

The Joy of the Gospel 6

Chapter 3: The Proclamation of the Gospel (Parts I & IV)

The heart of chapter three of *The Joy of the Gospel* is concerned with the Homily at Mass and the pastor's personal preparation for the task of preaching. I'll deal with that next week. But either side of this central part of the chapter are sections which have a wider import for us in our lives outside Mass. These tell us that the proclamation of the Gospel is a task involving all members of the Church; and it outlines ways in which we can come to a deeper understanding of the Gospel message we have a duty to share.

Citing Pope John Paul II, Francis tells us that “evangelization as the joyful, patient and progressive preaching of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ must be (our) absolute priority”, and that “there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord” (#110).

He develops this idea by speaking about the Church as the pilgrim people of God, the God who is always the first mover in matters of human salvation: ‘evangelizing’ means putting ourselves at his disposal, “inserting ourselves into the divine initiative” (#112). We are to be God’s leaven in the midst of humanity, “proclaiming and bringing God’s salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way. The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to lead the good life of the Gospel” (#114). Citing the Great Commission at the end of St Matthew’s Gospel, he says that, by virtue of our baptism, all the members of the people of God are to go forth as missionary disciples ... *all members*, please note! This is not a task reserved for ‘the others’ (priests, religious, professional missionaries): **all** members of the people of God are called to be missionaries – and then he qualifies it - “to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus”; “indeed anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love” (#120). What, asks the Pope, are we waiting for? Probably most of us recognise “we want to have better training, a deepening love and a clearer witness to the Gospel. In this sense, we

ought to let others be constantly evangelizing us. But this does not mean that we should postpone the evangelizing mission; rather, each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are” (#121). The challenge of mission, then, is also a challenge to keep growing in faith, and not to get bogged down in mediocrity (ibid.).

The Pope speaks warmly about the power of popular devotions (such as devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, the Sacred Heart and the rosary, or the power of pilgrimage to shrines and so on) in fostering the life of faith, and he has important things to say about approaches which reflect our contemporary culture. But I want to focus especially on the way he says we should go about witnessing to our faith in our normal everyday lives (paragraphs 127-129).

“There is a kind of preaching,” he says, “which falls to each of us as a daily responsibility. It has to do with bringing the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they be our neighbours or complete strangers. This is the informal preaching which takes place in the middle of a conversation ... (for) being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others: and this can happen suddenly and unexpectedly and in any place – on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey” (#127).

A paragraph (#128) I think particularly important says: “In this preaching, which is always respectful and gentle, *the first step is personal dialogue*, when the other person speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns for loved ones, or so many other heartfelt needs. *Only afterwards is it possible to bring up God’s word*, perhaps by reading a Bible verse or relating a story, but always keeping in mind the fundamental message: the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship. This message has to be shared humbly as a testimony on the part of one who is always willing to learn, in the awareness that the message is so rich and so deep that it always exceeds our grasp. At times the message can be presented directly, at times by way of a personal witness or gesture, or in a way which the Holy Spirit may suggest in that particular situation. If it seems prudent and *if the circumstances are right, this fraternal and missionary encounter could end with a brief prayer related to the concerns which the person may have expressed*. In this way they will have the

experience of having been listened to and understood; they will know that their particular situation has been placed before God, and that God's word really speaks to their lives."

It will be apparent that a precondition for this kind of faith sharing is being able actually to converse at a deep and meaningful level with the people we meet in daily life. This is a challenge for us: can we break out of our self-concern and traditional English reserve to allow ourselves to get close enough to others to listen well? We need to be sensitive in our listening and not to fire off our favourite texts, get on our personal hobby horses, or even proffer well-meaning advice, but rather to **genuinely accompany the other to a place where we can sensitively offer a life-giving word, apt for that moment, arising out of their concerns** and not the concerns we might think they ought to have. Key adjectives in what the Pope writes here are *humble*, *respectful* and *gentle*.

Those of us who received a visit from members of the Sion Community mission team in November will hopefully have experienced something of what the Pope is now encouraging us to take out to others. But there is also the matter of the Homily at Mass in modelling this process too: how can it correspond to the congregation's concerns in a really life-giving way? To this we must turn next time.

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