

UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY FATHER'S APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION – *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

By Joe Paprocki, DMin, December 1, 2013

The Holy Father has written an extraordinary document designed to set forth his vision for the Church. The document is titled *Evangelii Gaudium* which means “The Joy of the Gospel.”

An Apostolic Exhortation is written by the Pope to synthesize the thinking of a recently held Synod of Bishops, in this case, the Bishops’ Synod of October, 2012, that focused on the New Evangelization. Typically, the Exhortation that follows such a synod draws heavily from the propositions put forth by the bishops at the synod.

It is significant to note that, in this case, the synod took place under Pope Benedict XVI but the Exhortation fell to Pope Francis, who, instead of strictly following the propositions of the bishops at the synod, set forth his own agenda. While much of the focus of the Bishops’ Synod was on pointing out the problems and challenges of proclaiming the Gospel in light of increasing secularism and relativism, Pope Francis, instead, chose to focus his exhortation primarily at reforming the Church from within.

In essence, this exhortation is Pope Francis’ “manifesto.”

In his Letter, Pope Francis focused on 7 areas. Here is my summary of what the Holy Father is exhorting the Church to do and be (along with some very extraordinary quotes from the Pontiff himself).

- 1. We Must Be a Church on a Mission** – we cannot stand still; we need to move forward – we need to be a Church that goes forth and does so with joy. We need to engage the world, not separate from it. We need to begin by reforming ourselves and our parishes and even the papacy/Vatican. There is no room for complacency. As we take our message forth, we need to simplify it and to use less churchy language. The message also needs to be more balanced, less judgmental, and not always harping on the same issues or themes. It is important for the message we preach to be attractive to people.

There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter (8)

[A]n evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! (10)

The Eucharist...is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. (47)

- 2. We Can Overcome Challenges to Serve this Mission** – Evangelization does not take place in a vacuum. Far too many people in the world are living day to day. Our economy is one of exclusion and inequality which breeds violence. The economic problems we face are a human problem. Our goal must be the common good. The Church itself needs to do more to foster a sense of belonging, focusing on a pastoral approach rather than an administrative one; focusing on the People of God, not the institution of the Church. To do so, pastoral ministers need to be more energetic and bold. They don’t need to work harder but do need to work smarter. Women must be allowed to take greater roles of leadership and Catholics in general need to rise up to the call to evangelize with great joy and enthusiasm, responding to people’s thirst for God. Above all, we must stop “warring” with each other in the Church.

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. (53)

Money must serve, not rule! (58)

One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, "sourpusses". Nobody can go off to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. (85)

- 3. Everyone Needs to Proclaim the Good News** – The Church must not be an exclusive club and everyone must feel welcome. The Gospel must take flesh in every culture and this occurs primarily through popular piety which involves symbols more than words/reasoning. The Church thrives on diversity and seeks unity, not uniformity. We cannot expect every culture to imitate European Catholicism. Everyone who has experienced God's love is capable of proclaiming that love to others in their everyday lives, person to person.

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 ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act? (100)

But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. (103)

- 4. We Need Better Homilies and a More Evangelizing Catechesis** – Homilies should not be lectures or entertainment. They should not be moralistic, doctrinaire, or overly exegetical. Rather, homilies should be brief, should put us in dialogue with God, give life and meaning, and be transformative. Homilists need to know the hearts of the faithful and be in touch with what they need to hear. They must prepare thoughtfully and prayerfully. Homilies must draw from the Scripture text and homilists must understand its meaning, allowing it to touch his heart. Homilists must use effective images to engage the assembly and must avoid churchy language. Simplicity, brevity, and focus are keys as is positivity. Likewise, catechesis needs to be more focused on transforming hearts, not just on acquiring information.

We know that the faithful attach great importance to it, and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. (135)

A preacher who does not prepare is not "spiritual"; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received."(145)

- 5. Love of God Necessitates Love of Neighbor** – The Gospel is not simply a "me and God" experience nor is it a matter of doing a series of good deeds. It is the call to live in the reality of the Kingdom of God which is present in the here and now and is open to everyone. This calls us to work for the betterment of our world and for all those who live in it. Above all else, we must have an overriding concern for the wellbeing of those who are poor with whom we are called to live in solidarity. We

must strive to lessen the world's inequality which is the root of all social ills and ensure that all have accessibility to dignified work, education, and healthcare. We must be consistent in our efforts to protect the dignity of life from conception to natural death.

This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. (198)

None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice. (201)

- 6. We Need to Work for a Peace Based on the Common Good of All** – Such peace is not a quick fix but requires patience to bring about real and effective change. We must rise above conflict and find communion even in disagreement. Peace is not brought about through uniformity but rather by harmonizing diversity. We must go beyond the realm of ideas and put our faith into practice. Our goal is to bring all men and women together at the table of God's Kingdom. True dialogue is needed: between faith and science, with other Christians, with Jews and Muslims and other non-Christians, and with atheists. We must strive for religious freedom for all.

I ask God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances – of the evils in our world! (205)

Any Church community, 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 criticize governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk. (208)

- 7. The Holy Spirit Must Fuel Our Evangelization Efforts** – We need a Church that is fearless, proclaiming the faith, not only with words, but through lives transformed by Christ. We must be convinced, from our own experience, that a life with Jesus is richer than a life without him. We must have prayerful encounters with our Lord lest we lose heart. These encounters will propel us into the midst of society, responding to real needs. When we speak of these encounters, we will speak to the deepest yearnings of people's hearts. WE must become a mission! We can take the first steps by praying for the needs of others and by praying for Mary, the Mother of God, to pray for us.

We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize. (266)

My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an "extra" or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth (273)