. ... Someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God’s transcendence.”

The Pope went on to say sees in other Christians “an obsession with the law, an absorption with social and political advantages, a punctilious concern for the Church’s liturgy, doctrine and prestige, a vanity about the ability to manage practical matters, and an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfilment.”

The best way to find one’s own path through a “thicket” of commands and prescriptive orders, said Pope Francis, is to follow Jesus’ example of genuine charity. “For in every one of our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the most vulnerable, the defenceless and those in need, God’s very image is found.”

In his own reading of the Pope’s words about centuries-old ideologies, Dekovich said he interpreted, in part, that genuine human contact and recognition of mysteries contained in each of us are what connect people to their sense of God. “It’s that very relationship that bestows us knowledge, a knowledge that can’t be named.”

There may yet be room for Pope Francis’ deliberate, expansive teachings—their openness to variations of human experience—to take root in the Catholic church. Whether those ways of thinking extend from his flock to the pluralism of global and democratic processes is still cloaked in mystery.

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