

# Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel

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## SESSION 3

## Shining Forth in a Life of Fidelity to the Gospel

### Introduction

I once heard St John's Gospel summarised as: Come and See, Go and Tell. *Come and See where God's Grace is at Work in your Life* could sum up our first session on *Evangelii Gaudium*. *Go and Tell the Good News* could sum up the second. In this third session, we'll explore the spirituality of *Evangelii Gaudium*. We'll take a look at how Francis would have us live 'under the influence', how we might live our ordinary lives under the influence of God's Holy Spirit.

### Orthocardia

Pope Francis writes: 'we need to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude [orthocardia], which is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way. Better yet, it means learning to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas.'<sup>1</sup> This is a spirituality which 'fosters relationships and not just enables escapism.'<sup>2</sup> Francis rejects 'spiritualities of well-being' which are divorced from community life. It's all about me! He rejects a 'theology of prosperity' which is detached from responsibility for our brothers and sisters. He calls these, 'depersonalised experiences which are nothing more than a form of self-centeredness'<sup>3</sup> Francis is highly critical of spiritualities which he describes as 'a subtle way of seeking one's own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.'<sup>4</sup> He talks of the 'attraction of Gnosticism, a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in [your] own thoughts and feelings.' Francis also refers to the 'self-absorption of those who feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past. It is impossible to

think that a genuine evangelising thrust could emerge from these adulterated forms of Christianity'<sup>5</sup> he writes.

Pope Francis perceives the inadequacy of such spiritualities and is unrelenting in his critique of them. He writes: 'In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel has a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. In this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few.'<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis continues: 'Those who have fallen into this [spiritual] worldliness look on from above and afar. They discredit those who raise questions, they constantly point out the mistakes of others and they are obsessed by appearances. Their hearts are open only to the limited horizon of their own interests, and as a consequence they neither learn from their sins, nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness. This is a tremendous corruption disguised as a good. We need to avoid it by making the church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor. This stifling worldliness can only be healed by breathing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centeredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God.'<sup>7</sup> An ingrown-spirituality impedes our journey of faith even more effectively than a painful, ingrown toenail. He continues: 'Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.'<sup>8</sup>

Francis, on the other hand, paints an attractive spirituality. 'Rather than experts in dire predictions, dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and deviation, we should appear as *joyful messengers* of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel.'<sup>9</sup>

Francis begins sketching the parameters of an evangelising spirituality with the comment: 'Reading the Scriptures makes it clear that the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. Nor should our loving response to God be seen simply as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of 'charity a la carte', or a series of acts aimed at easing our conscience.'<sup>10</sup> He's got our measure, hasn't he! Building on his contention that 'the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God', Francis says: 'the Gospel is about the kingdom of God; it is about loving God, who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity.'<sup>11</sup>

Frederick Buechner describes the Kingdom of God as 'the time beyond time when it will no longer be human beings in their lunacy who are in charge of the world, but God in his mercy who will be in charge of the world.'<sup>12</sup> Francis continues: 'It follows that Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good.'<sup>13</sup> 'Consequently, no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society. An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.'<sup>14</sup>

Francis names the 'attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability,

readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental.'<sup>15</sup> Warming to his topic, Francis continues: 'We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells there, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses.'<sup>16</sup> Once again, Francis quotes Pope Benedict: 'The Church "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice".'<sup>17</sup> Francis continues: 'all Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world. This is essential,' he writes, 'for the Church's social thought is primarily positive: it offers proposals, it works for change and in this sense it constantly points to the hope born of the loving heart of Jesus Christ.'<sup>18</sup> Francis, ever the pragmatic pastor, comments: 'this is not the time or the place to examine in detail the many grave social questions affecting today's world. Furthermore, neither the Pope nor the Church has a monopoly on the interpretation of social realities or the proposal of solutions to contemporary problems. It is up to the Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country.'<sup>19</sup> Yet, Francis does go on to focus on 'two great issues which strike [him] as fundamental at this time in history'. He 'treats them more fully because [he] believes that they will shape the future of humanity'.<sup>20</sup> Can you guess what he names as fundamental issues for the future of humanity? (Inclusion of the poor and Peace and Social Dialogue). We'll address each of these issues later in this series.

## Conclusion

In this session, we have explored, in Francis' words, the call of each baptised Christian to Come and See, to encounter God's love and mercy, so that we might Go and Tell. We got a clear sense of the Spirituality of *Evangelii Gaudium*, first what it is not, and then, attractively what it is. Allow me to conclude this session by quoting Pope Francis quoting Pope Benedict: 'In the end, God's love is the only light which can always illuminate a world

grown dim and give [us] the courage needed to keep living and working.’<sup>21</sup> Can you name a time when God’s love illuminated your ‘world-grown-dim’, when God’s love gave you the courage needed to keep living and working?

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis (2013) *Evangelii Gaudium* #91

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #90

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #90

<sup>4</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #93

<sup>5</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #94

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<sup>6</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #95

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #97

<sup>8</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #2

<sup>9</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #168

<sup>10</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #180

<sup>11</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #180

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Buechner (2006) *Secrets in the Dark* San Francisco: Harper p161

<sup>13</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #182

<sup>14</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #193

<sup>15</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #165

<sup>16</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #183

<sup>17</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #183

<sup>18</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #183

<sup>19</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #184

<sup>20</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #185

<sup>21</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #272

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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 ...

- How do I live ‘under the influence’, of God’s Holy Spirit (#8). What difference does this make to my day-to-day life?
- Pope Francis recommends certain attitudes and attributes as critical for sharing the Good News: ‘approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental’ (#165). As I review my week which of these personal attributes am I especially aware of in my interactions with others? Which attributes or attitudes do I need to develop, enhance and/or practise?

### For sharing and discussion ...

- Pope Francis rejects a number of false spiritualities; such as a spirituality of well-being, of prosperity, of self-interest, etc (#93). What challenges does this pose for me, and for my parish?

### For formation and mission ...

- In our parish there is always a need for maintenance – buildings, systems, rosters, etc – but how do we balance that with constantly reviewing and questioning what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what could we be doing instead, or as well as?
- As a parish community how are we fostering and nurturing ‘joyful messengers’ and people whose ‘goodness and beauty’ shines ‘forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel’ (#168)?
- Pope Francis challenges ‘Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country’ (#168). How is our parish addressing this challenge? What concrete and practical steps will we take to achieve this?