

Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel

SESSION 1 Encountering Jesus, Encountering the Joy of the Gospel

Introduction

Whenever I read a book, I write any memorable sentences in the back of the book so that I can readily access them for talks or homilies.

When I read *Evangelii Gaudium*, I nearly ran out of space for writing down memorable sentences. I'm sure that this has been or will be your experience as you read the document.

The Exhortation begins: *The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus*. To be honest, we could spend our time pondering those words and we'd find they provide sustenance for living the Gospel each day for the rest of our lives: *the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus*. There's a favourite word of Pope Francis: *encounter*. It keeps popping up throughout the document. To encounter someone entails more than being with, more than meeting or greeting, more than crossing paths. It means more than talking at or talking over. Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber thinks of encounter as I-Thou relating, rather than I-It relating. To encounter is to treat people as subjects, as persons worthy of respect and collaboration, rather than as objects, recipients of our pity, of our largesse, or of our scorn. So, we'll keep an ear out for that word, *encounter*, in what follows.

How *Evangelii Gaudium* Pictures the Church

Pope Francis brought a new tone, a new style to the Papacy. For Catholics who treasure the

Sacramental Imagination, this has proved particularly attractive. Pope Francis thinks of the church as God's leaven¹ in the midst of humanity, helping its aspirations and goodness to rise to the fore, relying always on the mercy and compassion of God. Obviously, orthodoxy/orthodoxy (right believing) is essential in the life of the church. The great American writer Flannery O'Connor, and, Pope Francis would agree, saw dogma as an essential safeguard of mystery because it preserves the sense of something larger than human understanding.² Yet orthodoxy, has two sisters, ortho-praxis, right acting, and orthocardia, right heartedness. Without these sisters, orthodoxy can become, in my words, the bossy big sister, and in Pope Francis' words: 'self-centredness, cloaked in an outward religiosity, bereft of God.'³ Many Catholics who had drifted or walked away from the church are attracted by Pope Francis' embrace of all three sisters, orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthocardia. He writes: 'With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, [God] makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew.'⁴ Pope Francis has no time for what he calls: 'narcissistic, authoritarian elitism, [where] instead of evangelising, [people] analyse and classify others. Instead of opening the door to grace, [people] exhaust [their] energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case are [people] really concerned about Jesus Christ or others.'⁵

Ever the pragmatic pastor, Pope Francis says No to eight wide-spread practices in contemporary life. He says No to an economic system that excludes.⁶ He says No to idolising money.⁷ He says No to a financial system that rules rather than serves.⁸ He says No to the violence that results from economic inequities.⁹ He says No to selfishness and spiritual sloth.¹⁰ He says No to pessimism.¹¹ He says No to spiritual worldliness.¹² He says No to internal warring.¹³ That's a lot of Nos! But the list of Yeses is twice as long! Let us not flee from the Resurrection of Jesus, he says, let us never give up, come what will.¹⁴ Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope.¹⁵ So, what are we waiting for?¹⁶ he asks.

John Allen claims that *Evangelii Gaudium* is Francis' *I Have a Dream Speech*¹⁷, where he spells out his vision for the church. Francis writes: 'I dream of a church [including church agencies] that is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits that make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving. Jesus does not tire of saying to us "give them something to eat".¹⁸ Sure, we can look after ourselves in our parishes. Francis asks us as well to reach out to the community – to those who are not part of the church.

Which brings Francis to the key question: how do we spread the Gospel today? He answers: by 'encountering Jesus' and by 'giving them something to eat.' He holds together these two strands of the Christian life that are often

uncoupled, even pitted against each other. He writes, we need both a 'constantly renewed experience of savouring Christ's friendship' and 'a concern for the poor and social justice.'

Savouring Christ's Friendship

Let's take a closer look at both of these domains. Francis begins: 'I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.'¹⁹ Francis continues: 'we become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves.'²⁰ And God always takes the initiative. This is what we mean by the word grace. Francis writes: 'whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realise that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms!'²¹ Remember how Michelangelo designed St Peter's Square with two rounded porticos, Mother Church embracing those who flock there. At its best, Catholicism always embraces, as Pope Francis expressed it during his Inauguration Mass, 'with tender affection those who are poor and vulnerable, those who are least important.'²² More than that, 'God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy.'²³

In another place, Francis talks of God inspiring, provoking, guiding and accompanying us in a thousand ways.²⁴ Which raises the question: can I point to occasions in my life when God inspired or provoked or guided or accompanied me? Francis comments: 'The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts: it was about four o'clock in the afternoon (John 1. 39). The believer is

essentially “one who remembers”.²⁵ Before we recommend the gospel to others, we must find ourselves remembering those specific moments when Jesus has touched our hearts. Francis thinks of Catholics who have yet to pin-point God’s heartprints or footprints in their lives as ‘Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.’²⁶ Returning to his favourite image of the Christian life as being leaven in the world, Francis comments: ‘It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideals at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch-hunts.’²⁷ This is what tends to happen when we prize and pursue orthodoxy alone and ignore her sisters, orthopraxis and orthocardia.

Francis says: ‘Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s serving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.’²⁸ That is why he goes on to claim that ‘the church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open, even literally! The Eucharist, though it is the fullness of the sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the church is not a tollhouse; it is a house of the Father, where there’s a place for everyone, with all their problems.’²⁹ A little further on, Francis pulls no punches: ‘Some people want a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross. They also want their interpersonal relationships provided by sophisticated equipment, by screens and systems which can be turned on and off on command. Meanwhile, the gospel tells us

constantly to run the risk of a face to face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction.’³⁰ Pope Francis observes: ‘A missionary heart always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.’³¹

When was the last time your missionary heart saw your shoes muddied?

So What!

Pope Francis names three principal settings where evangelisation is carried out: in ‘ordinary pastoral ministry, [in the lives of] the baptised, whose lives do not reflect the demands of baptism, [and in the lives of] those who don’t know Jesus, or reject him.’³² Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, Francis has more recently written: ‘Effective Christian witness is not about bombarding people with religious messages, but about our willingness to be available to others by patiently and respectfully engaging their questions and their doubts as they advance in their search for the truth and the meaning of human existence.’³³ For most of us, Christian witness, as distinct from advice-giving, tends to happen over a cup of coffee or a yarn. And remember, it’s not something that begins with us. God always takes the initiative, inspiring, provoking, guiding, accompanying people long before we arrive on the scene. Indeed, God stays on long after we have given up, dispirited. Can you recall some of those times?

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- ¹ Pope Francis (2013) *Evangelii Gaudium* #114
² Flannery, O'Connor (2003) *Spiritual Writings* Maryknoll: Orbis Books p74
³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #97
⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #3
⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #94
⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #53
⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #55
⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* #57
⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #59
¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #81
¹¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #84
¹² *Evangelii Gaudium* #93
¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #98
¹⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #3
¹⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #86
¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #120
¹⁷ John Allen "Evangelii Gaudium amounts to Francis' I Have a Dream Speech" *National Catholic Reporter* 26 November 2013
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- ¹⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* #49
¹⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #7
²⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #8
²¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #3
²² Pope Francis' homily at his Inauguration Mass, March 19 2014
²³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #3
²⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #12
²⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #13
²⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #6
²⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #100
²⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* #44
²⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #47
³⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #88
³¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #47
³² *Evangelii Gaudium* #14
³³ Pope Francis *Everyone is a Neighbour* 24 January, 2014
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Towards Missionary Discipleship

Below are some questions that may further assist your reflection, group discussion and plans for missionary discipleship. Some questions are suitable for individual reflection and group discussion; some for parish councils, committees or boards.

For reflection and discernment ...

- ☐ A key word in this session has been 'encounter'; encountering Jesus, encountering the Joy of the Gospel, encountering others. What does the word encounter mean to me? What has been a personal experience of encounter with another person? How did I feel? What did the other person do or say? Was the experience significant at the time, or did I later realise the depth of this experience?

For sharing and discussion ...

- ☐ As I reflect back over my life, when have I felt 'heartprints' or witnessed God's 'footprints'? Write these down and share one or two with a friend or your group.

- ☐ 'Orthodoxy (right believing), has two sisters, orthopraxis, (right acting), and orthocardia, (right heartedness).' How do I see each of these three 'sisters' playing their 'part' in my daily life; in the vision of my parish; in the mission of the Church?

For formation and mission ...

- ☐ What pains Pope Francis greatly is 'to discover how some Christian communities ... can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideals at all costs, even to persecutions' (#100). As we begin our meeting how does this statement challenge and question our 'agenda'?
- ☐ What are the settings where you encounter people's 'questions and doubts in their search for the truth and the meaning of the meaning of human existence'? How can we be better equipped to respond?