

Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel

SESSION 5

Being Church; Being God's Leaven in the Midst of Humanity

Introduction

In this session, we explore *Evangelii Gaudium* from the perspective of pastoral ministers. To set the context, Francis writes: 'Jesus is the first and greatest evangeliser. In every activity of evangelisation, the primacy always belongs to God who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit'¹ Francis reviews pastoral structures: 'the parish,' he writes, 'is not an outdated institution. Precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours, depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.'² The Diocese finds 'joy in communicating Jesus Christ [in] areas of greater need and in constantly going forth to the outskirts of its own territory or towards new sociocultural settings. Wherever the need for the light and the life of the Risen Christ is greatest, it will want to be there.'³ 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.'⁴ 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.'⁵

Speaking next to Bishops, Francis says: 'He will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and, above all, allowing the flock to strike out on new paths.' He will 'listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear.'⁶ In the next sentence, Francis writes: 'Since I am called to put into practice what I

ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the Papacy. Pope John Paul II asked for help in finding "a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation". We have made little progress in this regard.'⁷ Francis concludes: 'I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear.'⁸

What are the guidelines Francis is referring to? 'Being church' he writes, 'means being God's people, being God's leaven in the midst of humanity. The church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.'⁹ Francis says pointedly to each of us: 'I ask you to adopt [this style of evangelisation] *in every activity which you undertake*,' with 'a missionary heart, [which] never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.'¹⁰

You'll remember, from earlier sessions, that Francis points out the inadequacy of a self-referential church: 'whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns,' he writes, '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.'¹¹ Yet, as we've seen, Francis does not restrict himself to vague generalisations. He speaks in specifics; for instance: 'We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. He dwells among them fostering solidarity, fraternity and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered.'¹² **What footprints of the Spirit do**

you uncover when you look at the suburb, the town, the city you live in, with a contemplative gaze? In Brisbane, I think we might contemplate the emergence of local coffee houses and of people using bicycles. 'What is called for,' he writes, 'is an evangelisation capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the innermost soul of our cities.'¹³ 'What could be significant places of encounter and solidarity often become places of isolation and mutual distrust. Houses and neighbourhoods are more often built to isolate and protect than to connect and integrate. The proclamation of the Gospel will be a basis for restoring the dignity of human life in these contexts, for Jesus desires to pour out an abundance of life upon our cities.'¹⁴

Francis goes on to quote the United States Catholic Bishops: 'responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.'¹⁵ Yet, something more is necessary: 'It is an ongoing process in which every new generation must take part: a slow and arduous effort calling for a desire for integration and a willingness to achieve this through the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of *encounter*.'¹⁶

Pastoral Ministry

It's in this context that Pope Francis reflects on pastoral ministry. He writes of the need to 'make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with him.'¹⁷ Imagining 'the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters,'¹⁸ Francis 'presumes that (the pastoral minister) really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable

outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers,'¹⁹ to share the gospel. What might that look like in your parish? Francis admits: 'the call to renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.'²⁰

Ever grounded and pragmatic, Francis names temptations which affect pastoral workers. He speaks of 'an inordinate concern for [one's] personal freedom and relaxation,'²¹ 'sloth' he calls it elsewhere. 'A tomb psychology thus develops,' he writes, 'and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum.'²²

Four Attitudes for Pastoral Ministers

Pope Francis names four principles, or rather assumptions or attitudes, derived from Catholic Social Teaching to guide us in our pastoral practice:

- time is greater than space
- unity prevails over conflict
- realities are more important than ideas
- the whole is greater than the part

The first principle, *time is greater than space* 'enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us to patiently endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. Giving priority to *space*, rather than to time, means madly attempting to have everything resolved in the present moment.' I remember Maurice Duffy saying once: we ought to do something. Otherwise, we'll look as grey as we are. 'Giving priority to *time* means being concerned about initiating processes'²³ [among people] rather than having impressive looking reports. 'We need to give priority to actions which generate new processes and engage other persons to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events.'²⁴

The second principle, *unity prevails over conflict* assumes that 'conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced. [For when] we lose our perspective, our horizons

shrink and reality itself begins to fall apart. In the midst of conflict, we lose our sense of the profound unity of reality.’²⁵ ‘When conflict arises, some people simply look at it and go their way as if nothing happened. They wash their hands of it and get on with their lives. Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners. The best way to deal with conflict is to face [it] head on, to resolve it, and to make a link in the chain of a new process.’²⁶

The third principle, *realities are more important than ideas* leads Francis to say that ‘it is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric. [We need] to put [our] words into practice, to perform works of justice and charity which make [our] words fruitful. Not to put the word into practice, not to make it reality, is to build on sand, to remain in the realm of pure ideas and to end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centeredness.’²⁷

The fourth principle is *the whole is greater than the part*. ‘We need to pay attention to the global so as to avoid narrowness and banality. Yet we also need to look to the local, which keeps our feet on the ground. Together, the two prevent us from falling into one of two extremes: getting caught up in an abstract universe, falling into step behind everyone else, admiring the glitter of other people’s world, gaping and applauding at all the right times, or turning into a museum of local folklore, a world apart, doomed to doing the same things over and over. Both extremes fail to appreciate the beauty which God bestows beyond their borders.’²⁸ ‘The global need not stifle, nor the particular prove barren.’²⁹

Conclusion

In this session, we have looked at *Evangelii Gaudium* from a pastoral minister’s perspective. We’ve identified the temptations that can lead us astray as well as the assumptions that can keep us on mission. Let the final words be Francis’: ‘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.’³⁰ Francis’ final prayer for us is that we ‘ministers and pastoral workers [may] make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze.’³¹

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¹ Pope Francis (2013) *Evangelii Gaudium* #12

² *Evangelii Gaudium* #28

³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #30

⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #210

⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #210

⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #31

⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #32

⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* #33

⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #114

¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #45

¹¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #2

¹² *Evangelii Gaudium* #71

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #74

¹⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #75

¹⁵ US Catholic Bishops (2007) *Forming Conscience for Faithful Citizenship* #13

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #220

¹⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #27

¹⁸ Francis quotes John Paul II (1988) *Christifideles Laici* #438

¹⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #28

²⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #28

²¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #78

²² *Evangelii Gaudium* #83

²³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #223

²⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #225

²⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #226

²⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #227

²⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #231, #233

²⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* #234

²⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #235

³⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #168

³¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #169

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 ...

- ☐ Pope Francis writes that 'a missionary heart, *never* closes itself off, *never* retreats into its own security, *never* opts for rigidity and defensiveness [rather] ... it always does what good it can'. How do I prepare each day to do good and to avoid the three 'nevers'?

Sharing and discussion ...

- ☐ Another favourite word of Pope Francis, along with encounter and dialogue, is 'leaven'. How do we respond to the clarion call to be 'God's leaven in the midst of humanity' (#114)? What does this really mean for me? What are the ramifications for how I interact with my work colleagues, local community groups, the media and governments?

Formation and mission ...

- ☐ The term 'tomb psychology' is fairly graphic. What steps can we take to insure our parish does not 'transform Christians into mummies in a museum' (#83)?
- ☐ How can the 'four principles' outlined by Pope Francis shape and form our short-term, and long-term, planning?