

EVANGELII GAUDIUM

The Good News from Pope Francis

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CHURCH-SPEAK, the language of official ecclesial documents, can often be a source of dismay for would-be readers, both inside and outside the church. That dismay has been evident recently in response to the questionnaire on ‘family’, which is part of the preparation for the synod of bishops that will take place later this year. The formulation of that questionnaire is anything but user-friendly—‘*How is the theory and practice of natural law in the union between man and woman challenged in light of the formation of a family?*’ As a result, many Catholics keen to participate in the consultation found the experience frustrating.

Against that background, Pope Francis is proving to be a godsend. His earthy images and direct language make his statements accessible to those hungry for nurturing in faith. *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis’ ‘Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World’, exemplifies his straightforward style. It is, after all, not every papal document that includes a mention of ‘sourpusses’ (article 85). Quotable quotes surface often in the document: ‘*an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral*’ (10); ‘*I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber*’ (44); ‘*I want a Church which is poor and for the poor*’ (198); and, of course, the already-legendary ‘*smell of the sheep*’ (24).

It would be a mistake, however, to equate Pope Francis’ freedom from jargon and obfuscation with a lack of substance. In fact, the papal document is a sustained challenge to the complacency that can impede every aspect of the church’s witness to the gospel. Rather than

simply rail against complacency, Pope Francis promotes a positive alternative: the embrace of mission. He reminds the church that mission is, and must always be, at the centre of our life of faith as a Christian community. *Evangelii Gaudium* expresses Pope Francis’ passion for mission, a passion that is the peerless source of the *gaudium* that permeates both the document and the ministry of the new bishop of Rome.

Evangelii Gaudium is the post-synodal document from the synod on ‘The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith’ (2012). It is instructive to compare Pope Francis’ exhortation with the synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris* and its final ‘Propositions’, the latter of which Pope Francis inherited from Pope Benedict XVI. The *Instrumentum Laboris*, an earnest and somewhat defensive text, begins with ‘duty’ and turns to ‘joy’ only in its Conclusion; the synod’s fifty-eight Propositions have a single reference to ‘joy’, and that exclusively in relation to the consecrated life. There is perhaps no more striking gauge of the difference between *Evangelii Gaudium* and the synod’s texts than the fact that ‘joy’ appears fifty times in the first chapter of Pope Francis’ document.

Although exactly half of the Propositions from the synod of 2012 appear as footnotes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the differences in tone between the present document and the synod’s texts indicate clearly that Pope Francis is making a personal statement or testimony, not simply repackaging the synod’s sentiments. Pope Francis signals unambiguously his conviction that ‘joy’, the joy derived from knowing the presence of God (article 4), is to underpin every expression of the church’s life.

The other linguistic feature of *Evangelii Gaudium* that identifies it as particular to Pope Francis is its use of terms characteristic of Ignatian spirituality. The exhortation contains neither direct quotes from St Ignatius Loyola nor citations from the *Spiritual Exercises*, but the constancy with which the pope speaks of ‘desire’ (thirty times), ‘discern’/‘discernment’ (twenty times) and ‘contemplate’ (fifteen times) are unmistakable pointers to his Jesuit roots. In addition, the abundance of references to ‘mercy’ (thirty-two times), which Pope Francis has made his signature tune, demonstrates conclusively that the new document expresses the pope’s priorities—‘mercy’ occurs only once in the *Lineamenta* and three times in the Propositions.

Since *Evangelii Gaudium* is a sprawling text—Pope Francis is yet to add to his arsenal the virtue of being concise, a virtue that modulates passion without dulling it—the analysis of it in this article concentrates on four themes. The four foci are: the church as a missionary body; the pastoral life of the church; the dynamics of the homily; the relationship between evangelisation and building a more just world.

The Missionary Church

A primary characteristic of a church that could be good news for our complex world is its willingness ‘to go forth’ (article 20). This involves following Jesus in the midst of ‘the unruly freedom of the world’ (article 22). Becoming a missionary church requires the renewal of every aspect of the church’s life. It requires especially a concerted effort in the church to ensure that ‘mere administration’ (article 25) does not absorb all our energies.

Accordingly, parishes need to beware of declining into ‘a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few’ (article 28). Bishops in particular can support mission by ‘allowing the flock to strike out on new paths’



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(article 31). Above all, every bishop can serve the mission of the local church by promoting whatever is conducive to participation and dialogue in those churches. Through such dialogue, the bishop ensures that those ‘who would tell him what he would like to hear’ are not the only ones to whom he listens (article 31). Pope Francis’ admonitions to bishops extend to his own office. He is alert, therefore, to the ‘excessive centralization’ that can impede the church’s missionary outreach (article 32).

Pope Francis advocates for a church characterised by a spirit that is ‘bold and creative’ (article 33). Such a church will be committed to the practice of a collective ‘wise and realistic pastoral discernment’; it will be a church willing to take risks, not simply repeat the way things have ‘always’ been done (article 33). Such a church will also not mistake mission for ‘the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed’ (article 35). *Evangelii Gaudium* invokes Vatican II’s ‘hierarchy of truths’ (article 36), as well as the teaching of Thomas Aquinas (article 37), to reinforce the need for the church to speak more about grace than the law, more about Christ than the church, and more about God’s word than the pope (article 38). The point, of course, is not to contrast the components of each pair, but to recognise that there is indeed a ‘hierarchy’ between them. The challenge for the church, therefore, is to ensure that it gives priority to ‘the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek

the good of others' (article 39).

What is particularly notable in the first chapter of the exhortation is the equation made between the effectiveness of the church's mission in the world and the conversion of the church itself, a conversion directed towards ensuring that we are not promoting a 'false god' of our own making (article 41). In the context of highlighting the importance of asking whether our words and actions as ecclesial communities are genuinely evangelical, Pope Francis refers to the urgent requirement that we free ourselves from a concentration on customs that 'may be beautiful, but ... no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel' (article 43). Equally, he stresses the need for pastors to act with 'mercy and patience' (article 44).

An authentic evangelical spirit commits the church to doing whatever good we can, 'even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street' (article 45). Evangelical activity, however, is not simply 'doing': it also involves the willingness to 'see' others and to listen to them (article 46). A church committed to mission, then, is a church with open doors—'One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door' (article 47). In order to be a conduit of grace, a missionary church will avoid situations where 'we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators' (article 47). In particular, Pope Francis appeals for the courage to commit ourselves to the poor, rather than remain 'shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security' (article 49).

The Pastoral Life of the Church

Throughout his exhortation, Pope Francis identifies the life of Christian discipleship as a life of joy, a joy that can be a source of good news in the world. Although it is easy to stigmatise both 'joy' and 'good news' as synonyms

for naïveté, the pope engages in a hard-edged critique of the contemporary world, a critique that shows an acute awareness of the challenges that confront the proclamation of the gospel. Those challenges notwithstanding, *Evangelii Gaudium* displays a deep trust in the power of the gospel to offer hope, even in the world shaped, and distorted, by globalised capitalism.

The prophetic role that any pope is uniquely placed to exercise is most evident in Pope Francis' analysis of the world of 'the market.' The sub-headings of the second chapter of the exhortation—'*No to an economy of exclusion*'; '*No to the new idolatry of money*'; '*No to a financial system which rules rather than serves*'; '*No to the inequality which spawns violence*'—identify the pope's concerns with laser-like precision. The pope names the flaws of unrestrained capitalism—its 'exclusion and inequality' (article 53), its 'trickle-down' mythology, 'sacralised workings', and 'globalization of indifference' (article 54)—with a directness that politicians consistently evade. At the heart of Pope Francis' critique is his rejection of consumerism as the defining feature of humanity (article 54). With an emphasis deeply grounded in the tradition of Catholic social teaching, the pope homes in on 'the common good' as the foundation for an ethical financial system, no less than for a peaceful world (articles 56-60).

Beyond his scrutiny of economics, the pope uses the second chapter of the exhortation to review other features of the contemporary world. In terms that echo his two immediate predecessors, Pope Francis highlights the limits of 'secularist rationalism' (article 63) and the shadow-side of our information-driven society, especially its 'remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment' (article 64). In that vein, he also affirms the importance of the church's role in raising questions that are 'less palatable to public opinion' (article 65). Particularly noteworthy in the analysis of society is the pope's

discourse on ‘cities’ (article 71-5), which he characterises as the venue from which arise both ‘countless possibilities’ (article 74) and obstacles to human development, obstacles represented by human trafficking, narcotics, the abuse of minors, and the abandonment of the elderly (article 75).

The goal of the pope’s social critique is to clarify the context in which the church is to engage in pastoral activity. Here again, the subtitles that capture the necessary priorities of such activity are particularly instructive: *‘Yes to the challenge of a missionary spirituality’*; *‘No to selfishness and spiritual sloth’*; *‘No to a sterile pessimism’*; *‘Yes to the new relationships in Christ’*; *‘No to spiritual worldliness’*; *‘No to warring among ourselves.’*

The prophetic zeal that Pope Francis demonstrates in naming social ills is no less evident in his passion for promoting a church committed to addressing those ills. A central aspect of his strategy is to highlight the dangers that might engulf the church’s pastoral workers—as an aside, the use of ‘pastoral workers’ is an intriguing instrument: it includes the ordained, but is not limited to them, so it enables the pope to make his case without becoming embroiled in unproductive disputes over who can or cannot be a ‘minister’.

Pastoral workers, then, need to guard against an ‘inordinate concern’ for ‘personal freedom and relaxation’, which result in ‘a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour’ (article 78). Pope Francis cautions pastoral workers against an obsession with being like everyone else and seeking to possess what they possess (article 79). Above all, he warns against activity ‘without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable’ (article 82). Such empty activity, driven by the desire for immediate results, leads pastoral workers to be intolerant of ‘disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross’ (article 82). Those who succumb to such a condition become like ‘mummies in a museum’, being melancholic and lacking hope

(article 83); they become ‘querulous and disillusioned pessimists’ (article 85).

The alternative to such flawed approaches is a recovery of ‘the revolution of tenderness’ that God offers humanity through the Incarnation (article 88). A church focused on God will not slip into ‘a self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism’ or a ‘narcissistic and authoritarian elitism’ (article 94)—here, the temptation to jargon proves irresistible! The key to a mission-oriented church, then, can be found only in a focus on Jesus Christ. For that reason, Pope Francis urges all in the church to reject ‘the vainglory of those who are content to have a modicum of power and would rather be the general of a defeated army than a mere private in a unit which continues to fight.’ What is needed instead is a church that draws on ‘a history of sacrifice, of hopes and daily struggles, of lives spent in service and fidelity to work, tiring as it may be’ (article 96). Likewise, we are not to be a church whose members ‘war’ against one another, but one in which there is ‘a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion’ (article 99).

The final passages of Chapter Two (articles 102-07) are less developed than the preceding parts of the chapter. The most significant feature of the final section is the pope’s effort to hold the need for ‘still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church’ (article 103) in tension with the exclusion of women from priestly ordination, which ‘can prove to be especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general’ (article 104). Although it may well be of some consolation to some women that the pope reminds the church that ‘a woman, Mary, is more important than the bishops’ (article 104), it is difficult to imagine that the current document could be the last word, even the last papal word, on women in the church.

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The Homily

The prominence of ‘the homily’ in an apostolic exhortation on evangelisation is perhaps unremarkable. More remarkable, however, is Pope Francis’s acknowledgement that homilies are a source of ‘so many concerns’, indeed of ‘suffering’, for both the people in the pews and for priests (article 135). What is not in doubt is the pope’s conviction about the importance of the homily: in the context of the Eucharist, the homily ‘surpasses all form of catechesis as the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people’ (article 137). The possibility that the homily might actually be recognised as such an exalted instrument is linked inextricably with whether or not the preacher knows ‘the heart of his community, in order to realize where its desire for God is alive and ardent, as well as where that dialogue, once loving, has been thwarted and is now barren’ (article 137).

A good homily, then, is not ‘a form of entertainment like those presented by the media’ (article 138), but ‘a kind of music which inspires encouragement, strength and enthusiasm’ (article 139). Indeed, Pope Francis presents the homily as being akin to a mother addressing her children, who are receptive because they ‘know that they are loved’ (article 139). It would be fascinating to poll both congregants and preachers to determine the degree to which the ‘motherly’ image of the homily does or does not resonate with those who listen to or preach homilies.

Pope Francis clearly believes strongly that the human qualities of the preacher – ‘the closeness of the preacher, the warmth of his voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking, the joy of his gestures’ (article 140)—can cover a multitude of sins. Indeed, he contends that those human qualities will bear fruit even when the homily ‘may be somewhat tedious’ (article 140). Preaching that involves ‘heart-to-heart communication’ can have a ‘quasi-sacramental character’; as such,

it differs markedly from a lecture on exegesis and from content that is ‘moralistic or doctrinaire’ (article 142).

‘Preparation’ is the largest single topic that *Evangelii Gaudium* examines in its review of the homily. Pope Francis asserts that preparation must have priority, ‘even if less time has to be given to other important activities’ (article 145). Preparation is far more than working on the mechanics of preaching; in fact, its core component is ‘serene concentration’ on the biblical text (article 146). Preachers, therefore, are to be the first to hear the text on which they are to preach, they are to practise *lectio divina*, and to recognise the implications of those texts for their own lives, not simply for the lives of others (articles 147-53).

As with the other emphases in the document, the discussion of the homily stresses both the human and faith dynamics that it involves. This includes linking the text to the specific situations of people’s lives, while avoiding the temptation to dwell on ‘questions that nobody asks’ (article 155). As Pope Francis presents them, good homilies are an act of love for the neighbour (article 156), they ‘awaken a desire and move the will towards the Gospel’ (article 157). In short, good homilies form part of ‘a mystagogical renewal’ in the church that aids ‘the integration of every dimension of the person within a communal journey of hearing and response’ (article 166).

Evangelisation and Building a More Just World

The election of a South American as pope sparked immediate debate over whether he was or was not a devotee of liberation theology. Some participants in that debate were adamant that not only had Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis’ earlier incarnation, eschewed that theology, he had positively opposed it. Irrespective of whether or not Pope Francis claims ‘liberation theology’ as a brand, there are certainly sentiments in *Evangelii Gaudium* that would

not be out of place in the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez or Jon Sobrino—nor indeed of John Paul II. Accordingly, the exhortation is unequivocal in the link that it makes between the Holy Spirit at the heart of evangelisation and a commitment ‘to desire, seek and protect the good of others’ (article 178).

As is common to liberation theologies, it is Pope Francis’ reflections on ‘the kingdom’ that generate his strongest statements on the link between the spread of the gospel and service to the sufferings of our world: ‘True Christian hope, which seeks the eschatological kingdom, always generates history’ (article 181). The document stresses that authentic religion is neither merely private nor focused on the preparation of souls for heaven, because ‘God wants his children to be happy in this world too’ (article 182). Faith, therefore, is utterly reconcilable with ‘a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it’ (article 183)

Pope Francis identifies the ‘option for the poor’ as ‘primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one’ (article 198). As such, it has implications for the church’s own life: it calls the church to be friends with the poor; indeed it calls the church to be ‘poor and for the poor’ (article 198). The connection that the pope makes between

evangelisation and justice resounds in his emphasis on the need for the church to be attentive to ‘a privileged and preferential religious care’ for the poor, since ‘the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care’ (article 200).

It is evident that Pope Francis envisages the church being transformed by commitment to the poor. Thus, he imagines a church that moves from ‘spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk’ (article 207) to become one that draws near to the world’s multiple expressions of poverty and vulnerability (articles 210-12), is committed to care for the earth (articles 215-16), and work for peace (articles 218-21), especially through multiple forms of ‘social dialogue’ with other religions (articles 238-58).

To describe *Evangelii Gaudium* as an inspiring document would be true, but that description would run the risk of domesticating the pope’s challenge, reducing it to the level of a bumper-sticker or a fridge-magnet. A more appropriate response, for individuals and communities, would be continual prayerful reflection on the text. In that reflection, we might pray that the Spirit would enable us to experience Christ, ‘risen and glorified’, as ‘the well-spring of our hope’ and empower us with ‘the help we need to carry out the mission which he has entrusted to us’ (article 275).

***Let the risen Jesus enter your life, welcome him as a friend,
with trust: he is life!***

If up till now you have kept him at a distance, step forward.

He will receive you with open arms.

If you have been indifferent, take a risk: you won’t be disappointed.

If following him seems difficult, don’t be afraid, trust him, be confident that he is close to you, he is with you and he will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do.

—Pope Francis.