

Reflection on the Fourth Chapter of “*Evangelii Gaudium*”: The Social Dimension of the Gospel



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I am writing this reflection in Papua New Guinea, a Melanesian country in Oceania lying just north of Australia. People call it “paradise” country, a place covered with green rain forests inhabited by people with hundreds of diverse cultures and traditions. The first missionaries arrived here about 160 years ago. Today, it is predominantly Christian, with Catholics making up about 35% of the population. However, today Papua New Guinea is still considered one of the least developed countries in the world. In spite of the many wonders the country offers, many tourists avoid it because of news reports about crime, tribal fights, and sorcery-related killings. Does the Gospel have any social relevance to a country like Papua New Guinea? Does the Christian faith concern itself only with the spiritual and the afterlife? Does it have anything to offer with regards the deep human aspirations of people for a better life in this world?

Building the Kingdom of God

The fourth chapter of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* concerns itself with the social dimension of the Gospel. Pope Francis begins the chapter by stating, “To evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world” (EG, 176). The Gospel has a clear social content. To miss this is to distort the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization (EG, 177). “The Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. Nor should our loving response to God be seen simply as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of ‘charity à la carte’, or a series

of acts aimed solely at easing our conscience. The Gospel is about *the kingdom of God* (cf. Lk 4:43). An authentic faith always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. Thus, the Church 'cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice'. All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world" (EG, 180).

These words clearly state the social relevance of the Gospel, which aims to build God's Kingdom of justice, love and peace. Jesus himself said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly". In Jesus' ministry, preaching the Gospel and healing the sick always went hand in hand. He preached about love, but he also reached out to people suffering from all kinds of misery. He healed them and made them whole. He embraced them with the liberating and compassionate love of God who is Father, Physician, and Good Shepherd. He sent his disciples to do the same, and to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand. No one was to be exempted from this apostolic duty. The love of God cannot be separated from the love of neighbour. At the end of our lives, we shall be judged by the love we had for the least fortunate: "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food... In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:34-40).

The first missionaries and the Church in Papua New Guinea remembered the social dimension of the Gospel. They evangelized the people, but they also put up schools and health centers for the poor and sick. Almost half the services in the country are provided by the Catholic Church. However, much more needs to be done. As the population grows, so do the needs of the people. With the economic crisis many countries face, helping those in need is becoming harder to do. The Church has to flex its muscles in tapping local resources, the government, and local people.

St. Vincent de Paul said, "We must love God with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows." This is made possible through help of the Holy Spirit and the "love of Christ that presses us on". The service of the poor is the responsibility not only of priests and sisters, but also of the lay people. Vincent motivated and organized all three of them during his time to reach out to the least fortunate. In his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI said that to love God is to truly seek the good of man, the whole man and each and every person. Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* spoke of solidarity, a sincere desire to seek the good of the other. This translates itself into effective action. Many times, this will demand a systemic change in economic, political, and cultural structures and values. The poor need

to be involved in making decisions that affect their lives and their future. The integral development of our neighbour is an essential part of the Gospel and of the whole mission of evangelization. Evangelization, liberation, and human promotion are not meant to be separated from one another.

An option rooted in faith

Pope Francis said that “our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members” (EG, 186). The work of human development and liberation cannot be separated from our Christian faith. It flows directly from our understanding of who Christ is, and our relationship with Him. The Church’s option for the poor is not the fruit of any ideology, nor a desire to gain any political, social, or economic benefit for oneself. The missionary is not a mere social worker or political analyst. He is, first and foremost, a man of faith. The Church’s commitment and preferential option for the poor has theological roots.

Jesus, who became poor and was in total solidarity with the poor, is the center and soul of the Church’s option for the poor and engagement with the world. Through the Incarnation, He took upon himself the poverty and the sufferings of every poor person in this world. He was not content with just sending the hungry away, but told his disciples “you yourselves give them something to eat”. He looked at the poor with great compassion, and made their burdens his own. The Church follows in the footsteps of the Master. The missionary, and every disciple of Christ, sees the poor with the eyes of Christ. Every person in this world, however poor and seemingly despicable, bears an absolute dignity that cannot be removed. All people are created by God, bear His image, and are loved to the point that His Son, Jesus gave up his life for him.

A challenge to all

According to Pope Francis, “each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society” (EG, 187). The option for the poor is a calling to every baptized Christian and to every person of good will. Christian discipleship is not cheap discipleship. The following of Christ demands a bold and committed option on behalf of the poor. It is not content with providing temporary or cosmetic relief to the plight of the poor and the suffering. Real love and solidarity with the poor demand that we address structural injustices, as well as spiritual poverty and the reality of sin in our

world. According to Pope Francis, this latter is the greater poverty in our world. This can demand heavy sacrifices on our part and a change in priorities and lifestyle. Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). The option for the poor calls for a change of heart and way of looking at life and one's relationship with others in the world. The focus can no longer be solely me and my family. When we start seeing with the eyes of faith, there are no longer strangers, but only a brother and a sister in Christ. The Gospel transforms our social values and makes us live a more simple life so that others may simply live.

The Gospel option for the poor is for everyone, including those in business and government. People usually regard these last two employments with certain distrust, as though business and politics belong to the corrupt. However, as Pope Francis says, these are noble vocations. Those engaged in business should be challenged by a greater meaning in life. "They can serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all" (EG, 203). In addition, the Pope observes, "politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good... I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, and the lives of the poor... to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare" (EG, 205).

Partnership and solidarity

In Papua New Guinea, we are blessed because there is an established partnership agreement between the government and the churches, especially in the areas of health care and education. We work together as equal partners for the good of the people. The government realizes that they can serve people better if they worked with the churches. At the same time, the churches realize they cannot serve the people without the help of the government. There is need for a joint spirit of stewardship and collaboration. In Milne Bay Province, the government pays the salaries and maintains the facilities of the eight medical centres and hospitals run by the 'Catholic Agency'. The government also helps us with our Catholic Agency schools, which enroll over 150 students in elementary and secondary levels. Four of these are technical/vocational schools and one is for children with disabilities. The proposed St. Mary Teachers College, presently under construction, is also a fruit of the collaboration between the Catholic Church and the government of Papua New Guinea. The diocese erects and manages the schools, while the government pays teachers' salaries and the tuition and fees of the students. The government respects the identity, philosophy and values of our agency schools and health centers, while the

Church abides by the regulations set up by the government. So much good can be done if government and Church work together for the good of the people. They don't have to be at odds with each other. The Church collaborates with the government while maintaining its own freedom and autonomy. This is not always easy. We learned to dialogue and to listen patiently to each other. The Gospel challenges all of us to work together in solidarity for the good of our people, esp. the least fortunate.

Stewardship and sharing

One of the ways solidarity is practised is through the exercise of responsible stewardship. Today there is a temptation to think that poverty will disappear if only governments focus on economic development by increasing their gross national production. Many times this is coupled with programs of population control, assuming it will engender a higher quality of life and service to people. Yet, Pope Francis reminds us: "Growth in justice requires more than economic growth... it requires decisions, programs, mechanisms, and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and integral promotion of the poor, which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality" (EG, 204). There are no easy ways and short-cuts. As the Pope says, "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor" (EG, 148).

There will be times when both Church and government will have to make unpopular and painful decisions to ensure that property and income are well distributed, so that the rich do not have too much, and the poor too little to survive. There is need to protect private property as a right, but there is also a need to educate people on the social function of property and the universal destination of goods, which are the higher values. As Pope Francis noted, "The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good" (EG, 189). Profit can no longer be the sole criterion of business. No one has the right to the exclusive enjoyment of the goods he possesses no matter how hard he worked for them. The Lord is the sole master and owner of everything.

We are just mere stewards whose duty is to make sure that everyone in this world has enough of the world's goods to live with dignity as children of God. Governments and multinational companies must insure there are jobs for all. These include migrants, who flee from not only political or religious persecution, but also economic poverty. How some governments deal with migrants today brings shame to humanity. We all have a sacred duty to create a world without borders because the world belongs to God, and every citizen of this world is a child of God.

Spiritual care

While concern for justice and the material well-being of the poor are important, we should not think that this is all that matters in life. As Pope Francis stated: “The worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care” (EG, 200). Genuine and effective love for the poor is always holistic, and includes the spiritual dimension. This aspect is often neglected, as though the only thing that matters is their material and economic welfare. However, the root of much of the suffering and poverty of people in the world today owes itself to the lack of a spiritual foundation. Sin, which is no other than turning one’s back from God, is the root of all that is evil. Sin makes a person self-centered and destroys love. It also destroys the sinner, while devastating others in the process.

Humanity needs to be saved from its tendency toward sinfulness. It is Jesus and the power of the Gospel that saves. Human promotion and liberation cannot be separated from evangelization. It is primarily evangelization that builds God’s kingdom of justice, love and peace. It is faith in Jesus that makes authentic liberation and human promotion possible. Evangelization is what sets people free. This concerns not only individuals, but also whole communities. It embraces attitudes, values, cultures and social structures. The whole of creation must turn to God and be transformed by the love of Christ. The spiritual builds God’s Kingdom on earth.

Care for the least fortunate

Concern for justice demands concern for the most vulnerable. Here, Pope Francis makes mention of people ‘on the margins’: the homeless, addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, and the elderly. He calls attention to the plight of migrants, victims of various kinds of human trafficking, prostitution, children used for begging, exploiting undocumented labour, women who endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence, and unborn children (EG, 211). As Pope Francis notes, Jesus identifies himself with the least among us (Mt 25:40). In today’s world, with its emphasis on success and self-reliance, there is not an investment in efforts to help the slow, the weak, or the less talented to find opportunities in life. Government often gives more attention to the youth and the economic development of the people. Very little is being done for the poorest of the poor, the homeless, those with mental disabilities, those neglected and abandoned by their families, and people wandering the streets and sleeping on the sidewalks.

In my Diocese of Alotau, the most destitute are often found at the doorsteps of the priests’ house and my own house. We do what we can. It is not easy because the poor can easily become dependent and

demand more things. A mentally disturbed lady often comes to me begging for food. I feed her, but then, she also asks for a place to stay. I gave her my garage, but then she asked for beddings and toiletries. Later, she asked help for her children's schooling. Finally, she asked if we could provide her with her own house. If only I had the means!

I consulted our Caritas coordinator, and brought this matter up with the government and the Women's Association. They all said that I should not be coddling this woman, but rather make her husband more accountable. She would not live with her husband, who was living with another woman, and who causes her emotional and mental problems. The case is complicated, as are cases of many other displaced people. If only we had a Mother Teresa or a Vincent de Paul in our community! If only people had more faith and love to stretch out their hearts and their arms to people like her. There is need to evangelize and the witness of charity. As Scripture says, "Faith, if good deeds do not go with it, is quite dead" (Jn 1:17). "Though I have all the faith necessary to move mountains – if I am without love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

Care for the unborn

Pope Francis said that care for the most defenseless and innocent among us involves the "conviction that a human being is always sacred and inviolable in any situation and at every stage of development" (EG, 213). I once attended a meeting organized by the United Nations in Port Moresby. It was about the UN declaration on human rights. I noticed that although most of the human rights were given adequate explanation, yet the right to life was only afforded one or two sentences. I asked the facilitator what she understood by the term 'human life'. When does it begin? I knew that certain organizations in the UN are pro-abortion, and I must have caught the UN representative unprepared. She admitted it was a difficult question, and told me she would get back to me. She never came back. In Papua New Guinea, the government has recruited the services of an international NGO to carry out the program of Family Planning and Population Control in the country. In the Solomon Islands, the government has also invited another international NGO that specializes in 'family planning' to do this work for them. These two international organizations are well known for being in the forefront of abortion. Those in charge of the country's planning and development say that there are just too many people and not enough resources to go around. Actually, PNG has only 7 million people. It is larger and richer in natural resources than the Philippines, which has over 100 million people.

Pope Francis says that human beings are ends in themselves and never to be seen as a means of resolving other problems. In many poor

countries, governments and organizations are not doing enough to for their own people, the most important resource in the development of any country. In PNG, government is spending millions of kina to make the contraceptive hormonal implant available to women of childbearing age. There have been reports of women complaining of bleeding and of getting pregnant in spite of the implant. If only no money were involved! If only people were better evangelized to know how to respect the sacredness of the body God has given them, control their passions, and trust in Divine Providence.

Much more can be said about the social dimension of the Gospel as stated in the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*. I suggest that you read the whole chapter from beginning to end, to see how it applies to your situation, and what God demands of you. The Gospel cannot be separated from social life, because by the Incarnation, God became human to save us. Evangelization and the witness of charity are God's invitation for our salvation. They also show us God's incredible love for us.