

FROM *GAUDIUM ET SPES* TO *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

From Proclamation to Pastoral Response

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WITH THE PROCLAMATION—and widespread acceptance—of *Evangelii gaudium* by Pope Francis, and in light of the Synod on the Family, we have a chance to compare content and context of the mid-twentieth century with that of the early twenty-first; and a challenge to engage today's Catholics, to listen to them, hear their questions and concerns and respond to them in ways that make sense both of the Gospel and their ideals and issues.

So when he said recently, 'we must be Catholic on the outside as well as on the inside', the Archbishop of Washington DC made an observation that might at first hearing appear somewhat trite, yet in its simplicity this comment is actually rather profound, and what is implied may not be as obvious to many as it seems.

And, while recognizing the risk of claiming too much for these few words, the observation by Cardinal Wuerl could neatly encapsulate the message of both *Gaudium et spes* and *Evangelii gaudium*, if only summarily, while at the same time—again even if only cursorily—characterize the difference of approach required of the Catholic reader of *Evangelii gaudium* today and of *Gaudium et spes* yesteryear.

Vatican Council II, Gaudium et spes and aggiornamento

Fifty years on from December 1965, *Gaudium et spes* remains the *pièce de résistance* of Vatican Council II, bringing into pastoral

focus the ideals of all its previous documents. Its appeal was to the everyday, everyone, everywhere. And in that was both the strength and weakness of *Gaudium et spes*.

It was proclamation on a grand scale, setting out for every Catholic the Christian vision for building the community of God's people and making the reign of God a reality in their lives and in their world ... in the home, in the workplace, in business, in leisure time, in professional and in ordinary life situations.

Gaudium et spes set out principles and values that needed (re)emphasizing, a vision to engage and challenge the 1960's Church and beyond.

And yet, no matter how sweeping, visionary—even new—the proclamation of *Gaudium et spes*, it is the voice of an 'older church', offering general principles and guidelines, exhortation to all the faithful. It spoke of a one size fits all approach, and though the implied message was indeed 'if the cap fits, wear it', there was also the underlying assumption that there was only one cap! So while the teaching of *Gaudium et spes* was necessary, timely, appropriate, it remained ultimately insufficient for many practical purposes, as subsequent documents from Pope, Congregations and Synods have shown.

Pope Francis, Evangelii gaudium and coinvolgimento

In March 2013, came Pope Francis with his feet firmly on the ground, his down to earth

approach—earthy images and example—and with, in November of the same year, the formal expression of this in *Evangelii gaudium*.

With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come. (par. 1)

Pope Francis was moving the Church from *aggiornamento* to *coinvolgimento*!

Then and Now

Fifty years or so on from *Gaudium et spes*, the vision statement, the manifesto, comes *Evangelii gaudium*, the handbook ... the emphasis shifting from what is expected of (any) good Catholic to the who, why and how of what being a good Catholic implies and involves, personally and individually, in everyday life.

This shift of emphasis may be highlighted by two other comparisons. *Gaudium et spes* might be comparable to the Discourse at the Last Supper (John 14-17), yet Pope Francis reminds us that without the washing of the feet (John 13), the words 'do this in memory of me' have no context. Further, while Vatican Council II might be comparable to the disciples gathered to await the Holy Spirit, Pope Francis reminds us that when the Spirit came the disciples were pushed out the door to do something!

And this is not mere toying with ideas and images. The Pentecost experience is at the heart of what is termed the new evangelisation.

'What does this mean?' the people asked when they heard the Pentecost message. A good question! In its inimitable way, the Pentecost experience tells us the whole world is able to hear the message—people from all countries, all faiths, all generations, all cultures—and, significantly, hear the message in one's own language, one's own life situation, one's own search for meaning, direction and purpose in life.



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This is why Pope Francis resonates with people, why he is so well respected and listened to—and, yes, challenged. He speaks the Gospel message to people in their own language and life situation. And he understands that while the ideal is aspirational, we actually live in a world where choices are complex, multi-layered, confusing; where our choices are often not only between the simplistic good v bad, but between good v good or better, bad v bad, and even more challenging, bad v worse.

A wise Redemptorist, Herman Boelaars, at the height of the crisis over *Humanae vitae*, called this approach 'the theology of the imperfect response', recognising that unlike the challenge of the textbook *casus conscientiae*, real life asks of us not the best possible, but the best we can, given the situation and the (realistic) alternatives available.

And so some fifty years after the Council Pope Francis has offered in *Evangelii gaudium* part two of *Gaudium et spes*, needing only his Encyclical on the Environment as icing on the cake to complete the catechesis ... except of course, there is still so much to be done to build on the rather tentative steps taken to address the role and status of women in the Church.

Evangelii gaudium is the pastoral response to the proclamation of *Gaudium et spes*. *Evangelii gaudium* is the appeal to each rather than all, to practice more than principle, to conscience more than casuistry, to the unique more than the universal.

Implications for Everyday Living

In the context of a 21st century Pentecost experience, what do we do when we are pushed out the door by the Holy Spirit to live the Gospel message? How are we to hear and respond to this message in our own language, circumstance, situation?

In his Catechesis for World Youth Day, July 2013, Pope Francis put it very simply: 'dear young people, we need 21st century saints who are at home in the world they live in'. And, of course, this is not meant to be age exclusive! For those who are older, 'if the cap fits ...'

If morality is 'the art of making appropriate choices', then morality for a Christian is 'the art of making choices appropriate for living as a disciple of Jesus Christ'.

This would imply that living a Christ-like life will be concerned with context as much as content. And a focus on context would need to put primary emphasis on why do I questions as determiners of (Christian) moral choice

before turning to what do I do.

Conclusion

The pastoral challenge of Pope Francis and *Evangelii gaudium* is not that we be Catholics loyal to the teaching of the Church and its moral imperatives, so much as Catholics invited to (re)discover the 'good news' of the Gospel; learning again the biblical meaning of *shema*, listening with the heart; that Jesus' command was not simply to 'love God and one another, but is *Christian Torah*, 'to love as Jesus has loved;' and in reading and responding to today's 'signs of the times', to develop and foster what might be termed a 'Good Samaritan approach'—that is, always putting the needs of others before one's own.

Or, to express all this at its simplest and most profound, indeed to return to the starting point of this presentation, our aim is to be so (consciously) Catholic on the inside, that we become (conscientiously) Catholic on the outside.

Pope John XXIII, to whom many already compare Francis, opened the Second Vatican Council with a talk he titled *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, "Mother Church Rejoices." Perhaps the most important document of Vatican II is "On the Church in the Modern World." The document's identifying words, *Gaudium et Spes* ("Joy and Hope"), link it to John XXIII's opening talk as well as Francis' first exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel."

From his first hours as pope, Francis has re-enacted or spoken of the great pastoral transformation of Vatican II as his own agenda. Francis' actions parallel the simple, ever-human gestures of John so that the world soon recognized him, as it does Francis, as a man it can approach easily because he strives to understand and love its people rather than to condemn and make its people anxious about their salvation.

—Eugene Cullen Kennedy, "Pope Francis to us: 'I am Vatican II'", *NCR*, Jan. 16, 2014