

“Evangelii Gaudium” and the Vincentian Charism



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Evangelii Gaudium is an inspirational document that will have a deep impact on the Church for years to come. It certainly ought to have a big bearing on every Vincentian as it touches the core of our charism itself. Pope Francis covers a much ground in this document. He treats specifically and extensively various dimensions of ‘evangelization of the poor’, the Vincentian charism. The Pontiff begins the document with these words: “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. 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” (EG, 1).

What is this new chapter that he speaks of? Some think it is articulated in paragraph 27: “I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG, 27). The Pope says it is time to open a new chapter to channel all the energies of the Church toward evangelization rather than self-preservation. What a big and beautiful statement! Many people believe this statement gives hope to the church and can serve to restore its credibility, as they think that for a long time, the Church has been preoccupied with attempts at self-preservation.

The rest of the document speaks about how this can be done. The document is not just a theological treaty or a dogmatic study but

a way to live our faith and a program for evangelization. Though the document deals extensively with numerous themes in the various chapters, the main ideas with special implications on our Vincentian charism are as follows.

1. The Sources of Evangelization

For Pope Francis, evangelization is a fruit of one's personal encounter and experience of Christ. This is very important for all missionaries and evangelizers to recognize and adhere to as a basic principle. The motivating force of evangelization is the result of one's personal experience of Christ and his love for each one of us. Impelled by this experience, one goes forward sharing that joy, the "Good News" with others, inviting them to have the same personal experience. "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 unflinchingly 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" (EG, 3). Pope Francis points out two key sources of evangelization.

First, we can evangelize only because of God first loved us. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19); has loved us gratuitously, and has loved us unconditionally. Therefore, we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, going out to others, seeking those who have fallen away, and standing at the crossroads to welcome the outcast. Second, our evangelization depends on our ability to accept the Gospel into our lives. "Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?" (EG, 8). It is the personal experience of God's mercy that becomes our driving force in evangelization.

2. The New Evangelization

There are three main components to the New Evangelization: first, it is for the Catholic to begin with himself or herself. The evangelizer must be first evangelized in order to truly witness to the faith. The Catholic should deepen his or her own faith through the varied means provided by the Church to become an effective evangelizer.

Second, it is for Catholics who, although baptized, whose lives do not reflect the demands of baptism. These are Catholics lacking meaningful relationship with the Church. The Church no longer sustains them in their spiritual journey and the practice of the faith. The Church calls them to conversion, and priests should reach out to them so they can rediscover the joy of the Gospel and the faith in which they were

baptized. The call for conversion is for all Catholics irrespective of their state. Conversion, as a radical change of heart, is an ongoing aspect of the spiritual life. The New Evangelization calls for conversion of all Catholics, laity, and clergy as well.

Third, it is the proclamation of the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ, and those who have always rejected him. This task is a mandate entrusted to all Christians in virtue of their baptism and confirmation. Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles, understood very profoundly this mandate when he said, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). Also, the apostle says, “If I proclaim the Gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel” (1 Cor 9:15-16). Thus, it is incumbent on all Christians to grasp the gravity of this mandate. The Second Vatican Council teaches that “each disciple of Christ has an obligation to spread the faith to the best of his ability” (*Lumen Gentium*, 17). Pope Francis challenged all Catholics to be actively engaged in person to person preaching “on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey” (EG, 127).

Pope Francis believes evangelization begins by sharing the basic message of the Gospel.

“In catechesis too, we have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement or kerygma, which needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal... On the lips of the catechist, the first proclamation must ring out over and over: Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (EG, 164).

He goes on to note the importance of the ‘kerygma’ throughout the life of a Christian: “It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment” (EG, 164). He insists that every baptized person is called to be agents of evangelization, as one should be eager to share the good news one has received with everyone he comes in contact. The content of the proclamation is basically the unconditional love of God for every human person created in the image of God.

3. Missionary Disciple

The term “missionary disciple” is used throughout the document. The two terms hold in tension the need both for a relationship with our Lord and the need to go to the outskirts to preach the Gospel. One thing is very clear. Every baptized member of the Catholic faith is called to evangelize and to be a missionary disciple. By virtue of

their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). “All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (EG, 120). Every baptized person has this right and duty to be a ‘missionary disciple’, to be an evangelizer. All have to think of the ways and means of fulfilling this in one’s own life-situations.

The right and duty to evangelize is rooted in the call and identity of every Christian. For the Pope, the Church exists to evangelize, “The Church is herself a missionary disciple” (EG, 40). Having affirmed this, he describes the approach of the missionary disciple, “What I would like to propose is something much more in the line of an evangelical discernment. It is the approach of a missionary disciple, an approach nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit” (EG, 50).

4. Pope Francis’ vision for the Church

Pope Francis states categorically his vision for the Church:

“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” (EG, 49).

This remark of Pope Francis says it all. He wants us to return to a Church that looks like the early Church, one without much property and worldly wealth, but with a great evangelizing spirit, one that continuously witnessed to the Lord Jesus to the point of death. The Holy Father has told bishops to get out of their offices, go out to the streets, and meet up with their flock. He also told them not to become ‘airport bishops’, but to be always present to their flock.

Pope Francis urges all Catholics to come out of themselves and reach out to others in love. To preserve our security, to remain in our comfort zones, to withdraw from others, not to reach out to others, is to become spiritually dead. As Christians and Vincentians, we find fulfilment when we reach out to others and embrace them, allowing them to touch our lives. To be closed in and look only inside ourselves is to be selfish, narcissistic, and filled with dryness and spiritual aridity. The nature of the Church and the identity of a Christian is to reach out to others in love and concern, and to be at the service of the other. The Pontiff touchingly states: “If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good” (EG, 9). He also advises

us, "If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving" (EG, 274).

5. The Pastoral ministry

Pope Francis spends a considerable amount of time on pastoral ministry as he looks to see how a missionary impulse would change parish life. For him, the parish should encourage and train people to live the gospel values and be proclaimers of the Gospel:

"In all its activities, the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and are a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented" (EG, 28).

It is not enough that we are concerned about the liturgy and doctrines, but our actual concern should be whether the Gospel is effectively lived and whether it makes any change in the life of the faithful. "In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel has a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time" (EG, 95).

As for sharing the message of the Gospel, the Holy Father says: "Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed... 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". The Pope is so concerned about the transmission of the message that he later spends several paragraphs (EG, 135-159) just on preaching homilies.

6. Church which is poor and for the Poor

We all know that Pope Francis wants "a Church which is poor and for the poor". The poor took up a huge section in this Apostolic Exhortation and his words are consonant with the goals of being a Vincentian. That is why one is inclined to think that he is a Vincentian in spirit. He notes: "We have to state, without mincing words, that 'there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor'. May we never

abandon them” (EG, 48). The Church has a special place for the poor because of the generosity of our Lord Jesus who “although he was rich, he became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through his poverty” (2 Cor 8:9).

Pope Francis considers the work of evangelization closely connected to the daily concrete life of the person. “Evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both personal and social” (EG, 181). The evangelizer has to take into consideration the human person, and see that the Gospel message addresses all the personal and social dimensions of the life of the poor.

He invites everyone to be involved in the mission of the integral development and total liberation of the human person. 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). It is by this conviction that the Church: every Christian and especially the consecrated persons must make an option for the poor, understood as a “special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness” (EG, 198). This vision moves the Vincentian to be at the side of the poor addressing their needs – spiritual and material. It is the essence of the mystery of salvation and the mission of Christ himself. God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself ‘became poor’ (2 Cor 8:9). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. “Salvation came to us from the ‘yes’ uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire” (EG, 197).

Pope Francis states very clearly what kind of Church he desires: “This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them” (EG, 198). Vincentians are familiar with these words and ideas, for they are very similar to the words and deeds of St. Vincent.

For the Pope, the preferential option for the poor is an essential aspect of the proclamation of the gospel and cannot be separated, lest it be misunderstood and go fruitless. “Without the preferential option for the poor, the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communications” (EG, 199).

7. Conclusion

Reading the document '*Evangelii Gaudium*' a Vincentian gets the feeling of talking similar language and walking through familiar territories. In his spirituality, priority, attitude, and dealings he gives a lot of importance to the themes of 'evangelization' and 'service to the poor'. Therefore, he is a Vincentian in spirit according to me. Pope Francis's thoughts and lifestyle are similar to that of a Vincentian. His message has been heard loud and clear through his lifestyle, even before he communicated it through this document. As Vincentians, we can be proud that Pope Francis has taken up our charism, our mission, and our lifestyle as the vision and mission of the entire Church. In mission territories, the message of the Pope becomes particularly clear as a road map of evangelization. Every Vincentian missionary bishop will feel very much included and encouraged by this document.

His thoughts on evangelization are particularly relevant for Vincentian missionaries, especially those entrusted with the task of guiding ecclesiastical jurisdictions as Vincentian bishops. The Pope speaks of not only what evangelization should consist, but also provides a road map of how to proceed. The Vincentian theme of interconnection between charity and evangelization is particularly noteworthy in Pope Francis' writings. In mission dioceses and vicariates like those in Ethiopia, this document is a working program. His love and concern for the poor needs particular mention. Here he follows the path of the great saints like Francis of Assisi, St. Vincent de Paul, and Mother Teresa who took up the mission of Christ as theirs. Pope Francis, like these patrons of charity and champions of the poor cannot imagine of a church without the poor.

I am also very much inspired and motivated by the new vision he has for the church. This certainly will restore back some credibility to the Church, which is badly needed. Each Christian, Priest, Religious and Bishops should not forget that this vision of Pope Francis can be accomplished through each one of us. It is this great vision that he is entrusting to each one of us as a mission.