

CATECHESIS 1 Introduction to *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel

Today I want to take a first look at Pope Francis' document, The Joy of the Gospel. Just a few days after our own Parish Mission last year here in Belper was over, on November 26th at a press conference in Rome, the Pope's new text *Evangelii Gaudium* was made public by three important figures recently appointed to their positions by Pope Francis himself: Archbishop Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation, Archbishop Baldisseri, General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, and Archbishop Celli, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. As an Apostolic Exhortation it possesses one of the highest levels of papal teaching authority. Following on from a Synod of Bishops held in 2012 entitled 'the new evangelisation for the transmission of the Christian faith', Pope Francis didn't just work with a draft provided by the Synod, but went beyond that to write his own document in his own style. The Pope hasn't forgotten the teaching of the synod, explicitly using half the final 58 propositions provided by the Bishops; but he cites also extensively from the Bible, from the Fathers of the Church and medieval writers, from modern church documents and recent Popes, working them all into a seamless whole which is written in a new and easy style. This is the style of Pope Francis the preacher, understandable, down-to-earth and appealing to a broad audience. It is addressed to 'bishops, clergy, consecrated persons, and the lay faithful' but doesn't forget Christians who are not Catholics either. He refers to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues, and encourages discussions with scientists and the secular world. The document, then, has a broad outreach and despite its breadth, depth and length is very readable. The Pope acknowledges frankly that "documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and are quickly forgotten", but I think that with this one at least it will be different. For three reasons at least: firstly, because the subject of evangelisation is evidently so close to the Pope's heart I am sure we will hear more on it. He himself was the primary editor of a document from Aparecida in South America in 2007, for example, which helped to pave the way for the 2013 Synod of Bishops. Secondly, because of his experience and background he brings a global perspective to the subject in a way which is quite new, refreshing and challenging. Thirdly, because the reason why Francis was elected Pope last year was because he was seen by the electors as the candidate most likely to be able to help the Church move on to fully enact the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

A respected Church historian has said that if you take the long view of Church history, it takes on average a hundred years for an ecumenical Council to bear its fruit. The immediate aftermath of Vatican II was chaos. Both in teaching and in liturgy everything was up in the air, and Pope Paul VI struggled to cope. Many liberal Catholics left the Church and hardline conservatives went into schism under Archbishop Lefebvre. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict stabilised the Church, bringing out new translations of the Mass in the vernacular, promulgating the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as the definitive teaching document of the post-Vatican Council Church and bringing in a new Code of Canon Law. Three outstanding things remain to be done, however. First, there has to be a redressing of the balance of authority between the Papacy and the Episcopate, with the Roman curia put in its place as a servant of the Pope and not a power in its own right. Second, there has to be an end to the clericalist mentality that has too often characterised the priesthood. Clericalism spells the death of authentic priesthood and Francis is rightly against it. Thirdly, the body of the faithful have to be convinced that mission is not something other people do in the Church, but is a task and responsibility for every believer. Only a re-energisation of the Church for mission can save it from continued and, in some parts of the world perhaps, terminal decline. Hence the importance of this document. It concerns us all in a vital way, and I fully expect that it will definitively shape the remaining 15 years or so left to me in active ministry. Mission is now at the top of my agenda as your pastor, and I hope to let Pope Francis persuade you it that it should be somewhere near the top of yours as well.

Next week I'll outline and discuss the Introduction to the document. But the best thing, of course, is to get and read a copy for yourself!

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