

The Joy of the Gospel 4

Chapter 2: Amid the Crisis of Communal Commitment

The theme of the first chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium* was that faith sharing is not something which can be left to just a few people or a few groups of Christians but that the whole of the Church in all its aspects needs to be structured, or restructured, to promote this end. He wants the Church to be ‘permanently in a state of mission’ (#25), going out, taking the first step, becoming involved and supportive, leaving our comfort zones (#20), responding to Jesus’ challenge to the disciples in the face of the hungry crowds, ‘Give them something to eat.’ (#49).

Chapter two sets this challenge in the context of today’s world. The Pope doesn’t offer an exhaustive analysis, but urges everyone within the Church to adopt the attitude of a missionary disciple, to embrace what he calls ‘an evangelical discernment,’ looking closely at ‘the signs of the times’ (#50 and 51). Here he draws on his spirituality as a Jesuit, for discernment as to what is of God’s kingdom - as opposed to movements and impulses within oneself and society that run counter to God’s plan - is a key aspect of *The Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit Order. Francis divides this chapter into two halves: the first looks at those challenges of today’s world which threaten the life and dignity of God’s people (#52-75), the second, which we will look at next week, examines temptations faced by pastoral workers (#76-107).

Some challenges of today’s world, then. In Pope Francis we have for the first time a Pope born outside Europe; and not only that, but one who in his formative years as a priest, Religious Superior, Bishop and Archbishop in the Argentina of the 1970s and 1980s, made a painful transition – or, better, a conversion - from supporter of a brutal and oppressive right-wing military junta to a pastor with a heart first and foremost for the poor who constituted the vast majority of his Archdiocese in Buenos Aires. The Pope is well aware of the realities of the modern city, where “human trafficking, the narcotics trade, the abuse and exploitation of minors, the abandonment of the elderly and infirm, and various forms of corruption and criminal activity take place” (#75) Remembering all of that he brings a passion for the poor to his apostolic exhortation. It is clearly reflected in the subtitles of this part of the chapter:

- No, he says, 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 inequality which spawns violence

Whilst he praises many of the positive things that are happening in today's world in the areas of health care, education and communications, the Pope is acutely aware that "the majority of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day ... The hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation, even in the so-called rich countries. The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the increase, and inequality is increasingly evident. It is a struggle to live and, often, to live with precious little dignity" (#52). Human beings are increasingly regarded, he says, as consumer goods, to be used then thrown away. The excluded are no longer even considered part of society: they are outcasts, the 'leftovers' (#53). One cause of this, he finds, is the idolatry of the financial market, a tyranny which relentlessly imposes its own rules and laws, fuelling debt, denying the primacy of the human person and reducing humanity to one sole need – consumption (#55 and 56). Behind this attitude, he says, lurks a rejection of ethics, which bids people look wider than the market, and a rejection of God, who calls human beings out of slavery and to their full realisation (#57).

But it is not only the new worship of the Golden Calf which exercises the Pope. He points also towards attacks on religious freedom and persecution of Christians in many parts of the world, fuelled by new religious movements on the one hand and radical secularization on the other. In such situations the faith and the Church are pushed into the private and purely personal sphere, the transcendent aspect of humanity is rejected and moral relativism reigns. The Church's contribution to promoting human dignity and the common good is acceptable in the fields of education and social mediation, but not so in other areas where Catholic convictions run counter to public opinion, for example in the sphere of marriage and family life (#65 and 66). It is imperative, then, to evangelize cultures in order to inculturate the Gospel. Each culture and social group needs purification, even in traditionally

Catholic lands. Therefore, long-term planning is called for, supporting parents in their efforts to pass on their Christian faith to the young (#70) and taking account of the completely new cultures which are constantly being spawned by urban living, which call for a new approach, a new evangelization (#73). What is demanded, he says, “is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us ... bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost soul of our cities” (#74). What we cannot do is “cling to a nostalgia for structures and customs which are no longer life-giving in today’s world” (#108).

The second half of the chapter concerns pastoral workers, “from bishops down to those who provide the most hidden and humble services”. This we must look at next time.

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