Pope Francis is an impressive guy. Impressive not in the sense of his “wow” factor, coolness, charisma or even power, but impressive in his calm inner humility. It is not what he shouts that is gripping, but what he speaks in a whisper (to borrow Frank Bruni’s characterization).

In a recent interview in the Jesuit publication “America,” the Pope characterizes himself as a “sinner.” And then, realizing how that remark will be interpreted, he goes on to say, “This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.”

When he thinks about his church -- and as a Jesuit he emphasizes “thinking” -- Pope Francis sees the overwhelming problems it faces. To solve them, he wants to “think with the church,” the “people of God.” Why? Because the people of the church “considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief.” Of course, as a Catholic leader, he means the “holy mother, the hierarchical church,...the church as the people of God, pastors and people together,” not some form of “populism.”

This “thinking with the church,” in the Pope’s view, can and should lead to changes in “human self-understanding.” He spoke of slavery and the death penalty as mistakes from which humanity and the church have learned and changed. And what test indicates when a past understanding is no longer valid? “When it loses sight of the human, or even when it is afraid of the human or deluded about itself.”

In that light, the Pope sees each individual human being as more important than the church’s doctrine. The message of salvation for all should be its front and center, not its doctrinal condemnations. While Pope Francis does not want to change church doctrine, he does want to alter how church leaders present it.

The church has sometimes “locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules.” When talking about divorce and remarriage, abortion and homosexuality, he almost turns folksy, giving several anecdotes emphasizing a loving attitude toward individual humans, “sinners” and their life choices.

Instead of condemning sinners, the church should do triage. “I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds.”

Francis repeats this phrase, “Heal the wounds. Heal the wounds.” The church needs to return to the world and “accompany” the people who live there, wherever they live: in poverty, in sickness or in spiritual need. He points particularly to the bishops, who should not only support the “movements of God” among their flock, but should “accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.”

“Finding new paths” seems to apply to Francis’s thoughts about women and their place in the church. “Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed … the church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential for the church.” He even states, “We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman … the feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions.”

Unfortunately, the tone has suddenly changed here. No more anecdotes. No love of the individual. Instead, dealing with women directly, the church should create a generalized “theology of women.”

But a theology of women is not what the 2 billion women and men who belong to the Catholic Church need. A “theology of women and men together” would be a better idea, since Catholicism exists in a world that men and women increasingly share as equals.

Most adults have a wide experience of the opposite sex. In marriage, men and women work together in the most intimate ways: companionably, intellectually, emotionally and sexually. Together, they create and raise families, loving their children with a bond and strength only they can experience.

In today’s workplace, men and women work together more and more: as colleagues, workers, members of a team, as subordinates and as supervisors. Increasingly, over the decades, women and men have grown accustomed to working with each other in these different roles.

A theology is not what is needed, but a practical guide for the relationships and community dynamics of people’s daily lives; a guide through which the hierarchy can learn how church members live their lives, lives that the priestly, celibate commitment to the church prevents them from experiencing directly.

Pope Francis is bold to challenge himself and the church’s leadership to “think with the Church,” with all the people of God. For their sake, I hope he truly sees and enacts the full potential of his goal.

Note: The interview with Pope Francis appears online at America Magazine: [http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview](http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview).