

DAILY NEWS

'Evangelii Gaudium': The Joy of the Missionary Disciple

Register commentary on Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation.

BY FATHER ROGER J. LANDRY

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During his history-changing address to his brother cardinals before the conclave that elected him, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio stressed that the fundamental choice facing them was between an "evangelizing Church that comes out of herself" and a "worldly Church that lives within herself, of herself, for herself."

With words that would soon become his own job description, he said that the next pope had to be a man who, "from the contemplation of Jesus Christ ... will help the Church get out of herself and go to those on the outskirts of existence."

With today's publication of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis is sharing the fruits of his lifelong contemplation of Christ and seeking to lead the whole Church to become, at every level, an evangelizing community of missionary disciples.

The exhortation is a compendium of many of the strongest points he has made in homilies, catecheses and interviews over the first eight months of his pontificate, but it also provides a detailed pastoral program for the reform of the Church he is seeking to bring about.

Missionary outreach, he writes, must be "paradigmatic for all the Church's activity." All Church institutions, from the papacy to parishes, must be reformed so that their structures are directed not toward maintenance, but toward a permanent state of mission (25).

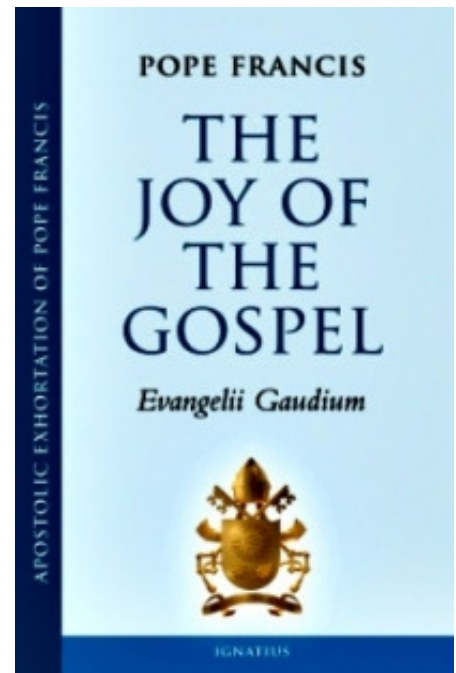
Likewise, he summons all Catholics to a similar process of conversion, remarking that those who are truly disciples will be missionary disciples, characterized by the joy of the faith. Evangelizers, he says, "must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral" (10) or "whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (6), but, rather, must be those who "wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet" (14).

Pope Francis describes the history of salvation as a "great stream of joy" (5). Jesus has come so that his joy may be in us and our joy may be complete (John 15:11). The Christian's joy "drinks of Jesus' brimming heart," he says (5). This participation in Jesus' joy constitutes the "joy of the Gospel" Francis is proclaiming not only through the title and pages of this exhortation, but also through his daily example.

He structures the rather long letter — two and a half times the length of the July encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (*The Light of Faith*) — in five chapters.

In the first, he describes the transformation that must happen in the Church so that sharing the happiness that flows from our encounter with Jesus in faith becomes part of everything the Church does. This renewal cannot be deferred, he said. "I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is, a missionary impulse, capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world" (27).

He describes how the Church must "go forth," boldly taking the first step to draw near to those who do not know or live the Gospel, by bridging bridges, supporting others, taking on the "smell of the sheep" and patiently seeking to accompany them on their journey. He says that the message we announce should be the "heart of the Gospel," which is the joyful proclamation that Jesus loves them, gave his life to save them and seeks to live at their side each day to strengthen and free them (164).



This doesn't mean that we duck controversial issues, he clarifies. Rather, these issues must be announced in a way that doesn't distract from the central message of salvation. If others hear 10 times as many words on temperance as on charity, the Pope notes, the Christian message is being disproportionately presented (38).

Lest anyone misinterpret this point, he powerfully reaffirms the Church's teachings on the true nature of marriage (66), even citing the [2006 U.S. bishops' document](#) on ministry to persons with same-sex attraction (65). He also reiterates the Church's passionate defense of the unborn, even in the "very difficult situations" of rape victims and women in extreme poverty (213-214).

In the second chapter, Pope Francis focuses on the challenges to proclaiming the joy of the Gospel in today's world. He mentions that consumerism, complacency, blunted consciences, excuse-making, relativism, secularist rationalism, violence, poverty, indifference, greed, narcotics, false autonomy and spiritual worldliness all weaken the impulse of missionary renewal in the Church.

He acknowledges that his words against the idolatry of money (55), the "deified market" (56), and the "absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation" (202) may not be taken by everyone as part of the joy of the Gospel. "If anyone feels offended by my words," he writes, "I would respond that I speak them with affection and with the best of intentions. ... My words are not those of a foe or an opponent. I am interested only in helping those who are in thrall to an individualistic, indifferent and self-centered mentality to be freed from those unworthy chains" (208).

In the third chapter, he focuses more specifically on the proclamation of the Gospel. After saying that it is the duty of all Christians to share the faith with joy — since Jesus entrusted this task not to an "exclusive and elite group" of professionals, but to all his followers — he then turns specifically to clerics and gives the most "meticulous" primer on the preparation of homilies in the history of papal documents.

Homilies are an obvious part of the New Evangelization and a crucial element in forming the faithful to assume their own responsibilities in sharing the faith, but he admits that homilies are often a cause of suffering for both clergy and the faithful. He wants to help them become "an intense and happy experience of the Spirit," leading people to the encounter with Jesus in the sacrament of the Eucharist and to the encounter with him in others (135).

Pope Francis says that homilies should be simple, brief, clear, positive and from the heart. They should be modeled on the way a mother speaks to her children, in a language they can understand. They should be beautiful, like a kind of music that can move others' heads and hearts. Further, they should feature a reverence for, and great personal familiarity with, the word of God, brought about through prayerful assimilation.

In the fourth chapter, Pope Francis tackles the social dimension of evangelization. The Gospel is not supposed to remain private, but flourish in a true love of neighbor that transforms all of society. He focuses specifically on the demands of the Gospel with regard to the poor and with regard to peace.

Jesus himself became poor, preached the Good News to the poor and personally identified with the needy, Pope Francis reminds us. Throughout sacred Scripture, God's care for the poor is striking. Pope Francis says we shouldn't "relativize" or "weaken" the force of these texts, but accept them with "courage and zeal" (194).

We must get beyond, he says, a "simple welfare mentality" (204) to passionate and compassionate love of the poor as persons loved by God. The worst neglect of the poor, he says, is the "lack of spiritual care." The Church is called to give them "privileged and preferential religious care" (200).

The Pope recognizes that his words on behalf of the poor will give rise to much "commentary or discussion," but states his fear that his evangelical call will have "no real practical effect" beyond those analyses. Whether that fear is realized, of course, depends on us.

With regard to peace, Pope Francis states that the Gospel is meant to bring about the peace with God on the basis of which real peace with each other can be built. Christians are sent forth in peace at the end of every Mass "to announce the Gospel of the Lord." Peace is a crucial part of the mission that is the Church. Missionary disciples are meant to be not just peace-wishers, but peacemakers. The virtues of the peacemaker are likewise needed, the Pope continues, in dialogue with other Christians, with Jews, Muslims, atheists and others.

In the last chapter, Pope Francis focuses on an authentic missionary spirituality, "full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction!" (261). This spirituality, modeled for us by the Blessed Virgin Mary and brought about by the Holy Spirit, flows from the life-changing encounter with Jesus and his saving love. Those who have had this encounter know the difference Jesus makes and want others to experience the joy of a similar transformation (266). Pope Francis encourages everyone to recognize that, just like the Church, we don't have a mission; each of us *is* a mission. It's for that mission, he emphasizes, each of us is alive (273).

In the introduction, he admits, "Nowadays, documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and ... are quickly forgotten." His hope for this new apostolic exhortation, however, is that the "Joy of the Gospel" will not only arouse the interest of clergy, religious and faithful, but will provide the paradigm for the reform of the Church — helping the Church more effectively carry out her mission as salt, light and leaven in the world of today and tomorrow.

*Father Roger Landry is pastor of St. Bernadette parish in Fall River, Massachusetts, and is national chaplain of **Catholic Voices USA**. He provided expert commentary for EWTN during the conclave that elected Pope Francis.*

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