

The Joy of the Gospel and the New Evangelization

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On 28 March 2013, a mere two weeks after he was elected pope, Pope Francis presided at the Chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In this first formal appearance in front of the clergy of his diocese, he spoke straightforwardly and told them why he thinks there are sad priests, why joy is so elusive in the churches of our times. "This is precisely the reason for the dissatisfaction of some, who end up sad – sad priests – in some sense becoming collectors of antiques or novelties, instead of being shepherds living with 'the odor of the sheep'. This I ask you: be shepherds, with the 'odor of the sheep', make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fishers of men."¹ This programmatic statement is amplified in the whole of *Evangelii Gaudium*. This article seeks to read the apostolic exhortation with the following objectives: (1) to understand the contemporary church crisis as Pope Francis understands them; (2) to outline the basic directions of the new evangelization that seeks to respond to this crisis; and (3) to trace some parallel experiences in the life and example of St. Vincent that maybe helpful to our present situation.

1. A Closed Church, A Closed World and the Way Out

If I am going to summarize *Evangelii Gaudium* into three statements, it would be this: (a) the problem of the Church in our times is the lack of joy and zeal to proclaim the Good News; (b) the main cause is the logic of exclusion and self-referentiality; (c) the solution lies in the logic of encounter and mission, that is, to go to the peripheries and smell like one's sheep.

Many evangelizers today look like people who believe in "Lent without Easter" (EG 6), most often looking "like someone who has just come back from a funeral" (EG, 10). In a consumerist society filled with the noise of technology, there is so much pleasure but has no place for joy. The pastoral worker's life "becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor." (EG 2).

Pope Francis locates the cause of such sadness in self-absorption, self-preservation and self-referentiality. He identifies "spiritual worldliness" – a term adapted from Henri de Lubac – as the main culprit. In an earlier interview, he says: "An example I often use to illustrate the reality of vanity, is this: look at the peacock; it's beautiful if you look at it from the front. But if you look at it from behind, you discover the truth... Whoever gives in to such self-absorbed vanity has huge misery hiding inside them."² He extensively analyzes this crisis of commitment in pastoral workers in (EG 79-109), to name a few:

This self-referential logic does not only appear as "temptation" to individual pastoral workers; it also plagues the Church institution itself. In the pre-conclave conference where Cardinal Bergoglio

¹ Pope Francis, "Chrism Mass Homily," http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html

² Andrea Tornielli, "Careerism and Vanity: Sins of the Church," <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/careerism-and-vanity-sins-of-the-church.html>

was a presenter, he shared about the two images of the Church and the challenge of evangelization in our times. This extemporaneous speech on March 9, 2013 gave a strong impression on the rest of the Cardinals present. Part of his handwritten notes is worth quoting:

“The Church, when it is self-referential, without realizing it thinks that it has its own light; it stops being the “*mysterium lunae*” and gives rise to that evil which is so grave, that of ‘spiritual worldliness’ (according to De Lubac, the worst evil into which the Church can fall): that of living to give glory to one another. To simplify, there are two images of the Church: the evangelizing Church that goes out from itself; that of the “*Dei Verbum religiose audiens et fidenter proclamans*” [the Church that devoutly listens to and faithfully proclaims the Word of God], or the worldly Church that lives in itself, of itself, for itself. This should illuminate the possible changes and reforms to be realized for the salvation of souls.”³

This basic analysis of the crisis of the Church in our times is echoed in the whole of *Evangelii Gaudium* and many of the pope’s speeches. In his latest social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), Pope Francis analyzed these same self-referential tendencies beyond Church walls, and relentlessly pursues the same logic of exclusion in the present world and its dominant systems. He talks about a “dark cloud in a closed world” characterized by selfishness and indifference; of a market logic fostering a “culture of waste”; of a world that builds walls not bridges, which in effect breeds all kinds of fear and loneliness, crime and slavery, racism and poverty, and many social ills. The suggested way out is to engender an “open world”. Francis exhorts the faithful and people of good will to go outside of the self to the “world of the other” in the spirit of solidarity and fraternity. Like the Good Samaritan (FT 56-86), one must have “a heart open to the world” (FT 128).

2. The Contours of the New Evangelization

If the way out of the closed world is solidarity, if the direction out of self-exclusion to evangelical joy is mission, what then are the main contours of Pope Francis’ missionary option? Chapters 3 and 4 of *Evangelii Gaudium* contain two main themes which are also central to the Vincentian charism: (a) mission – proclamation of the gospel (EG 110-175); and charity – the social dimension of evangelization (EG 176-258). Let me summarize my takeaways of this apostolic exhortation in ten simple sentences coming from these chapters.

2.1 Mission: Proclamation of the Gospel

- a. **Grace supposes culture.** Building on Aquinas’ dictum “grace presupposes nature” (EG, 115) and the intimate link between nature and culture, Pope Francis emphasizes the diverse ways with which different peoples experience God’s revelation. Christianity is

³ After the conference, Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega of Havana requested for a copy of the text. Cardinal Bergoglio responded that at the moment he did not have one. But the next day, with “with extreme delicacy”, Bergoglio gave him “the remarks written in his own hand as he recalled them.” Ortega asked him if he could release the text, and Bergoglio agreed. Cf. <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2013/03/28/pope-francis-and-henri-de-lubac-sj/>

- not monocultural but transcultural. New evangelization presupposes that “all missionaries work in harmony with indigenous Christians so as to ensure that the faith and the life of the Church be expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture” (EG, 118). Inculturation is another name for new evangelization.
- b. **We are missionary disciples.** “All baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (EG, 120). New evangelization is not just a work of learned professionals but of all members of the people of God. There is no more distinction between disciples and missionaries or, between what traditional theology calls “*ecclesia discens*” and “*ecclesia docens*”. Gifted with the “instinct of faith” (*sensus fidei*), all faithful have an intuitive access to the wisdom that “discerns what is truly of God”, even if they do not possess a sophisticated language to express it. Pope Francis makes the work of evangelization the right and responsibility not just of an elite few but of all. All are “missionary disciples” – at the same time learning and teaching, maturing in and sharing the faith.
 - c. **Popular piety is a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly.** The poor are missionary disciples through their own mysticism and their simple faith. “Only from the affective connaturality born of love,” the pope writes, “can we appreciate the theological life present in the piety of Christian peoples, especially among the poor” (EG, 125). Nothing more can be as concrete as the evangelizing potential of these everyday faith practices and the religious experience of the poor: a mother clinging to her rosary as she tends to her sick child; a silent lighted candle as one’s prayer for help through Mary; a gaze of tender love at Jesus on the cross in the midst of suffering. These are not mere expressions of human longing for the divine; they are authentic feel and manifestation of the Spirit inside our hearts.
 - d. **The homily is like the words of a mother speaking to her child.** The preferred approach to new evangelization is dialogue. It is a personal testimony to the love of God personally experienced, spontaneously telling others of the love of Jesus even in unexpected situations – “on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey” (EG, 127). But the homily, the privileged place of the faithful’s encounter with God’s message in liturgy, should also be a personal testimony of the preacher’s consoling encounter with God’s word. “It reminds us that the Church is a mother, and that she preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child” (EG, 139). To be effective, the preacher must speak from the heart with words which can set people’s hearts on fire.
 - e. **The first proclamation is a good news: Jesus Christ loves you.** Kerygma, the first announcement of the Christian message, must start with this resoundingly joyful message: “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). Mystagogic initiation and catechesis follows kerygmatic proclamation leading one to a progressive

experience of formation in the faith and a “renewed appreciation of the liturgical signs of Christian initiation” (EG, 166).

2.2 Charity: Social Dimension of Evangelization

- a. **The kerygma has a clear social content.** The gospel is not just a feel-good message; it has a strong social content. Its moral implication centered on charity (EG, 177) does not merely refer to personal acts of kindness in time of need; it is not a form of “charity à la carte” to ease one’s conscience. The kingdom that Jesus preached brings real liberation “to the whole person and to all peoples” (*Populorum Progressio*, 14) bringing us directly to the heart of the Social Teachings of the Church. “All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world” (EG, 183). Working for justice and participation in the transformation of the world form as a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel (*Justice in the World*, 1971).
- b. **God’s heart has a special place for the poor.** Jesus was a poor man. He belonged to a poor family, lived and worked among the poor, and died as a poor person. The option for the poor is the option of Jesus. “That is why I want a Church that is poor and for the poor. They have so 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). The new evangelization must place the poor at the center of the Church’s mission.
- c. **Inequality is the root of all social ills.** The structural causes of poverty continually marginalize and exclude the poor. Without attacking these sources of structural inequality, e.g., the absolute autonomy of the market and financial speculation, all our solutions only touch the surface. “We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market... I ask God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances – of the evils in our world” (EG, 204-205). The new evangelization needs to address this inequality or it is not Good News at all.
- d. **Peace must be a result of integral development.** Peace is not absence of violence of war, not a program of pacification to silence the minority or the cries for human rights or equal distribution of wealth. A peace “which is not a result of integral development will be doomed; it will always spawn new conflicts and various forms of violence” (EG, 219). Pope John XXIII already said: “Peace must be founded on truth, built according to justice, vivified and integrated by charity, and put into practice in freedom” (*Pacem in Terris*, 167).
- e. **Evangelization involves the path of dialogue.** Three levels of dialogue are envisioned in the new evangelization: dialogue with States, dialogue with society (cultures, sciences, etc.), and dialogue with other faiths. Since the state is responsible for the

promotion of common good, the Church needs to dialogue and build consensus with it in the spirit of subsidiarity and solidarity.

2.3 The Missionary Option: I am a mission on this earth

Mission, it is our deepest identity; it is who we are. In the beginning of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis expresses his wish: “I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything” (EG 27). He ends the apostolic exhortation with the same Credo: “My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an ‘extra’ of just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. *I am a mission* on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world” (EG, 273). It is only in mission that the Church and its workers be delivered from self-preservation and self-absorption towards being spirit-filled evangelizers going forth in great “fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction” (EG 261).

Pope Francis identifies two sources of this joy and passion: personal encounter with Jesus (EG 264) and personal encounter with poverty and suffering (EG 268). First, the apostolic exhortation opens and ends with the “narratives of joy” of God’s people in the Scriptures having experienced the intimacy of God’s presence (EG 3-13). “It was about four o’clock in the afternoon (John 1: 39),” the apostle John remembers the precise time when he met Jesus. “A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him... Unless we see him present in our missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigor and passion.” (EG 266). Second, new evangelization is not only “a passion of Jesus”; it is also a “passion for his people” (EG 268). Jesus wants us to be immersed in the misery and suffering of our people, “not to keep the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length” but to truly “touch the suffering flesh of others”. Only then shall we know the depth of missionary joy.

New evangelization is not only about new ways of “transmission of the Christian faith” in the spirit of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 2012 Synod of Bishops on Evangelization expressed it.⁴ A cursory reading of this working document does not yield any social agenda. *Evangelii Gaudium* is both a product of the propositions of this Synod and Pope Francis’ own agenda.⁵ To his mind, new evangelization is not just about strategies of proclaiming the faith in modern agora with “new ardor, new methods, new expressions,” as John Paul II announced at the beginning of Puebla.⁶ Pope Francis thinks that it is all these and more. The new evangelization aims above all to proclaim the social message of the Gospel, to uphold the centrality of the poor, to struggle against social and economic inequality, to pursue peace,

⁴ Cf. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20120619_instrumentum-xiii_en.pdf.

⁵ He writes: “I was happy to take up the request of the Fathers of the Synod to write this Exhortation. In so doing, I am reaping the rich fruitss of the Synod’s labours. In addition, I have sought advice from a number of people and I intend to express my own concerns about this particular chapter of the Church’s work of evangelization.” (EG 16).

⁶ John Paul II, *Discourse to the XIX Assembly of C.E.L.A.M.* (Port au Prince, 9 March 1983), 3: AAS 75 (1983) 778; *L’Osservatore Romano*, English Edition (18 April 1983), No. 9.

development through a life of dialogue, etc. For the joy of the Gospel is not only for a few but for all people: “no one can be excluded” (EG 23).

But St. Vincent already expressed the pope’s agenda four centuries ago: “If there are some among us who believe they are in the mission to evangelize the poor and not to take care of them, to remedy their spiritual and not their temporal needs, I will tell them that we have to help them and have others help them in every way – by ourselves and by others... To do this is to evangelize by word and deed.”⁷

3. St. Vincent and Evangelical Joy

Joy and cheerfulness are not strong points in the personality of St. Vincent. One seldom sees a smiling portrait of the founder. His first biographer Abelly writes that his disposition is “kindly and good, his temperament sanguine and bilious”.⁸ He was prone to anger and melancholy. “I addressed myself to God,” Vincent says, “to beg him earnestly to change this curt and forbidding disposition of mine for a meek and benign one. By the grace and with some effort on my part to repress the outbursts of passion, I was able to get rid of my black disposition.”⁹

Beyond natural disposition, St. Vincent underwent successive personal experiences that brought unfortunate and unhappy consequences – from the pursuit of an heirloom that did not succeed to the desire for a benefice that did not come, from the painful incidents of his captivity in Tunis to the accusation of theft in Paris. In all these events, the young Vincent was seeking himself, for his own promotion, for a comfortable retirement (at thirty) with his mother, for material benefits from the priesthood, even the desire for the bishopric which he might have been embarrassed to mention again in his lifetime. His successive misadventures and setbacks did not discourage him. He believed, as his early letter suggests, that “present misfortune heralds future success”.¹⁰ There was so much frantic and self-seeking optimism and an absence of authentic joy. Vincent was working for God but not doing God’s work. In the term used by Pope Francis, this is the temptation of “spiritual worldliness”, that is, to “hide behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, [which] consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being” (EG 93-97).

His “temptation against the faith” was decisive. “His soul plunged into darkness... He felt all his childhood beliefs and certainties crumble around him”: This was how the historian Roman describes this ordeal that Vincent underwent with much pain for three to four years.¹¹ In the midst of this ‘breakdown’, he visited the sick in an adjacent hospital. There, he saw the real suffering of the poor – a place so crowded that dozens of sick people scramble for a bed vacated by someone who just died. This was an everyday occurrence in an institution that was overwhelmed with misery.

⁷ Conferences to the CM, “On the End of the Congregation of the Mission, December 6, 1658, 608. Cf. Jose Ma. Roman, “The Spirituality of Vincent de Paul,” *Of Roots and Wings: Reflections on Rediscovering and Reliving a Religious Charism Today*, ed. Julma Neo (Paranaque: Daughters of Charity, 2003), 100-117.

⁸ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Vol. I, trans. William Quinn, (New York: New City Press, 1993), 100.

⁹ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Vol. III, 163.

¹⁰ José Maria Roman, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography* (London: Melisende, 1999), 89.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 100.

The sick were so destitute that no one really cared. They were just there waiting for their death. Vincent's self-seeking complacency was confronted by this situation of humans living like animals in hell. Quite an eye-opener for one whose life ambition was to live in luxury! It was a painful realization. The poor revealed to him the truth of himself. He allowed his selfish life to be confronted with suffering and destitute poverty. Abelly wrote: "No sooner had he done this than, by a marvelous effect of grace, all the suggestions of the evil one disappeared. His heart which has been so troubled for such a long time, was suddenly freed."¹² But we also know it was not that fast. He did not fall from the horse and got converted suddenly like St. Paul. Yet he knew something was going on inside him. In the months that followed, he slowly changed his heart as he encountered other situations that put his self-complacency in question.

He was no longer happy living in the seclusion of the palace. He resolved that his life be dedicated fully to these suffering people. He slowly avoided the corridors of power and sought to be assigned among the neglected peasants in the countryside, among beggars on the streets, among the prisoners in the galleys, and many others. His life took a real turnaround toward society's victims. Within this conversion was a deep realization: that the poor is the source of his liberation. Against all messianic complexes that plague many philanthropists, community organizers and pastoral workers of our time, Vincent realized that it is not him who was saving the poor. In fact, it is the poor who has saved him.

And for the first time, we read from him an exuberant and joyful note while at Clichy when he was a pastor among the poor people for the first time in his twelve years of priestly life (1612): "This gave me such consolation and made me so happy that I used to say to myself – *Mon Dieu! How happy you are to have such good people! I think the Pope himself is not so happy as a parish priest of such kind-hearted people.*"¹³

The conversion Vincent experienced is the same transformation Pope Francis dreams of the Church in our times. Without this conversion, we will be mired in webs of obsessions. With it, we encounter evangelical joy. "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 center and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures... 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 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)" (EG 49).

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¹² Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Vol. I, 115-116.

¹³ Pierre Coste, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol I (New York: New City, 1987), 57.