



## Second Sunday of Advent December 8, 2013 A

### Excerpts from Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation on The Joy of the Gospel

On November 24, Feast of Christ the King, our universally loved Pope Francis issued a 48,000-word Apostolic Exhortation called *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). The following are some excerpts.

*The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.* (para 2)

**Reflection question:** Do you agree with these sentiments of Francis?

*I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.” The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.* (para 3)

In our parish, our Christ Renews His Parish (CRHP) men’s/women’s retreat weekends have offered hundreds of parishioners an opportunity to *renew* and *deepen* their relationship with Christ and his Church.

#### **A church and parish with a “missionary impulse”**

Francis dreams of a church with a strong “missionary impulse,” a church and parish ready to reform

everything about its “ways of doing things” so that she can successfully bring the gospel of joy to the world. The Church and parishes should not be about self-preservation but about evangelization, about sharing the gospel of joy with all who are ready to listen (para 27).

Francis says: *“In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers.”* Parishes ought to be a *“community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach”* (para 28).

When I read those words, I am most grateful for the many forms of small communities active in our parish and engaged in doing what Francis is referring to. In and through these small communities, parishioners are evangelized and are enthusiastic to share the Gospel with others. Could we do it better? Absolutely! Just imagine what our parish would be like if more and more parishioners had a thirst to draw the disconnected and alienated back to our Church family.

Francis refers to the Church’s need to “reform the papacy” (para 32). He says: *“Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and missionary outreach.”*

#### **Don’t allow secondary aspects to get in the way of Jesus’ primary message**

Francis continues:

*If we attempt to put all things in a missionary key, this will also affect the way we communicate the message. In today’s world of instant communication and occasionally biased media coverage, the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects. In this way certain issues which are part of the Church’s moral teaching are taken out of the context which gives them their meaning. The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ’s message. We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart*

of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness. (para 34)

*Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing.* (para 35)

If I was having breakfast with Francis, I would ask: What exactly do you mean by “secondary aspects”? I think I know what he means by “essentials”—God’s love and mercy. God’s desire for us is to have a relationship with him. God desires all of us to be active members of a loving Church family. If we get that right, perhaps the rest will fall into place.

When some people want to come back to the Church or convert to Catholicism, there might be the obstacle of a previous marriage that needs to be annulled. Perhaps this is one issue bishops and pastors should not be obsessing about. I don’t.

Francis speaks about the importance of finding fresh and new ways of expressing ancient truths (para 41). *“The deposit of faith is one thing—the way it is expressed is another.”*

Yet Francis says that we will never fully succeed in making the Church’s teachings understood or fully appreciated by everyone (para 42). Why? Because *“faith always remains something of a cross; it retains a certain obscurity.... Some things are only understood... from the standpoint of this assent....”*

Cardinal John Henry Newman, former Oxford professor and convert to Catholicism, used to say to those who wanted to join the Church but were having difficulty with certain practices: *“Do them and then you will understand.”*

### **A church with open doors**

Francis says: *“A church which goes forth is a church whose doors are open”* (para 46).

He adds: *“Nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason”* (para 47). It seems some pastors will not baptize children until parents have “all their ducks in order.” I push very hard to draw non-churchgoing parents seeking sacraments for their children back into the Church, but I never refuse them the sacraments. I would delay reception if they said to

me: “We don’t go to church and frankly we have no intention of beginning.”

Concerning the Eucharist, Francis says: *“It is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”* Also: *“Frequently, pastors act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is a house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems”* (para 47).

### **“A church bruised and dirty”**

Francis exhorts us: *Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty, because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37)* (para 49).

When has a Pope spoken like that? Francis tells us *“not to obsess about rules and procedures.”* Let us be concerned about touching people’s lives.

### **Four NO’s**

In chapter two of the Exhortation, Francis draws our attention to the huge numbers of people who live without health care and education—even in rich nations (para 52).

In paras 53-60, he lists four things Christians should say No to:

- 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 equality which spawns violence

Some compelling quotes:

*“Can we stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving?”*

*“We have created a ‘disposable culture.’”*

*“Debt and the accumulation of interest also make it difficult for countries to realize the potential of their own economies and keep citizens from enjoying their real purchasing power. To all this we can add widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion, which have taken on worldwide dimensions. The thirst for power and possessions know no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.”*

*“Inequality eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve.”*

### **The good done by parishes and religious communities**

Francis writes: *But in justice, I must say first that the contribution of the Church in today’s world is enormous. The pain and the shame we feel at the sins of some members of the Church, and at our own, must never make us forget how many Christians are giving their lives in love. They help so many people to be healed or to die in peace in makeshift hospitals. They are present to those enslaved by different addictions in the poorest places on earth. They devote themselves to the education of children and young people. They take care of the elderly who have been forgotten by everyone else. They look for ways to communicate values in hostile environments. They are dedicated in many other ways to showing an immense love for humanity inspired by the God who became man. I am grateful for the beautiful example given to me by so many Christians who joyfully sacrifice their lives and their time. This witness comforts and sustains me in my own effort to overcome selfishness and to give more fully of myself* (para 76).

*Today, our challenge is not so much atheism as the need to respond adequately to many people’s thirst for God, lest they try to satisfy it with alienating solutions or with a disembodied Jesus who demands nothing of us with regard to others. Unless these people find in the Church a spirituality which can offer healing and liberation, and fill them with life and peace, while at the same time summoning them to fraternal communion and missionary fruitfulness, they will end up being taken in by solutions which neither make life truly human nor give glory to God* (para 89).

### **Divisions within Christian communities**

Francis speaks about divisions between Christians (paras 98-101).

*It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even conservative persons, can welcome different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?* (para 100)

### **Women**

With respect to women, Francis writes:

*Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded. The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion, but it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general.... Its key and axis is not power understood as domination, but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist; this is the origin of its authority, which is always a service to God’s people. This presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.* (para 104)

Regarding Youth Ministry and vocations (paras 105-107), Francis says that there needs to be greater progress in: *“the awareness that the entire community is called to evangelize and educate the young, and the urgent need of the young to exercise greater leadership.”*

### **Evangelization**

It is still very easy for so many Catholics to think that evangelization is not their business. Francis does not accept this, saying: *“Every baptized Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim God’s love”* (para 120).

Francis teaches that we also need to let others evangelize us. Even little children can and do evangelize parents, and teachers of the faith can be moved and touched by the inspiring witness of their students.

### **The homily**

Francis gives us homilists an extensive seminar on preaching (paras 135-159). He says, among other things: *“The homily is the touchstone for judging a*

*pastor's closeness and ability to communicate with his people”— and that “the homily should not be a form of entertainment...it should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture....” A homily should help people encounter God. Quoting St. Paul, Francis says a homily “should not be spoken to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts” (1Thes 2:4). Homilists should first let God’s word penetrate their hearts before they seek to let it penetrate the hearts of their people. The homilist needs “to be able to link the biblical text to the human situation, to an experience that cries out for the light of God’s word”.*

When preparing my homily, I frequently seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I read several commentaries on the readings, then write and rewrite several times what I feel God wants me to say. I also pray for *all* who will be preaching in Church this coming weekend and for the people who will be coming to Church. I would love it if you would do the same. God knows we homilists need all the help we can get.

Next week more excerpts from the rest of Pope Francis’s Exhortation. If you have read the Exhortation and would like to share with me what spoke to you, please do so.

**Reflection questions:** What spoke to you most in the above excerpts?

Have a blessed Advent,

*Le Saran*