

The Joy of the Gospel 2 – The Introduction to *Evangelii Gaudium*

The Introduction to *The Joy of the Gospel* tells us why Pope Francis has decided to write his Apostolic Exhortation and gives an insight into some of its major themes. He tells us that the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which gathered in 2012 to discuss the theme of *The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* was seeking to be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and to read the signs of the times. He says that as well as “reaping the rich fruits of (the Synod’s) labours” he also sought advice to express his own concerns. He tells us he doesn’t attempt to deal with every question or get in the way of discernment by local Bishops on issues arising in their own setting. So he’s promoting a healthy decentralisation from the domination of the Church by central authority, something fresh and timely. He does identify seven areas, however, where he wants to present guidelines to the Church as she enters into a new phase of missionary activity, and to encourage her to do this with enthusiasm and vitality. These seven areas will be the themes of my future addresses. But first we must pause to consider the introduction itself before pressing on to the application - because here are found pages of rich content well worth pondering which lay the foundation for all that follows.

A key to the Pope’s thought is found in his description of *the encounter with God’s love*: this, he says, “blossoms into an enriching friendship” in which “we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.”

We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves ... to attain the fullest truth of our being (#8)

Here, in this encounter of love, this enriching friendship, is found the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelisation: “For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (ibid.)

The encounter with Jesus Christ to which we are invited is personal and open to all:

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 unfailingly 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”. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this

risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realise that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: “Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once more into your redeeming embrace” (#3).

In these words, it may be we are privileged to overhear the private personal prayer of the Holy Father as a much converted person to Jesus his Lord and Saviour. But, as always, what is most personal is also most universal. We too are invited into that loving embrace and acceptance! We too are invited to know Jesus as our Saviour, the one who can completely renew our lives and fill our hearts with joy! And so the Pope continues:

“How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost! Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy” (ibid.)

The encounter with Jesus, the central theme of the introduction, is the source of all true joy. This joy - the joy of the Gospel - “fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” (#1). It helps us find *dignity and fulfilment in life*, overcoming the dangers of our modern materialistic consumer society, in which so many people no longer have room for others amid their concerns, no place for the poor in their hearts. This blunting of the conscience, and the inner desolation which comes from the complacent pursuit of frivolous deceiving pleasures, is not God’s will for us. Life in the Spirit by contrast has its source in the heart of the risen Christ (#2). Knowing the Father’s tender love we can appreciate the good things of this world aright as a gift in the light of the Gospel (#4) and yet “reach out to others and seek their good” (#9). And so the Gospel “offers us the chance to live life on a higher plane, but with no less intensity” (#10):

‘Life grows,’ says the Pope, ‘by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others’ ... For ‘here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure it is offered up in order to give life to others’ (#10, citing *Aparecida Document*, 360).

In the joy, then, of encountering Jesus and in him the Father's love, we discover the joy also of reaching out to others and sharing our joy with them. With a characteristic touch of humour Pope Francis insists, "an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!" Even when it is in tears we must sow, he says, "let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm" that "delightful and comforting joy of evangelising" (#10, citing Pope Paul's EN 80). The heart of the Gospel message is always the same and will never grow old, the Good News that God revealed his great love for us in sending Jesus, our crucified and risen Saviour. Yet the forms which evangelisation must take are always new:

Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelisation is always 'new' (#11), with a newness which God himself mysteriously brings about (#12).

In the final section of the Introduction the Pope outlines three areas where the Church's new evangelization issues its summons to all: firstly, in the area of ordinary pastoral ministry, the Church must seek to help all believers, including believers who seldom practice their faith, to grow spiritually, to inflame their hearts, "so that they can respond to God's love ever more fully in their lives" (#15). Secondly, with regard to the baptised who are seriously lapsed: believers must try to help them experience *a conversion* which will restore joy to their hearts and inspire a commitment to the Gospel. Thirdly, with regard to those who do not know or have rejected Jesus Christ, the Pope proposes not an outward observance arising from a religion of obligation, but genuine faith-sharing - the sharing of a joy-filled hope which is inherently attractive (#*ibid*). And so we return to the Holy Father's central theme – the importance of a personal encounter with Jesus and the Good News of the Father's love. *The faith that attracts is a faith radiant with a joy that comes from knowing one is infinitely loved* (cf. #6).

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