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Encountering "The Joy of the Gospel": A Commentary on Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*

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"The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Christ." So begins the first apostolic exhortation from our Holy Father Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"). Pope Francis' exhortation, which some members of the press have referred to as the Mission Statement of his pontificate, is a significant contribution to the new evangelization to which the Church must faithfully apply herself. The promulgation of *Evangelii gaudium* provides an opportunity for prayerful study, and as an apostolate founded to promote fidelity to the Church's teachings and the Holy Father, we heartily accept the challenge to listen, reflect, and assist in disseminating the message of "the Joy of the Gospel."

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From the outset of the document, the Holy Father is clear that his exhortation is a series of reflections, a pastoral program, and while he occasionally alludes to more substantial doctrinal issues, he makes no claims of altering these matters and posits that his reflections should provoke continued dialogue. *Evangelii gaudium* is simply a presentation intended to rouse the hearts of all Christians so that we might joyfully share the Gospel with others.

Because of the uniqueness of Pope Francis' pastoral approach, it is helpful to keep in mind the guidance offered by *Lumen gentium*:

Religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking. (no. 25)

Taking this admonition to heart, let us learn from our Holy Father by focusing on the essential message of *Evangelii gaudium*.

Although *Evangelii gaudium* is a considerably lengthy document at over 50,000 words, one simple premise contains the entire meaning of the exhortation. Without this key, as it were, to unlocking the document, its implementation will be fruitless; its study misguided; its message completely obscured.

The key which opens and reveals the framework for the text is the very same key that unlocks the meaning of our lives. This key is the response to an invitation.

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them . . . no one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord." (no. 3)

Pope Francis' invitation is one that all Christians, including we members of Catholics United for the Faith, must consider prayerfully with docile hearts. The *source* of our joy must be rediscovered, and Francis assures us that Christ "is always capable of restoring our joy" (no. 3). The renewed encounter with Him empowers us to fully live out our baptismal call. Because the joyful encounter with Christ transforms and animates us, it must serve as the driving force which guides our purposes and causes us to reassess our goals. "The primary reason for evangelizing," Francis writes, "is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him" (no. 264). The Holy Father proposes that we once again look to the Gospel message and reclaim it as our rule of

life.

A simple remembrance of the whole of salvation history—the anticipation of Christ, His life, death, and Resurrection—may seem basic, but if the Gospel is the core of our lives it must be retold again and again. We must never stop seeking to understand all of its implications, like the lover who constantly seeks further knowledge of the beloved.

Francis states: “The Gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ’s cross, constantly invites us to rejoice” (no. 5). When the Word was made flesh, the immediate result was *joy*. “Mary’s visit to Elizabeth makes John leap for joy in his mother’s womb,” Francis recalls. Joy is evidence of Christ’s nearness, and we who share in His life as a result of our baptism, who experience His touch of mercy through the sacrament of reconciliation, and who consume His very Body and Blood should undoubtedly be bearers of that joy which is the unmistakable sign of God’s love and presence.

Francis’ reflections hinge on the encounter with Christ. It is no small matter that the Lord came to ensure the possibility of this encounter by establishing the Church as the bridge to God. Its very existence makes manifest the Body of Christ. Where else can we go but to the Church to encounter the Lord?

Francis echoes what has been stated previously by Pope Benedict XVI, in his moving encyclical *Deus Caritas est* (“God is Love”).

He encounters us ever anew, in the men and women who reflect his presence, in his word, in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist. In the Church’s Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has “loved us first,” love can also blossom as a response within us. (no. 17)

Our commitment of love, stemming from an authentic relationship with our Savior, is the obvious requisite that precedes evangelization—and at the same time provides the impetus to evangelize. “Unless we see [Jesus] present at the heart of our missionary commitment,” Pope Francis rightly acknowledges, “our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on.” Enlivened by the love of God, we share what no one can argue with: a personal experience of God’s redeeming work in our own lives. Undeniably, Francis warns, “A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody” (no. 266).

If the first premise of *Evangelii gaudium* is that a joyful spreading of the Gospel is contingent upon a renewed encounter with God, the second is that the encounter with God inspires a renewed encounter with humanity. Closeness to the personhood of Christ reveals to us the personhood of every individual.

Recognizing the image of God in others, Francis teaches, should come even before the desire to evangelize. “Appearances notwithstanding,” he asserts, “every person is immensely holy and deserves our love” (no. 274). Because we have all heard that men are made in the image and likeness of God—perhaps countless times—this truth is hardly novel. However, it bears repeating. Just as we must meditate once again on the Gospel message, we must revisit what Jesus’ coming means for the human person. His love for the individual informs *our* love for the individual. His sacrifice elevates the dignity of all men. If we truly unite ourselves to Christ, the desire to continue His mission to “draw all men to Himself” is inevitable.

All of the disordered behaviors we see in our society, at the root, reveal desperation and longing. This is not to trivialize immorality, but we gain nothing by putting the cart before the horse. Ours is a generation desperate for love. The objective is not to impose a message on the world: we are called to promote the flourishing of the human person by challenging all to embrace the great dignity bestowed on us by Christ. We must reach the *source* of the symptoms. The remedy to any and all human difficulties can be found in the person of Jesus Christ—that is why the Church urges evangelization. We must communicate what we possess; we must supply the Answer to a questioning people.

It has always been through individuals that the Gospel has spread. Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, which discussed the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and the world, emphasized the duty of every Christian to be an envoy of the Good News.

Humanity is loved by God! This very simple yet profound proclamation is owed to humanity by the Church. Each Christian's words and life must make this proclamation resound: God loves you, Christ came for you, Christ is for you "the Way, the Truth and the Life!" (no. 34)

Let us therefore overcome our fears and renew our enthusiasm for bringing the life-giving message of the Redeemer to all people. Pope Francis says, "To be evangelizers of souls, we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people's lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy" (no. 268). The Holy Father assures us that when we participate in the joyful spreading of the Gospel, we not only draw closer to the individuals we engage but also strengthen our relationship with God. "Whenever we encounter another person in love," Francis explains, "we learn something new about God" (no. 272). Similarly, Pope Benedict wrote: "Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me" (*Deus Caritas est*, no. 18).

Remarkably, through *Evangelii gaudium* the Holy Father lays out his program for the Church by doing precisely what he is asking of the faithful. He joyfully proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ and reminds us that when renewed by love, this becomes the simplest of tasks. Those who would inhibit this message are doing a disservice to themselves and to the Church. Worse than that, the Holy Father warns, "We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide" (no. 272).

When we have long participated in the life of the Church, it is wise to continuously reexamine our attachments: Have we become like the Pharisees, attached to the commands without the proper relationship to the command-giver? The call for a renewed study of the Gospel should be welcomed by all Christians if we are sincere in our devotion.

Many Catholics have been so startled by the dramatic shift in pontifical programs, meaning Francis' unconventional style, that they have hastily discounted the promulgation of this important document or taken periphery comments out of context. Sadly, if one rejects the message of *Evangelii gaudium*—the invitation to encounter God once again—the unwillingness and inability to partake in the joyful spreading of the Gospel leaves the call of baptism unfulfilled. Pope Francis wisely addresses this spiritual crisis which can cripple the Church. He knows that Christians without Christ are nothing at all. It is the remembrance of our love of God and the renewed awareness of our relationship to Him that melt apathy and ignite zeal.

Our Holy Father advises us: "If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence" (no. 264).

Catholics United for the Faith urges our members and all the laity to read, in full, *Evangelii gaudium*. We too must recollect our purpose. Our apostolate prays daily:

O God our Father, who sent Your only-begotten Son to suffer and to give His life for the life of His Church, rule, protect, and nourish her continually, we beseech You. Teach us of Catholics United for the Faith to direct our zeal first of all to the renewal of our own hearts. Then, if it be Your holy will to allow us to be in any way your instruments in the wider renewal of Your Church, give us the grace to know what services, small or great, You ask of us, and let the Holy Spirit teach us to perform them in obedience, patience, and charity, leaving entirely to You what fruits they may bear. We ask this through the same Jesus Christ Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of that Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

A validation of the work of our apostolate is contained within *Evangelii gaudium*. The Holy Father implicitly affirms our mission, encouraging us in his own words to continue what we have always striven for: "to direct our zeal first of all to the renewal of our own hearts."

Therefore, let us humbly accept his invitation to a renewed encounter with God, that we might be joyful evangelizers and experience once again the empowering love of Christ. May we be invigorated by the Holy Father's words:

We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach. . . . It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. (nos. 265, 266)

"This," our Holy Father tells us, "is why we evangelize."

Pope Francis' exhortation Evangelii gaudium can be read in full at the Vatican website. It can also be ordered through Ignatius Press.

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