

In November 2013, Pope Francis published his Apostolic Exhortation, [Evangelii Gaudium](#) – the Joy of the Gospel. Here I offer a brief overview of the document. **Passages in italics are my own commentary**; all the rest is a summary of what Pope Francis is saying. I have sought to draw out those themes which the Pope is emphasising, or contain some innovation in message or focus compared to past Catholic teaching. Inevitably this is coloured by the extent and limitation of my own theological formation; I write as one who is not a specialist but received a First Class honours degree in Catholic Theology in 2005.

All numbers in brackets in the text below are paragraph references to [Evangelii Gaudium](#).

### **Proclaiming the Gospel**

***Below, I will separate out two very clear sub-themes: the liturgical Homily, and our call to make the world a better place. But most of Pope Francis' letter is on the general theme of how we proclaim the Gospel, with constant reminders the Church is called to reach those on the margins of society, and any practices – prayerful or practical – which cause us to turn inwards rather than outwards, are a danger to our Christian vocation.***

We are infinitely loved and are called to love others. Joy is our response to being loved. Our starting point is what God has done for us in Jesus; we find contemporary ways to express this, but never with a scowl. We must reach out to those who worship, those merely baptised, and those who have never engaged with the Church, whether in pre-Christian or post-Christian cultures. Each local Christian community will need to find its own best practice. (1-19)

***Why must we share the Gospel? Not, primarily, because God commands us to, but because it brings us joy to receive, live and share Jesus, and his message, in our lives. The Church has [always understood](#) her call to take the Gospel to where it is not yet known, and since the reign of Paul VI has also recognised the need for a [new evangelisation](#) of post-Christian societies.***

We are called to be communities of missionary disciples. We are called to leave our comfort zones, seek the lost, take on the "smell of the sheep", celebrate small victories, tend the wheat and not to fret unduly about the weeds. Our joy is expressed through beauty of the liturgy. (20-24)

We must focus on sharing the BASIC Gospel message, but not as mere sound-bites. The core doctrine is God's love revealed in Christ; the core aspect of moral teaching is God's mercy. Moral catechesis should emphasise the virtuous life, so our rejection of evil can be better understood in that context. Within the many theological truths taught by the Church, some are more important than others; let us give most attention to what matters most, and relate peripheral points back to these core values! (34-39)

***Here we might see a gentle warning to avoid getting hung up on theological details of less important things. Moral preaching and teaching in particular is not to emphasise "Thou shalt not..." (with its consequences of divine punishment or reward) but rather the virtuous life which is the antithesis of forbidden behaviour.***

Salvation comes through the Church. We must ensure we communicate the Gospel rather than its remote cultural trappings. All the baptised are called to act, without delay, as missionary disciples.

Tools we can use include: popular devotions; active listening; deliberate inculturation; charisms integrated into the life of the church community; dialogue with science; the presence of Catholic educational institutions in wider society. Our own church culture must be neither unwelcoming nor bureaucratic, finding new ways to bring people together in urban settings. (110-134, 71-75)

***There is nothing new in the message that all members of parishes are called to be missionary. But it is a sad reality that very few parishes in British Culture are truly "[Fit for Mission](#)".***

All members of the Church are called to share in this mission. For this, they should: develop the value of stable relationships, within and apart from marriage, relationships within which genuine conversation and growth can occur; affirmation/training, optimism, mutual support. Act, don't opine. Bless others. Overcome painful historical divisions. Pray for those who annoy them. Train laity (including women and young people) for leadership and give them opportunities; theologians may need to distance governance from Eucharistic presidency. (76-109 – positive aspects)

***Here and [elsewhere](#) Pope Francis has indicated that he is not going to change the Catholic position on the ordination of women to the priesthood, but that the Church must develop the opportunity for women (and therefore also lay men) to take on much more significant leadership roles in the church.***

***Loving enemies and reconciling with them is a fundamental Christian value. Special prominence in our age of broken relationships and mobile populations will need to be given to establishing stability and commitment in parishes, communities, friendships and marriages.***

At the same time, beware: inferiority complex, sterile spiritual exercises, self-centred motivations (including personal glory and prosperity gospel), joyless pragmatism, retreating into a closed circle; seeking adherence to outdated Catholic forms, campaigning for liturgical or doctrinal purity, self-realisation programmes, busy-ness, criticising others; macho or fatalist cultures; devotional traps which don't foster growth. (76-109 – negative aspects)

***Pope Francis here will give no solace to promoters of the [Traditional Latin Mass](#) nor those who make a hobby out of delating clergy. Presumably the traditional Catholic duty to save one's own soul is not one of the self-centred motivations the Pope opposes, but he would emphasise the understanding in Luke 17:33 and [Catechism 1889](#) that the only way to achieve this is by laying down one's life in the service of others. (In the spirit of celebrating our multi-faceted society, however, we must still acknowledge that there will be a certain section of society for whom traditional forms of Catholic worship will appeal and that there is still a place in the Church for such practices, as long as they are not wrapped in teachings about the superiority of those who practice them and the inadequacies of the wider church.)***

Are our Church structures fit for mission? Dioceses and parishes must ensure they draw close to the people they are called to serve, especially those on the margins. Movements have their own particular callings, but must work in tandem with their local parish. Leaders must listen attentively to the Church's critics and some decentralisation of structures will be helpful. (25-33)

***The call for decentralisation is in accord with the core Catholic principle of [subsidiarity](#).***

How is it humanly possible to spread the Gospel when faith is a spiritual gift? If technical precision or longstanding customs don't communicate the core message, avoid these. Accommodate human weakness and the [gradual](#) way people grow in understanding, both in the [confessional](#) and in other encounters; communicate something good. (42-46)

We must have open doors on our buildings, maximum access to the sacraments, little regard for our institutional security, but a priority to move out to the poor with an offer of friendship with Jesus, meaning and purpose in life, and the support of a community of faith. (47-49)

***If in some Latin American cultures it is common for [priests to refuse to baptise the children of unmarried mothers](#) then it is easy to understand why the Pope needs to call for greater access to the sacraments. It is less clear what response the Pope will hope for from parish clergy when parents approach the Church with no intent of raising a child as a practising Catholic but every hope of gaining a place in the Catholic school.***

For those who are already members of the Church, there is a Gospel call to continuing growth. All catechesis must re-emphasise the kerygma: "Jesus loves you, died for you, walks with you to enlighten, strengthen and free you." Today we need to develop these themes: God loved us of his own volition; we do not impose truth but appeal to freedom; we present a joyful and harmonious balance, not preaching philosophical stances. Use the arts. We must develop one-to-one accompaniment and encourage Bible study. (160-175)

***The appeal to freedom is in accord with Vatican II's move away from 'error has no rights' to [recognising that human beings have a right to be wrong](#), and to come to know the truth in their own time.***

***The call to develop one-to-one listening (169-173) points to important skills for [forming intentional disciples](#), [community organising](#), and [mentoring confirmandi](#).***

Only the Holy Spirit can impel us to heartfelt evangelisation; we call upon Him! Let us avoid sterile prayer; let us beware of anything which hides us from social engagement. As true missionaries, let us remind ourselves of how Jesus enriches our life and take this message joyfully to others, answering the questions their hearts are asking. Let our motive be the Father's glory. We must enter into the lives of others, doing so humbly, gently and peaceably. Let us put our faith in God's help, even when fruitfulness seems unlikely. Let us pray for the help of the Holy Spirit; let our prayer include intercession and thanksgiving for those we serve. (259-283)

Mary is mother of the Church, a praying presence and our intercessor. She is our model of triumphing through darkness and tiredness, as one who is a humble handmaid defeating powerful foes. Many cultures have recognised her as their own. (284-288)

## **Making the World a Better Place**

Pope Francis wants a church which IS poor, and is FOR the poor. The poor make present in our midst the suffering Christ, and so evangelise the wider church. We must listen to them, speak for them, and place them at the heart of the church. Every Christian must act for the poor, not only by campaigning, but personally. Scripture makes it clear that our acts of mercy and almsgiving contribute to the way God will have mercy on us when we are judged. (198-208)

Because Jesus demonstrated the infinite dignity of human beings, Christians are compelled to work, locally, to make the world a better place. This requires transforming structures as well as helping individuals. Our priorities are: less able children; trafficked workers; vulnerable women; the unborn child; the global ecosystem. Our lofty aim is education, healthcare, and employment for all. Structural change is also needed so global economic and political leaders prioritise the common good, not maximum profit. Society becomes 'alienated' when the way it organises itself, the way it produces and consumes goods, obstruct interpersonal communication. Society needs a better distribution of income, job creation, and promotion of the poor. (176-197, 209-216)

***Catholic Social teaching has pointed to these broad themes for more than 100 years; Pope Francis points strongly to the duty of EVERY Christian to engage with these issues. He indicates the contemporary issues of trafficking (211), less-able children (209) and our call to be stewards of the ecosystem (215) as well as signalling his own pro-life credentials (213-214). There is an implicit call for a society wedded to electronic communication and mail-order delivery to find a more personal way of doing commerce.***

Peace has to be built by a daily decision to seek justice for all. This needs political engagement, including learning about unfamiliar facets of local culture. Building a better society takes time (inimical to short-term political gain). Acknowledge conflict, resolve it, and make it a link in the chain of peace. Under Christ, all good things will be gathered together, a redeemed diversity. Be guided by incarnate realities, not unachievable theoretical ideals. Work locally while remaining aware of global issues. Human society is meant to be multifaceted, not uniform; the Gospel must extend to every facet. (217-237)

***In this section the Pope offers four personal maxims about the way to peace: allowing time (222-225), seeking unity (226-230), being grounded in concrete realities (231-234) and valuing the whole (235-237). In particular he warns against pursuing pious theoretical ideals, rather we need good role models of how the Gospel has been lived out in practice.***

The Church enters dialogue. With States, about the common good and human dignity, asking for the avoidance of crude generalisations about religion, but the upholding of religious freedom which allows religious behaviour in public. With culture, respecting established scientific principles. With other Christians, towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness. With Jews, their depth of reading the Hebrew Scriptures. With all religions, in pursuit of peace. With other religions, seeking the stirrings of the Spirit who provokes mutual love. With all people who seek truth, goodness, and beauty, in the Court of the Gentiles. Muslim immigrants must be welcomed by Christians and their religious rights respected. We must avoid labelling the majority of Muslims by the actions of a violent fringe. (238-258)

***There is little new here which has not already been set out by the Second Vatican Council, in its documents on [religious freedom](#) and on [other religions](#). Comments on Islam clearly reflect global events of recent years.***

## The Homily

Pope Francis offers a detailed consideration (135-159) of the place of the homily within the liturgy (it is clear he is thinking mainly of Mass, especially Sunday Mass, rather than other liturgies, see 137). He reminds preachers that a good homily is a concise invitation to positive action, rooted in a particular scripture. Not a lecture on doctrine, morals or scriptural exegesis, it uses beautiful images to encourage good action; it offers a rounded message expressed in a way which is accessible in the culture of its hearers, it avoids jargon and does not seek to present a detached idea.

The homily proclaims what God has done to save the human race, and the demands made upon us as the people who are in relationship with God. It reminds the listeners that they are already members of the Body of Christ, preparing for the Father's eternal embrace, and is a balanced element of a liturgical celebration, drawing participants into communion with Christ.

To prepare a homily: Ask God's help. Study the text: what did the original author intend, in message and effect? Do *lectio divina* - how is this passage challenging me? Consider what it says to issues which the congregation are facing. How does it mediate God's love?

***There is little new here, except for the depth of details which a Pope is offering on the art of homiletics. At seminary I was taught to take the original message intended by the human author as starting point, though the idea of needing to reflect their intended impact, as well as their content, is new to me.***