

REFLECTIONS ON POPE FRANCIS' APOSTOLIC LETTER GAUDIUM EVANGELII

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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, time and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. (27)

When I read this, I thought of the following:

...(The) Church will suffer the loss of its shape as it undergoes a death, and all the more so, the more purely it lives from its source and is consequently less concerned with preserving its shape. In fact, it will not concern itself with affirming its shape but with promoting the world's salvation; as for the shape in which God will raise it from its death to serve the world, it will entrust that to the Holy Spirit.

When von Balthasar wrote that some decades ago, and even more recently when I quoted it in my *Openings to Renewal*, it could only have seemed like a dream, because of the tenacious ways the institutional Church looks after itself. Yet here we have a Pope who intends to make that dream come true. Quoting Pope John Paul's post-synodal Letter to the Church in Oceania, he added: "All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion." (27)

We would seriously underestimate this Apostolic Exhortation if we expected it to be a kind of pious exhortation, or even the usual line on evangelisation. In fact it is about radical orthodoxy – more radical than looking after the Church's present shapes and forms. But nor is it about changing any of the Church's teachings. It is about "transforming everything" by focussing on "the heart of the Gospel" instead of it "being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects" (34), which obscures its attraction.

"The biggest problem is when the message we preach seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ's message." (34) Instead, it has to "concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time more necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing." (35) It is meant to be the source of great joy.

"In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead" (36) "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life for you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you". (163)

"All revealed truths... are to be believed with the same faith, but some of them are more important for giving expression to the heart of the Gospel." (36) In this context, he refers to the Council's teaching on an "order or hierarchy of truths since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith. This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church's teaching, including her moral teaching." (36) And he affirms Aquinas' teaching that "mercy is the greatest of all the virtues". (37)

Pope Francis wants this refocussing – and the transformation it brings about – to take place at every level – parishes, other Church institutions and movements, dioceses, and the Holy See.. (28 – 32) And he makes this a clear expectation. (18)

He repudiates any idea of a business-as-usual model of Church life, and singles out for special mention those who have “an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time...” (95) He equally repudiates a style that resembles that of executives in the business world (95),

He calls for a re-examination, “with prudence and boldness”, of our pastoral and sacramental practices wherever they might have the effect of making people feel excluded. He refers specifically to Baptism and Eucharist (47). His only mention of the sacrament of Penance is that it is not meant to be a “torture chamber”. It will be interesting to see how all this plays out in the light of what he says about the primacy of mercy over all other virtues, his reminder of the factors that diminish imputability, and the “law of gradualness” (cf 43 – 47) Concern for “rules” and correctness often has more to do with our own false sense of security than with sharing the Gospel. He is more interested in ways of thinking and acting that risk mistakes than in playing safe. (49)

His ecclesiology draws heavily on *Lumen Gentium*, but he also draws from various post-synodal Apostolic Exhortations. He seems to have taken a special interest in what the regional Bishops’ Synods have said (including Oceania), and he quotes from documents of Bishops’ Conferences, more than I recall in previous papal documents. He is strong on the need to facilitate people’s *participation* in all the ways the Code provides for in its implementation of the Council.

When he speaks of economic injustices he has fire in his belly; (cf chapter 2, and on the Church’s social teaching, chapter 4) When he speaks of the poor, he is just so eloquent. His reflections on *Temptations Faced by Pastoral Workers*, in chapter 2, (as also his section on homilies), is a treasure house that could be used in on-going formation of priests and other pastoral workers, and seminarians. I personally experienced it as an examination of conscience.

I find it hard to believe he has written all this since becoming Pope. And yet is it his work, with recurring references to his own experience. I am currently reading the *Aparecida* document and I think I see some resemblances.