

The pope who prioritizes

Francis hasn't just adopted a different style from Benedict. He has put first things first.

By [Frank Lesko](#)

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There has been a lot of debate as to whether Pope Francis is changing Catholic doctrine or not. Early in his papacy, his approach was categorized as a “change in tone,” and that phrase has stuck remarkably well. It's an often unquestioned subtitle to Francis' papacy.

“Change of tone” is a politically shrewd phrase. It has the word *change*, which excites liberals. But it also suggests that the change might be more along the lines of style and not substance, which is an attempt to reassure conservatives. Francis dances in the space between.

I have never found it wholly satisfactory. **I believe the papacy of Pope Francis has been, among many things, an attempt to put first things first and second things second: Francis is the pope who prioritizes.**

Pope Francis affirms the centrality of a joyful, living relationship with Jesus Christ in *Evangelii Gaudium*. He holds up the primacy of conscience in navigating gray areas in *Amoris Laetitia*. Francis raises up care for creation to its rightful place in *Laudato Si*. He not only erases all doubt that environmental issues are merely a secondary matter but actually holds up an integral human ecology as an overarching paradigm encompassing other life issues. Throughout his papacy, Francis has asserted Catholic values of life and family while avoiding getting entrenched in the culture wars quagmire.

In like fashion, I believe Francis instituted the Year of Mercy in part to search for the appropriate balance between the necessary rules of the institution and the role of love. This is to put the practices of the church more in line with a gospel vision.

Those of us who are Catholic know how to focus on rules. We don't do as well of a job navigating in the territory of mercy. That should alarm us, given the centrality that Jesus himself gives it.

Matthew 22:40 reminds us that how the doctrines are arranged and prioritized matters immensely. When introducing the Greatest Commandment to love God and one another, Jesus adds that "all the law and prophets hang on these two commandments." This often glossed over line provides a stunning vision if we pause to consider it. This requires more than just a change in tone or even of emphasis.

Imagine that our religious laws, customs, and moral codes are like Christmas ornaments. Mercy is the tree on which they all hang. The tree not only displays them, but it helps them rise to their purpose. The tree helps them all make sense. Some ornaments may look good sitting by themselves on a mantle, but most of them do not function well without the tree. Without the tree they could all just as easily sit in some dusty box in an attic somewhere.

The ornaments themselves do not really make sense, nor do they serve much of a purpose, without the tree on which to hang. This is, I believe, what the Jesus is saying in the Gospel of Matthew. Love and mercy is the structure on which the rules and regulations of the church hang. Without it, they don't make much sense.

We may get all the rules right but if we put them in the wrong order of emphasis, or without a corresponding love, we can get it wrong.

Anyone who has spent any time immersed in the struggles of what it means to be church knows that there is a place for rules. Love them or hate them, they aren't going away entirely. But how they are applied and administered can be where the error lies. Mercy has to be held in balance with the rules of the institution.

Whereas Pope Benedict XVI may have had a knack for speaking to the letter of the law, Pope Francis has the calling to speak to the infrastructure of that law, especially as it relates to mercy. As Francis puts the house in order, he has called us into a whole church conversation about the parts of our faith and tradition that have not seen the light of day in accordance with their due and the signs of the times. These include the role of conscience, the care for our common home, and mercy.

It's not just a kinder, gentler application of the same thing.

It's a vastly reordered, radically restructured system that puts Jesus first, that takes the words of Jesus seriously, that takes the gospel seriously, and which reorders all our rules, regulations, and codes in light of those fundamental truths. It also raise mercy to its rightful place as the overarching theme, as it is the structure on which all law and prophets hang.

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