

The Joy of the Gospel 3

Chapter 1: The Church's Missionary Transformation

Last time I ended by saying that Pope Francis proposes not trying to impose dutiful obligations upon people – saying in effect, “You must behave like this to be acceptable to God” – but that we should find new and winning ways of genuinely sharing a faith which is life-giving: he is convinced that the faith which attracts is a faith radiant with an inner joy that comes from knowing one is infinitely loved (cf. #6). And this brings us on to the theme of chapter one – that this is not something which can be left to just a few people or a few groups but that the whole of the Church in all its aspects needs to be structured or restructured to promote this end. What he is proposing in effect is an ongoing reformation – quoting the Vatican Council that the Church stands always in need of reformation (#26, citing *Unitatis Redintegratio* 6) – or what he calls a ‘missionary transformation’. No one can accuse the Pope of lacking courage and chutzpah: “I dream,” he writes “of a ‘missionary option’ ... capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, languages and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (#27). He pleads for the Church at every level to be more open and inclusive (*ibid.*) and recognises what effort and commitment this calls for: “I hope all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion *which cannot leave things as they presently are*. ‘Mere administration’ can no longer be enough. Throughout the world let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission’” (#25 citing the Aparecida document, my italics).

Francis addresses how this drive for reform should affect each Diocese, the ministry of each Bishop and indeed the Papacy itself; but the sections that most concern us are to do with the parish (#28) and local groups (#29). The Parish possesses great flexibility, he says, which enables it to adapt readily to new ways of working together between pastor and community; it should be in regular contact with people’s homes and lives; it should not be a “self-absorbed group of a chosen few” but outward-looking. Its role is to encourage and train members to be evangelizers – so that the parish is a sanctuary for the thirsty, but also a centre of constant missionary outreach. Past calls for renewal have not, he admits, been enough to make parishes completely

mission-orientated: but this time he evidently intends it should be different: this is a renewal “which cannot be deferred” (#27). And within each Parish other church institutions or small communities are raised up by the Spirit to enrich and renew the Parish, often bringing “a new evangelizing fervour ... and a new capacity for dialogue with the world” (#29). It is important, however, that such groups are integrated properly with the Parish as a whole so that they do not become one-sided or nomadic and disconnected (ibid.)

Within this overall context, then, we read (at the beginning of the chapter) that the Church must be a Church which goes forth, taking the first step, being involved and supportive. All of us are asked to obey the Lord’s call, reflected so clearly in Holy Scripture, to leave our comfort zones – without hesitation, without reluctance, without fear - and reach out to the peripheries where people are “in need of the light of the Gospel” (#20). We are to be supportive, patient, standing by people, slowing down even to honour the individual person and the needs of the moment, to embrace people in their humanity and touch the suffering Christ in others. This is how we are to bear fruit, rejoicing over small victories (#24). This theme returns at the end of the chapter too: “Small steps can be very pleasing to God,” says the Pope, as God’s saving love becomes active in each person (#44).

The image of the Church I take away from this chapter is the Church as ‘A Mother with an Open Heart’, the Church which always does the good she can, even if her shoes become soiled by the mud of the street. The Church is a mother of the poor which accepts and cherishes each child of God unconditionally and does not hypocritically demand perfection. Yet, as a mother, the Church herself – that is, we her members – are bidden to corporately raise our eyes to new horizons and reach out with a new generosity. We must not opt for the safety of “structures which give a false sense of security, rules which make us harsh judges, habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving” – starving for the word of life.

“Jesus,” he reminds us, “does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat.’” (#49)

MICHAEL KIRKHAM