



Fr. Christian Barone (left) and Cardinal Michael Czerny are pictured with their book in Italian, "Fraternity: Sign of the Times," in Rome on Sept. 30, 2021. The English translation, "Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis," was published by Orbis Books in 2022. (CNS/Victoria Isabel Cardiel Chaparro, Alpha and Omega)



by Michael Sean Winters

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A new book, [*Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis*](#) is an instant classic and must-read for anyone interested in Catholic social teaching. Not only does it do a better job explaining the social magisterium of the Holy Father than anything yet published in English, it also touches on foundational theological issues that are too often overlooked and unexplored.

Siblings All, Sign of the Times is co-authored by Jesuit Cardinal Michael Czerny, the prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, and Fr. Christian Barone, who teaches at Rome's Gregorian University. Books authored by prominent churchmen, including cardinals, are not known for being provocative. They tend to be cautious, steering away from controversy. There is nothing reckless in these pages, to be sure, but the discussions are frank and forthright. And they repeatedly situate the issues of social ethics within the broader theological landscape, something too few ethicists undertake.

So, for example, in the first chapter's section on "The Church-world relationship and Vatican II's 'anthropological turn,'" the authors start by explicating the Constitution on the Church and its critics.

In *Lumen Gentium*, the council introspectively examined the mystery of the Church, highlighting its communal and eschatological nature (LG 8-9, 48-21). This ecclesiological reflection, with its markedly doctrinal character, finds its natural complement in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 2, 32, 40): from the Church as communion, constituted by the People of God, flows the dynamism of its mission in the world (GS 3).

They proceed to consider criticisms of [*Gaudium et Spes*](#).

Not a few criticisms were raised...accusing this conciliar document of producing a detrimental reduction of the universal validity of the Gospel

message. Critics also point to the uneven way that the various topics are treated as evidence that the Pastoral Constitution never managed to duly integrate either the richness of the ecclesiological reflection proposed by *Lumen Gentium* or the sacramental perspective developed by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

No attempt is made to downplay the gravity of the criticisms. Their answer to the critics, however, is also at hand. "Yet it was precisely the methodological choice to describe the phenomena of contemporary reality that constituted the progress made by *Gaudium et Spes* in comparison with previous socio-theological reflection." A few pages later, they continue to flesh out the significance of this methodology:

Gaudium et Spes applies the law of gradual progress and growing understanding of the truth to the human awareness that lets itself be increasingly enlightened by the mystery of Christ. At the same time, this same law of gradualness and progressive understanding of the truth is applied to the ecclesial mission of proclaiming the Gospel: listening, understanding, and interpreting the treasures hidden in cultures and the progress of science (GS 44) to test them against the Word of God.

Here are the seeds of that dynamic understanding of the church's mission to which Pope Francis is always calling the church.

And, a couple of pages later, Czerny and Barone continue to detail the significance of *Gaudium et Spes*, writing,

The real novelty of *Gaudium et Spes* consists in presenting dialogue with the world as an exercise of self-awareness in the Church's identity. This dialogue is not aimed exclusively at making the proclamation of the Gospel more effective. Rather, it is necessary for grasping the signs of Christ's presence that emerge from contemporary history. Therefore, dialoguing with the world is not a question of carrying out a strategic marketing operation, or of embellishing the Gospel in order to capture the widest margin of consensus, even at the risk of compromising the message. On the contrary, being in dialogue with the world is a question of supporting the gradual and organic growth of the Church in the understanding of divine Revelation.

Cardinal Michael Czerny
Christian Barone

Siblings All, *Sign of the Times*

The Social Teaching of Pope Francis

FOREWORD BY POPE FRANCIS



In a preface to "Siblings All, Sign of the Times," Pope Francis said that, like many Latin American Catholics of his time, the Second Vatican Council shaped his theological and pastoral vision. (Courtesy of Orbis Books)

Those are some key insights about a Vatican II document that had seemed somewhat tired in recent years, even a little ragged, like it had seen better days. I might add, that is also some fine writing.

This willingness to engage difficult issues and criticisms without flinching is even more evident when Czerny and Barone turn to the two approaches to social questions that characterized the post-conciliar church. The inductive approach starts by examining the "signs of the times," a phrase that appears only three times in *Gaudium et Spes* yet infuses the theological method.

It "found an authoritative precedent in the Magisterium of John XXIII." They write that in his 1961 encyclical [*Mater et Magistra*](#), Good Pope John's "aim was to give theology a new direction. Instead of drawing its own understanding of the economy of salvation from abstract premises, theology would have to develop from a continual encounter with history, manifesting its capacity to show the world that the Kingdom of God is a dynamic event and reality."

The authors follow the development of this inductive method into the council and beyond. "Paul VI inherited this awareness of the 'signs of the times' from John XXIII and the Second Vatican council, but he also perceived its ambivalence," they write. "His Magisterium sought to clarify the category, so that it would not be reduced to a mere recording of 'facts,' but that in it one would perceive that abundant 'more' that signals God is at work."

When I read those sentences, I put down the book and almost wept. Here was a hermeneutical key for which I had been searching. More on that later, but for now, let us continue with their narrative.

Paul VI shared some of the concerns about *Gaudium et Spes*' methodology voiced by one of the theological periti at the council, Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, who lamented "its excessive sociological emphasis and the lack of criteria for clarifying its meaning in a biblical-theological key." Paul VI never rejected the inductive method but, instead, tried to emphasize the degree to which the inductive method was itself grounded in the teaching of the church.

So, in [*Octagesima Adveniens*](#), Paul's 1971 apostolic letter on Catholic social teaching, he writes,

It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation, which is proper to their own country, to *shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words* and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church. (emphasis mine)

Czerny and Barone add that the local Christian community "will have to discern by keeping in mind the criteria of reference are the Gospel and the Church's social teaching."

The negative overreaction to Francis' approach in certain conservative theological circles is rooted in an idolatry of theological method.

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With the election of Pope John Paul II, there is a pronounced, though not complete, return to the deductive theological method. John Paul II is also more explicit about the weight of sin and the shadow of the cross. He writes in his 1980 encyclical [Dives in Misericordia](#), "The situation of the world today not only displays transformations that give grounds for hope in a better future for man on earth, but also reveals a multitude of threats, far surpassing those known up till now."

It is the church's received and authoritative teaching that allows one to confront the ambivalence of history. Czerny and Barone write: "This emphasis on the truth that the Church has received from God, and which therefore always transcends history, appears to be an invitation to redirect the way of theological reflection along the safer path of the deductive method."

When Benedict XVI becomes pope, this deductive approach is continued and the "signs of the times" are viewed less with ambivalence than with hostility. "What is striking is the hermeneutical framework in which Benedict XVI inserts the idea of the 'signs of the times,' " the authors write. "He frames the expression as a negative evaluation of the contemporary world."

This is quite different from the way the council fathers used the expression. They were looking for evidence of grace.

Pope Francis received all these precedents and tries to forge them into a dynamic whole. A pastor with theological depth, rather than a theologian with a pastoral heart, Francis sees the limits of the deductive method. "Fidelity to the truth codified by doctrine is not sufficient for identifying the Church's pastoral form," Czerny and Barone write. "Rather, a relationship of concern, care and reciprocity must be established between the truth of the Gospel and the contemporary historical context."

Following the vision of the Second Vatican Council, what is at stake in this wrestling with the significance of the signs of the times was, and is, "the development of a theology of contemporary history that was not marginal but structurally directed toward the mission of the Church and toward determining the practical ways and means in which to embody the proclamation of the Gospel."

In his groundbreaking 2015 encyclical [*Laudato Si'*](#) the Holy Father states why he is adopting an inductive approach:

Theological and philosophical reflections on the situation of humanity and the world can sound tiresome and abstract, unless they are grounded in a fresh analysis of our present situation, which is in many ways unprecedented in the history of humanity. So, before considering how faith brings new incentives and requirements with regard to the world of which we are a part, I will briefly turn to what is happening to our common home.

The church's message and mission risks being marginalized if it is not grounded in the pastoral realities of the moment. But, at the same time as the church opens itself to learn from the world, it still sees, judges and acts with the eyes, criteria and decisiveness of faith. That faith enters into dialogue with the world not to "amass information or to satisfy curiosity," Francis writes, "but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."

There is always something profoundly existential about Francis' theological approach, precisely because he is a pastor first and last.

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The authors then offer their own gloss on this ambivalent phrase, the "signs of the times," writing, "we can conclude that a fact or event becomes a 'sign of the times' when it proves capable of permanently changing the mentality and behavior of believers, that is, when it inspires a shared awareness that can modify in a messianic or saving direction the balance of human relations in a given age or period."

This is not sociology. It is theology, deeply rooted in the Gospels and in the teachings of the Second Vatican council.

It is difficult not to conclude from the author's survey of recent papal magisteriums that both the deductive and inductive methods have their place. In different times, and perhaps when looking at different issues, the one or the other might prove more pastorally effective.

But what is very important to remember, and is too easily forgotten, is that the differences in the theological method are just that, differences in method, not differences of faith. The negative overreaction to Francis' approach in certain conservative theological circles is rooted in an idolatry of theological method. Francis is no heretic, nor was Benedict XVI indifferent to the pastoral needs of the church. One of the great values of this book is that while it bracingly sets out the differences in approach, it constantly reminds the reader that these differences of method all seek the same thing, the Kingdom of God.

I'll finish the review in my next column.

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