

SHORT INTRO

“The Vision of *Evangelii Gaudium*” (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis’s Exhortation on ‘proclaiming the gospel in today’s world’. A talk given by Andrew Thomson at an ACTA meeting held at St Robert’s Harrogate in May 2015. EG is one of the chief sources for the “dialoguing” church ACTA advocates.

THE VISION OF EVANGELII GAUDIUM

1. Introduction

Over 80 years ago, the French Jesuit philosopher, Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, recounted the story of a conversation he had had with a saintly old missionary, who had said: “History shows that no religion has been able to maintain itself in the world for more than two thousand years. Once that time has run out, they all die. And it is coming up to two thousand years for Christianity . . .”

Teilhard went on to say that: “As a Christian, I (do not believe that Christianity will disappear) . . . as has happened to other religions. . . But (the) immortality of our faith does not prevent it from being subject . . . to the general laws of periodicity which govern all life. . . Christianity is reaching the end of one of the natural cycles of its existence . . . the time for a renewal is close at hand.

So many attitudes and outlooks are modified after twenty centuries that, in the context of religion, we have to slough off the old skin. Our formulas have become narrow and inflexible . . . they have ceased to have an emotional impact on us. There must be a ‘moult’ if we are to continue to live.”

Although Teilhard de Chardin was condemned and effectively silenced by the Church during his lifetime, thirty years later his theological vision had a profound effect on Vatican II and was acknowledged to have been the inspiration behind *Gaudium et Spes* – The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

Vatican II was a time of enormous hope and expectation. It appeared that the “moult had started” but in terms of evangelisation – *making the kingdom of God present in our world* (176) – the long years after Vatican II were not as fruitful as had been hoped.

So it was that ten years ago, the Dominican friar, Timothy Radcliffe, said in the introduction to his book *What is the Point of Being a Christian*: “All the Christian Churches have in recent years been making a big push to spread the gospel. Certainly in the Catholic Church there has been a lot of talk about evangelisation. Dioceses and parishes have drawn up ambitious plans to let people know about our faith. Usually these have had little effect. We talk about love, freedom, happiness, and so on, but unless our Churches are really seen to be places in which people are free and courageous, why should anyone believe us?”

And in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI said in a homily to the Latin American & Caribbean Bishops: “It is not by proselytising that the Church grows but by attraction.”

Then, in 2013, not many months after his election, Pope Francis issued his Apostolic Exhortation - *Evangelii Gaudium* - The Joy of the Gospel ¹. Its focus is the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, and in it. Pope Francis repeats this quotation of Pope Benedict and then goes on to spell out what he believes is needed to provide this attraction and the kind of Church he wants us to be.

¹ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's in Today's World. Issued 24 November 2013.
Published by St. Paul's Publishing ISBN: 978 0 85439 and also available online at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

Some have called it Pope Francis's manifesto, but - unlike the party political manifestos which we may have been reading over recent weeks – it is very direct, unambiguous, hard-hitting and often quite uncomfortable. It is well worth reading if you haven't already done so.

Many people far more qualified than me have written and given erudite talks about *Evangelii Gaudium* but I have taken a more simplistic view and tried to pick out those key extracts which describe the characteristics of what this Church would look like. This is the vision of *Evangelii Gaudium* that I want to share with you today.

Most of the words are Pope Francis's ² – in total there are 47,560 of them - but I promise not to quote more than half!

2. Characteristics of the Church

2.1 Love

It is no surprise that the first characteristic is love. Love is to be the bedrock and the inspiration behind everything that we do. What counts above all else is "*faith working through love*" (Gal 5:6), and Pope Francis quotes St. Thomas Aquinas: "*The foundation of the New Law is in the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is manifested in the faith which works through love*". (37)

Love is the constantly recurring theme throughout *Evangelii Gaudium*.

2.2 Joy and enthusiasm

However, the second characteristic may come as more of a surprise to quite a lot of Catholics because this is joy - not just joy in and for ourselves but *shared joy*.

Pope Francis quotes from the Acts of the Apostles that wherever the disciples went *there was great joy* (5) and he goes to say that . . . *an evangelising community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always*. (24)

Unfortunately, *There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter*. (6)

[Some years ago, when I was a staff member at CAFOD, I had the opportunity to speak at a lot of Masses in different parts of the country. I'm sorry to say that I didn't come out of most of those churches with the feeling that we had been celebrating "Good News"]

Coupled with joy is enthusiasm: *Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm . . . an evangeliser must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!* (10)

The word “enthusiasm” derives from the Greek “en Theos” and means “coming from God”. Enthusiasm is infectious – it is a communicable disease – it is what the disciples exhibited after Pentecost and in the life of the early Church. It is what made the message attractive and helped to bring people to Christ.

Pope Francis says: *How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelisation full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction* (261)

² Direct quotations from *Evangelii Gaudium* are shown in italics with the relevant paragraph number given at the end of each quotation.

2.3 Openness and inclusivity

Thirdly is another pair of twinned characteristics – openness and inclusivity.

Pope Francis says: *The joy of the Gospel is for all people; no-one can be excluded.* (23) and *Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone.* (15)

Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be a part of the community, nor should the doors of the Sacraments be closed for simply any reason. This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself “the door”; baptism. The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.

These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a toll house; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems. (47)

Pope Francis deeply regrets *the failure of our institutions to be welcoming* (70).and says: *We are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink.* (86).

He rejects any notion of the Church as a cult and rails against those *who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past. A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelising, one analyses and classifies others and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying* (94)

Furthermore, he says: *In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel has a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. In this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few* (95)

Jesus did not tell the apostles to form an exclusive and elite group. He said “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mk. 28:19) (113)

Pope Francis stresses the importance for the Church to: *practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awake a yearning for the Christian ideal.* (171)

The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into the “art of accompaniment” which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other. (169)

2.4 Involvement (“Going forth”)

The fourth characteristic is involvement, and *Evangelii Gaudium* places great emphasis on the importance of the Church “going forth”

Pope Francis explains that: *A Church which “goes forth” is a Church whose doors are open (46)* and he makes clear that those doors must be open not just to invite everyone in but also for all of us to go out into our communities and into the world at large:

. . . we cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings; we need to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry. (15)

. . all of us are asked (to obey his call) to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel. (20)

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. (49)

Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing. (35)

He rejects a *privatised and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity (262)* and goes on to say that our *kerygma* – our proclamation and acting out of the Gospel – *has a clear social context: because community and engagement with others is at the very heart of the Gospel. (177)*

An evangelising community gets involved (not only) by word (but also by) deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelisers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelising community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. (24)

An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. (183)

Pope Francis accepts that that this Apostolic Exhortation is not the time or the place to examine in detail the many grave social questions affecting today’s world but he picks out the *two great issues* which he considers *fundamental at this time of history*:

- *The inclusion of the poor in society*
- *Peace and social dialogue*

And he strongly recommends people to use and study the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. (184)*, and always to say: *no to the economy of exclusion and to the inequality which spawns violence.*

2.5 Preparedness to change

'Preparedness to change' is what I have termed the fifth characteristic, because Pope Francis clearly wants to see a Church which not only recognises the need for change but which is also committed to making it happen.

He quotes Vatican II in saying that the Church must demonstrate *an openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ. . . . Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way . . . to that continuous reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth.* (26)

Pope Francis goes on to 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 channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.* (27)

Mere administration can no longer be enough. Throughout the world let us be permanently in a state of mission. (25)

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 re-thinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation in their respective communities. (33)

Evangelii Gaudium is full of instances where Pope Francis wants to see change. Regarding the structure and operation of the Church he highlights three things in particular::

- Decentralisation

I am conscious of the need to promote a sound decentralisation. (16)

Excessive centralisation, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach. (32)

- Role of women

The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. (103)

Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded. (104)

- Collaborative ministry and lay formation

Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority – ordained ministers - are at their service . There has been a growing of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough in some cases (this) is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision making. The formation of the laity and the evangelisation of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge. (102)

2.6 Mercy and forgiveness

Last, but by no means least, are the characteristics of mercy and forgiveness; the whole of *Evangelii Gaudium* is set between the twin pillars of love and mercy.

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. (114)

Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings. (44)

God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy. Christ has given us his example (3)

An evangelising community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first, (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy.

Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. (24)

3. Conclusion

So there it is. What Pope Francis sets out in *Evangelii Gaudium* is a vision – he doesn't try to prescribe answers to all the questions which he poses, but challenges us to be involved in helping to find those answers.

What he asks is that we all work together to forge a Church which is defined by:

- Love
- Joy and enthusiasm
- Openness and inclusivity
- Involvement in the community and in the world
- A preparedness to change and always the practice of
- Mercy and forgiveness

That's all there is to it!

Postscript – A few words about ACTA

Regrettably, there are some people who, in spite of repeated assurances, choose to believe that ACTA has a hidden agenda. There are also others who question the role of ACTA, not because they doubt the sincerity of our mission for dialogue but because they ask what is it that this dialogue is intended to achieve?

My first answer would be that such dialogue within the Church is highly desirable and necessary in itself. As Pope Francis said (this time not in *Evangelii Gaudium*!): *When leaders in various fields ask me for advice, my response is always the same: Dialogue, Dialogue, Dialogue.*

When people start to dialogue, when they really start to listen to each other, when they come to appreciate where each other is coming from - and why - then progress has been made.

It isn't always possible to reach agreement, but it is possible to reach understanding.

But secondly, if ACTA were asked to define an end objective for its mission of dialogue, I would say that, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis has effectively done it for us. This is the kind of Church for which we hope and pray, and we see the pursuit of dialogue as being the only way by which this vision can be realised.

Our task now is to find ways in which we can help to bring it about.