

Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel

SESSION 4

Embracing with Tender Affection those who are Poor and Vulnerable

Introduction

At his Inauguration Mass in St Peter's Square on March 19, 2013, Pope Francis spoke about the power of the pope. Yes, he said, Jesus gave Peter the power of the keys. But what kind of power does the Pope have? He answered: 'The Pope has the power to embrace with tender affection those who are poor and vulnerable, the least important in society.' From that day onwards, Francis has embraced the least important in society. His first foreign trip was to meet asylum-seekers on the Mediterranean Island of Lampedusa. He invited four guests to lunch on his seventy-seventh birthday; three homeless men and their dog. A few months ago, he spent 20 minutes with 160 Diplomats, accredited to the Holy See, a very important group of people. From there, he went to Rome's Ospedale Bambino Gesù, the Baby Jesus Hospital for children. He spent three hours with the children and their parents, a very important group of people.

Why does it come as no surprise that Francis names 'the inclusion of the poor' as one of the two fundamental issues for the future of humanity? He writes: 'We may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign that we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards.'¹

Why 'The Poor'?

'A mere glance at the Scriptures,' he writes, 'is enough to make us see how our gracious Father wants to hear the cry of the poor: *I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them ... so I will send you ...* (Ex 3. 7-8, 10). If

we, who are God's means of hearing the poor, turn deaf ears to this plea, we oppose the Father's will; that poor person *might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt* (Deut 15.0). *How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods, and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?* (1 John 3.17).'² Pope Francis follows this up with a vow from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith: 'The Church, guided by the Gospel of mercy and love for humankind, hears the cry for justice and intends to respond to it with all her might.'³

Francis grounds his comments: 'with due respect for the autonomy and culture of every nation, we must never forget that the planet belongs to all humankind and is meant for all humankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity. It must be reiterated,' he writes, that 'the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others.'⁴ Francis urges us 'to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, **but also** to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.'⁵

It is easy to turn 'the poor' into objects of our pity. Francis clearly sees this danger. That's why he invites us to encounter 'their experience of life, their culture; their ways of living the faith. Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation.'⁶ Francis comments: 'I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack

of spiritual care.’⁷ Again, he quotes the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: ‘Spiritual conversion, the intensity of the love of God and neighbour, zeal for justice and peace, the Gospel meaning of the poor and of poverty, are required of everyone.’⁸ Well might we ask ourselves: what does this encounter with ‘the poor’ look like in my life? What might this encounter with ‘the poor’ look like in our parish? What does it look like in our Diocese?

Besides challenging us to embrace with tender affection those who are least important in society, Francis urges us to look at the structural causes of poverty. This ‘cannot be delayed,’ he writes, ‘because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises.’⁹ He continues: ‘as long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world’s problems, or for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills.’¹⁰ No doubt, Pope Francis is familiar with those words attributed to Mother Theresa: ‘When they see me feed the poor, they say: what a saint! When I ask **why** people are poor, they call me a communist!’

‘Just as the commandment, Thou Shalt Not Kill, sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say, Thou Shall Not, to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion.’¹¹ Francis continues: ‘Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing

economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalisation of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase; and in the meantime, all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.’¹²

Francis proposes two key principles from Catholic Social Teaching for shaping economic policies, the dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good. ‘We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth in justice requires more than economic growth. While presupposing such growth; it requires decisions, programs, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income. It requires the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality. The economy can no longer turn to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing the workforce and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded.’¹³ Francis makes an interesting point: ‘We need to be convinced that charity is the principle not only of micro-relationships [with friends, with family members or within small groups] but also of macro-relationship [social, economic and political ones].’¹⁴

‘Economy, as the very word indicates, should be the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home, which is the world as a whole. Each meaningful economic decision made in one part of the world has repercussions everywhere else; consequently, no government can act without regard for shared responsibility. If we really want to achieve a

healthy world economy, what is needed at this juncture of history is a more efficient way of interacting which, with due regard for the sovereignty of each nation, ensures the economic well-being of all countries, not just a few.¹⁵ Francis then turns his focus on Church communities. 'Any Church community' he writes, 'if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticise governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk.'¹⁶

If You Are Offended ...

Francis is aware of the impact his straight-talking is likely to have on people. For some, it's a refreshing change. For others, it's too direct or not sufficiently nuanced (read: bland, innocuous, de-fanged, air-brushed). Hence, the frank acknowledgement: 'if anyone feels offended by my words, I would respond that I speak them with affection and with the best of intentions, quite apart from any personal interest or political ideology. My words are not those of a foe or opponent. I am interested only in helping those who are in thrall¹⁷ to an individualistic, indifferent and self-centred mentality to be freed from those unworthy chains and to attain a way of living and thinking which is more humane, noble and fruitful, and which will bring dignity to their presence on this earth.'¹⁸

So What?

Francis concludes: 'it is essential to draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognise the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate results.'¹⁹ Francis names the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous people, elderly who are isolated and abandoned. He continues: 'Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the

pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all.'²⁰ To conclude these reflections, I adapt those evocative words of Francis at his Inaugural Mass: **The Church** has the power to embrace with tender affection those who are poor and vulnerable, the least important in society. **Who ought I be embracing with tender affection? Who ought we be embracing with tender affection? Who ought the Archdiocese be embracing with tender affection? In Francis' words:** 'Let us listen to what God's word teaches us about mercy and allow that word to resound in the life of the Church.'²¹

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¹ Pope Francis (2013) *Evangelii Gaudium* #195

² *Evangelii Gaudium* #187

³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1984, *Libertatis Nuntius* #903

⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #190

⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #198

⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #200

⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #200

⁸ *Libertatis Nuntius* #908

⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #202

¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #202

¹¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #53

¹² *Evangelii Gaudium* #54

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #204

¹⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #205

¹⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #206

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #207

¹⁷ Completely controlled or influenced by someone or something.

¹⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* #208

¹⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #210

²⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #210

²¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #193

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.

Reflection and discernment ...

- The 'Introduction' describes a number of events when Pope Francis 'walked the talk' of 'inclusion of the poor'. What responses have I seen or witnessed from other people about the actions of the Pope? How have these events challenged me, encouraged me, transformed me?

Sharing and discussion ...

- Comparing the commandment 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' to 'an economy of exclusion and inequality' is strong and unequivocal language. What are my reactions? How can I respond to this exclusion and inequality?

- The word 'economy' has its origin, or etymology, in the Greek for 'house' (*oikos*). What challenges does this present when I reflect on my home budget, parish budget, state and national budgets and international trade and finances as 'a fitting management of our common home' (#206)?

Formation and mission ...

- How are we responding to the needs of 'the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous people, elderly ... and migrants' (#210)?
- Each of these six sessions concludes with the subtitle 'So what'. This session has dealt with some very significant issues that affect us, and the whole world, but 'so what'? What formation does our community need to begin to address these issues? What practical steps are we taking now, and into the future?