

“Go and Announce the Gospel of the Lord”

Southwark Evangelization Conferences - May 2014

Reflection on the Papal Exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium”

By Most Rev’d Peter Smith, Archbishop of Southwark

From the moment of his first public appearance after his election, it became clear that Pope Francis was going to be a real breath of fresh air in the Church. In all that he did and said over the coming days and weeks it was obvious that here was a humble and modest man, a man of integrity practicing what he preached; a man who speaks in simple and straightforward language, using wonderful images to illustrate what he says, who even makes us laugh. It also became very clear that he saw his mission, as the Bishop of Rome, was to bring fresh life to the Church, to initiate once again the process of reform, renewal and purification, which has been a recurring need in the Church over the centuries.

Last November, he published what has been called his “Magna Carta” for the Church, the Apostolic Exhortation, “Evangelii Gaudium”. In that document Pope Francis reveals to us both the bad habits that need to be abandoned and the pastoral priorities in the public life of the Church, the body of Christ, whose mission is to proclaim the gospel in season and out of season. His vision is breathtaking, challenging and rather frightening. He is challenging us to overcome our complacency, to drink from the wells of God’s grace, and so refreshed, to do courageously as Christ asks of us: “Go and proclaim the Gospel”.

It’s a radical document - radical in the original sense of that word which means the essential nature of something, not radical in the sense that it is often used today to mean an approach which is fanatical, extremist or a departing from tradition. It is radical because he wants us, the Church, to re-acquaint ourselves

with the roots of the Church's mission as set out in the Gospel; to rediscover the wonder, the joy, the extraordinary gift God has given us by sending his Son to redeem us and reconcile us to God and to one another. He is reminding us that in his life and teaching, Christ revealed the depths of God's unconditional love for us; the God who says to each and everyone, "You are precious in my sight and I love you - and my love for you will never fail." God's love, his mercy, his compassion and readiness to forgive is expressed supremely in human form in Christ's life and ministry.

When we read and reflect on the gospels we discover that Christ approached people where they were, in their frailty, weakness and sinfulness. He had a special love and compassion for the poor, the vulnerable, the sick and the rejected. And he took the initiative to approach them, to sit down with them and begin a conversation with them, to teach them that God loves them, wants to forgive them, to heal them and to share with joy the very love and life of God the Father. It was through those personal encounters with Christ, as we find particularly in John's gospel, that the Samaritan woman came to faith, as did the blind man whose sight he restored, and as did Martha and Mary when Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead.

Pope Francis is adamant that that personal encounter with the person of Jesus Christ must be at the heart of the renewal and purification of the Church, God's family, because it is through prayer that we are drawn into a deeper communion with the person of Jesus Christ and we will be given the courage to go out and proclaim the Gospel to those in our society who have never heard it; or to those who have become "nominal Christians" who no longer feel any sense of belonging to the Church. That life of prayer will lead us to be co-responsible with Pope Francis for the renewal of the Church, because it will renew our faith and trust in God, and empower us to do what he is asking of us. Prayer, abiding with God the Father, remaining in his love, was the way of Christ, and that must always be the way of the Church which Christ commissioned to proclaim the Gospel to all the nations, in season and out of season.

This was something that St. John-Paul II also emphasised in his Apostolic Letter, "Novo Millennio Inuente" at the end of the Holy Year in 2000: ". . . *training in*

holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer . . . both personal and communal. But we well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray: as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: 'Lord, teach us to pray!' (Lk 11:1). Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends: 'Abide with me and I in you' (Jn 15:4). This . . . is the very substance and soul of the Christian life, and the condition of all true pastoral life. Wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, (prayer) opens us, through Christ and in Christ, to contemplation of the Father's face. Learning this Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer and living it fully, above all in the liturgy, the summit and source of the Church's life, but also in personal experience, is the secret of a truly vital Christianity . . . " (n.32) Or as I tend to put it, prayer is the sap that gives life to the vine, keeping it healthy and producing fruit.

We can't be authentic Christians, true disciples of Christ, faithful to the spirit of the Gospel and the mission Christ gave each one of us in baptism, if we have a weary and half-asleep faith, if we shut the door of our hearts or our church buildings, becoming self-absorbed and caring only about ourselves and our parish community. We are being called to fling open the doors of our hearts, and of our parish churches, and face with courage and confidence the challenges of the world into which we are sent to proclaim the Gospel. A living and vibrant faith, rooted in our personal relationship with the risen Christ, will motivate us to take up the reform which Pope Francis is calling for. He is already making great strides in reforming the government of the Church and says that he wants *"to get rid of clericalism, the mundane, this closing ourselves off within ourselves."* He also wants a reform of the way authority is exercised in the Church, abolishing heavy-handedness, intransigence, hypocrisy and other shortcomings which undermine the credibility of those in positions of authority.

More locally, he wants us all to work with him and with each other to have a good spring clean as individuals and as parish communities, to throw out the accumulated baggage of the years. As Pope Francis puts it, *" . . . if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be 'the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters'. This presumes that it 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 group 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 evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach." (n.28)

1. The Mission of the Church:

Evangelization is at the heart of the Church's mission because it is the missionary mandate given by Christ to the Church, as recorded in Matthew's gospel: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"* (Mt28:19-20). *In these verses we see how the risen Christ sent his followers to preach the Gospel in every time and place, so that faith in him might spread to every corner of the earth."* (n.19)

In his introduction Pope Francis, says that *"The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come."* (n.1) He goes on to say that, *"The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. 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. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ."* (n.2) And he adds a little later, almost as an aside, *"There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter."* (n. 6)

Pope Francis recalls the words of Pope Benedict XVI, which he says take us to the very heart of the Gospel: *‘Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?’* (nn.7,8)

The implication of this is, of course, that if we are to evangelise authentically and effectively, we must be convinced that God loves us and that through the gift of the Holy Spirit we really are in a personal relationship with God our Father, through, with and in our relationship with the person of Christ who gives us his gifts of joy and peace. Consequently, Pope Francis says, *“ . . .an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that ‘delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ’”*. [n.10]

The joy of the gospel, he says, *“fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church’s journey in years to come.”* (N.1)

2. Obstacles that hinder the Mission of the Church:

Pope Francis then identifies, in Chapter 2, some of the obstacles that hinder the proclamation of the Gospel in contemporary culture:

- attitudes of cynicism, relativism, pessimism, materialism, secularism and consumerism (62, 63, 68, 80),
- the exclusion and extreme poverty of so many in the world (53),
- the challenge of secularization which tends to reduce faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and the personal, (64)
- the challenge of developing a communal commitment,
- the challenges faced by families and the challenges faced by people living in urban centres (66),
- a spiritual worldliness leading to the creation of false priorities (93 -97),
- the lack of a clear understanding of the identity and mission of the laity and the lack of a more visible presence of women and a more creative response to young people (102-106),
- the lack of a contagious apostolic spirit leading to a scarcity of vocations (107) and a lack of confidence.

3. How does the Church evangelize?

Then in Chapter 3, Pope Francis speaks of the heart of evangelization which is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. He makes it clear that there can be no true evangelization without it. He reminds us that *“Evangelization is the task of the Church. The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary. . . This people, which God has chosen and called, is the Church. Jesus did not tell the apostles to form an exclusive and elite group. He said: ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’ (Mt28:19).*

Saint Paul tells us in the people of God, in the Church, ‘there is neither Jew or Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal3:28) . . . Being Church means being God’s people, in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love. This means that we are to be God’s leaven in the midst of humanity. It means proclaiming and bringing God’s salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way. 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 . . . In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization.” (nn.111, 113, 114, 119) In this chapter he also stresses the need for on-going formation through catechesis, and personal accompaniment.

In Chapter 4 he reminds us of the social dimension of the Gospel, the Social Teaching of the Church. The Gospel demands that we have a care and concern for the society we live in, a care for the common good especially:

- for the poor
- identifying and helping to eliminate the causes and policies that lead to poverty
- for those who experience violence and exclusion
- for migrants and victims of trafficking

4. Conclusion:

Pope Francis wants us all, laity, religious and clergy to take his Exhortation to heart and begin to find ways to implement it in our parishes and dioceses. It is a real challenge and may well disturb those who feel “comfortable” in the Church as she is. But Pope Francis will have none of that and challenges it. He is calling for new life and new ways of being a missionary Church, and I’ll end with two final quotes from the Exhortation:

“Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.

“I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope

is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk6:37). (n.49)

And finally a last word of encouragement from the Holy Father for us to discern the way forward together - laity, religious and clergy:

"Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way'. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment." (n.33)