

MUSINGS

FROM THE

EDITOR

SPECIAL EDITION: POPE FRANCIS
AND *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*



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Since the launching of this journal in the winter of 2012, the editors of *Church Life: A Journal for the New Evangelization* have sought to articulate a sophisticated vision of pastoral theology, one infused by the spirit and concerns of the New Evangelization. With passing references from Pope St. John Paul II, attention to the theological and pastoral program set forth by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in his encyclicals and apostolic exhortations, and the *Lineamenta* preparing for the Synod on the New Evangelization, we undertook our mission with vigor.

In the midst of this work, we grew increasingly aware that the term New Evangelization tended to take on whatever meaning a theologian or pastoral leader desired it to have. For some, the New Evangelization was fundamentally a deeper engagement with culture, one that invited women and men absent from the Church back to the life-giving font of the Word and the sacraments. Others spoke about the New Evangelization as a synonym for the renewal of the life of the parish itself. Still others balked at the term, wondering why Catholicism needed a “new” approach to evangelization in the first place.

With Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 2013), the Magisterium of the Church has presented the first coherent and systematic account of the New Evangelization, one that, to the editors of this journal, requires more serious treatment by parishes and schools throughout the United States. Most of the public discourse around this document, thus far, has centered on Pope Francis’ robust critique of forms of capitalism that seek to

take advantage of those at the margins of society. At the same time, within the Church, the document has become a source of rich quotes about the nature of Christian joy. The pastoral ministers of the Church are not to act as if they are “sourpusses” (*EG* §85), living as Christians in the midst of an eternal Lent (*EG* §6). Yet even these phrases have been employed by Catholics to condemn one another for failing to get to the heart of the Gospel.

The intention of this special issue of *Church Life* is to assist dioceses, parishes, and schools in appropriating the vision of the New Evangelization offered by Pope Francis. The columns and articles that will appear in this issue of the journal are intended to function akin to a mirror, allowing institutions to discern their own commitment to the task of the New Evangelization. Yet before entering into the content of this issue, I want to offer a few remarks that will set the stage for the pages that follow.

EVANGELII GAUDIUM: TITLE, GENRE, AND TONE

The titles of documents from the Vatican consist of the very first Latin words of the text. In the case of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the text begins in English with “the joy of the Gospel.” The title is more revealing than one might initially notice—a combination of two Latin titles from previous documents of the Church. The first is from the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). The second is from Paul VI’s own apostolic exhortation following the 1974 Synod of Bishops on evangelization (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*). This fact is more than an interesting tidbit that would enable one to win the papal documents section of the local parish’s trivia night. The last three apostolic exhortations (two from Benedict XVI and the last from Pope Francis) have intentionally referenced previous documents from the Second Vatican Council. *Sacramentum Caritatis* (*The Sacrament of Love*, 2007) evokes the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium. Verbum Domini* (*The Word of the Lord*, 2010) also calls to mind the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. This is no mere accident. The apostolic exhortations of Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis are intended to offer a way of interpreting the Second Vatican Council in light of the situation of the day. They offer guidance for the Church’s understanding of the liturgy, her rumination upon the Sacred Scriptures through preaching, teaching, and prayer, and now the Church’s very relationship to the world.

It is also helpful to say something briefly about the genre of the text. Pope Francis’ document is not a papal encyclical but an apostolic exhortation. An encyclical generally treats themes of doctrine (the nature of faith, of love, a discussion of specific issues in the social doctrine of the Church). Apostolic exhortations are pastoral documents intended to move the Church toward a specific action. In addition, Pope Francis’ recent document is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation. That is, it is the Pope’s own response to an international gathering of bishops, who assembled precisely to discuss the theme of the New Evangelization in October of 2012 during the papacy of Benedict XVI.

What is remarkable about *Evangelii Gaudium* is that it is written explicitly in the first person, a response of one relatively new pontiff to the happenings of this synod. In the document itself, Pope Francis provides a rationale for his use of the first person:

I was happy to take up the request of the Fathers of the Synod to write this Exhortation. In so doing, I am reaping the rich fruits of the Synod’s labors. In addition, I have sought advice from a number of people and I intend to express my own concerns about this particular chapter of the Church’s work of evangelization. Countless issues involving evangelization today might be discussed here, but I have chosen not to explore these many questions which call for further reflection and study. Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralization.” (EG §16)

The decentralization that Pope Francis encourages is not a dismissal of the power and duty of the papacy. In the ecclesiology (theology of the Church) of the Second Vatican Council, the local bishop receives pride of place precisely because he is able to discern the needs of the Church within a particular area. The document does not offer the definitive analysis of the relationship between the Church and world, precisely because such analysis, such discernment of the signs of the times, must be undertaken by the local Church herself. Pope Francis can begin to point us in the right direction for such analysis, but no pope can offer the definitive account of evangelization for the entire world. The “I” of the document serves as a constant reminder of this fact, of the need of each diocese, each parish to undertake its own process of self-examination, to discern those facets of humanity in their own location that might be healed and elevated through the joy of the Gospel.

Lastly, I would like to say something about the New Evangelization, a theme that we considered in our first issue of this journal. Evangelization is not new to the Church’s lexicon. Every time that the Church proclaims the narrative of salvation through the medium of human speech; every time that the Eucharist is celebrated and our desires and affections are lifted up to become that offering of love revealed in Christ’s presence; every time that the members of the Body of Christ work for peace within the world, to heal the violence and hatred that plagues the human condition—it is evangelization.

What is it that makes evangelization “new”? The New Evangelization, a term coined by Pope St. John Paul II, refers to a novel situation of the twentieth century in which there are many baptized into the Church who live a “practical existence” outside of the Church. They do not attend the Eucharistic celebration on Sunday. They are fundamentally unaware of the beauty of the Church’s teaching, the narrative of divine love revealed

in the Scriptures. They make their decisions without consideration of how God’s will is unfolding through their very lives within the world. In this case, the New Evangelization is not the “better” evangelization (as the newest iPhone is the better iPhone). Rather, the “classic” evangelization is that announcing of the Gospel to those who have never heard of Jesus Christ. The New Evangelization is often a re-discovery of the riches of the Catholic imagination by those who have indifference to the life of the Church, even though they are baptized members of the Church.

Yet, the New Evangelization has come to have another meaning, one related to the very transformation of those who are already active within the life of the Church. In the preparatory document leading up to the Synod on the New Evangelization, the following understanding of the term was expressed:

synonymous with mission, requiring the capacity to set out anew, go beyond boundaries and broaden horizons. The new evangelization is the opposite of self-sufficiency, a withdrawal into oneself, a *status quo* mentality and an idea that pastoral programs are simply to proceed as they did in the past. . . . [It] is the time for the Church to call upon every Christian community to evaluate their pastoral practice on the basis of the missionary character of their programs and activities. (*Lineamenta*, §10)

The New Evangelization is thus an interior renewal of the life of the entire Church. Think for a moment about your own parish. There is a constant danger that as time goes on, the parish becomes simply about itself. Its own building programs, the education of its own children, its own policies and regulations relative to sacramental preparation, its own programming. Yet, new situations, new realities, call for new responses. And these new responses must proceed from the heart of the Gospel:

that encounter with Jesus Christ through the Church that comes to transform what it means to be human. An encounter that is as necessary for bishops, priests, deacons, and lay ecclesial ministers as it is for any person in the pews. And each person in the Church has a responsibility to “evangelize” in this way. As Pope Francis states:

In our days Jesus’ command to “go and make disciples” echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church’s mission of evangelization, and all of us are called to take part in this new missionary “going forth.” Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but 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. (EG §20)

This is the “deeper,” “thicker” understanding of the New Evangelization that Pope Francis seeks to articulate in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

JOY AND THE KERYGMA

The heart of the New Evangelization is that encounter with Jesus Christ that comes to transform what it means to be human. In this way, evangelization is the joy-filled proclamation that Jesus Christ is still alive, still lifting up the human condition to participate in divine life. God cares about human history so much that he became the definitive meaning of history. Even now, he still becomes the definitive meaning of *my* history here and now. The introduction to *Evangelii Gaudium* unfolds that narrative of salvation following the way of beauty, which is integral to preaching the Good News. Creation is not meaningless but a gift of love from God, which even now points to the beauty of the triune God. The story of our salvation in the Old Testament should offer to us a deeper awareness of that hopeful expectation that God will continue to enter into human history. And in Jesus Christ, we have that definitive encounter with the Word made flesh, with the God who has become history. Think for a moment about the nativity of the Lord. Think for a moment about the self-emptying that would be required for God to become not simply human but a child, an infant. The creator of the universe bound in swaddling clothes, unable to express even the most fundamental of his desires except through inarticulate cries. In Jesus Christ, we encounter the very reality that God has loved humanity so much that he has given up the trappings of godliness, given up the heights of power, so that love itself might conquer death. He has revealed to us that to be fully human means to become like God. Not a God who seizes power at all costs but who gives himself up upon the Cross without responding in violence, entering into that aspect of the human condition that is most terrifying for each of us: death itself. Yet, death does not conquer, evil does not win, violence is not the meaning of history.

This is the joy that Pope Francis is communicating in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the very meaning of evangelization. He writes:

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? (*EG* §8)

The living of this joy-filled proclamation is constantly renewed in our individual identities, in our families, in our parishes, in those communities enmeshed in violence and poverty that come to encounter Christ’s love made flesh through the Church’s ministry. To contemplate the love of God made manifest in Christ is the heart of the New Evangelization:

Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always “new.” (*EG* §11)

Rediscovering the newness of evangelization is not an individual task alone. We need the memory of the Church, her Scriptures, her liturgy, her preferential option for the poor in order to constantly learn to receive that gift of love that transforms our lives into gift itself.

When Pope Francis thus talks about a hierarchy of truths in this document, he is not dismissing the need for the Church to address concerns about sexuality, about family life, about violence against human dignity ranging from abortion to euthanasia. Rather, he is responding to those who preach isolated moral teachings apart from the mystery of Jesus Christ, from the love of God made flesh in the human heart. In the first chapter, he writes:

Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love. If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk. It would mean that it is not the Gospel which is being preached, but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological opinions. The message will run the risk of losing its freshness and will cease to have “the fragrance of the Gospel.” (*EG* §39)

For example, it is not enough to proclaim that sex before marriage is wrong. Rather, one must show how the sacrament of marriage is itself a taking of human love, including sexuality, into that narrative of salvation revealed in Christ. The couple’s desire for one another, their sexual unity and procreativity, the mundaneness of domestic love becomes a living and efficacious sign of Christ’s love for the Church. The world itself is renewed through the couple’s self-gift, including their sexuality. In this way, the positive doctrine of the Church, its teaching about Jesus Christ, presents a vision of the world in which moral truths are contextualized in the joyful practice of Christian faith. Sex within the commitment that marriage provides enables human

flourishing in such a way that sex is not simply a matter of physical desire but one that involves the entire human person, an expression of a kind of love that takes a lifetime to learn. Fidelity in marriage points toward Christ's very love of humanity, his total commitment to give himself over to the human condition.

Such a teaching should be life-giving rather than simply a source of sadness, a proclamation of a rule that one must obey in order to be Catholic. All of the Church's teachings must be connected to life in Christ rather than presented as a series of disconnected rules and regulations. The Church's teaching, its *Catechism* itself, is not equivalent to a handbook for the Department of Motor Vehicles. It is the responsibility of each preacher and teacher of Christian faith to show how in each of the Church's teachings "what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead" (*EG* §36).

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A number of implications flow from this centering of the New Evangelization upon that joy of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ—that gift of love received in the Word made flesh, which is meant to be given over now to the salvation of the entire world. Fundamentally, for Pope Francis, the institution of the Church does not exist simply for its own sake. The very necessary institutional procedures that develop in each and every parish and school are not to be sustained at all costs. As anyone who has worked with large organizations knows, it is very possible for these institutions to forget their primary mission because they are too busy thinking solely about their own regulatory structures. Departments of campus ministry may hold onto retreats for years, even though attendance is dropping, because "we've always done this retreat here." National organizations in the Church may continue to offer large scale conferences, which meet only the needs of a declining demographic, rather than ask themselves: what is our mission here and now? Religious education programs in parishes continue to offer the same classes, the same opportunities for formation, despite the fact that sociological data points toward the inadequacy of these approaches in traditioning faith. In each of these instances, the mission of the Church to proclaim, to celebrate, and to live the Good News of Christ's Death and Resurrection to all of humanity in every time and place is passed over because of our love of the idol of "what has been done before."

The renewal of the Church so that she may better carry out that mission of self-giving love is the central concern of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Pope Francis writes:

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, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. (*EG* §27)

The New Evangelization necessarily entails, therefore, a commitment to new ways of doing things within the Church. This renewal is not simply for the sake of modernization. Rather, the orientation of the Church should be the mission of Jesus Christ. Approaches to education, to the organization of schools and parishes, to the way that bishops interact with those in their dioceses, to the proper age for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation—all of these are questions that are part of the New Evangelization insofar as they continue Christ’s saving ministry to the world.

It should be said that parishes hold a unique pride of place in Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*. As Americans, the major problem with talking about parishes is that we tend to mean simply the individual church—St. Joseph Parish and its staff and all those who attend Mass on a given Sunday. The parish is more than this. Pope Francis writes:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, 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 center of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented. (*EG* §28)

The parish is how the Church divides up the world into small, geographical units that enable the entire world to encounter Jesus Christ as believed, celebrated, and lived through the ministry of this particular community of believers. Yet, parishes too often suffer from an inwardness that cuts off the missionary dimension of Catholicism. We want our parishes to serve us as religious consumers, and we do not consider such parishes as places in which we learn to receive that gift of love, which we must give away. Attention to homilies, approaches to catechesis, to the quality of liturgical

celebration—all of this is essential. But, the parish seeks quality in these matters not in order to attract more members from other parishes, to increase enrollment in their particular school, and other measures to success. A parish is successful when those who belong to this parish are renewed in their missionary zeal on a Sunday morning; when studies of the Scriptures are opportunities to share the Gospel with one another, a mutual gift that enables each person to see how God acts even now within the world. Parishes are centers of mission, of identity formation, a bodily and concrete way to encounter Christ here and now. Implicitly, Pope Francis is cautioning us against setting up committees in our parishes so that everyone feels involved in the administrative life of the parish. Parishes should be less concerned with committee work and more concerned with the renewal of their city, their suburb, or the farmland for which they are necessarily responsible.

In the end, the Christological center of the Church's efforts at evangelization means that the Church cannot simply exist for her own sake. The Church is not in the business of "self-maintenance." So much of Pope Francis' rather challenging language is actually intended to connect the Church ever more deeply to that encounter with Christ, the memory of Jesus, which is the source of her own existence. The zeal in which the Church goes forth is based in this memory, this desire to offer to a life-giving encounter with the Word made flesh:

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 center 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" (Mk 6:37). (*EG* §49)

The Church is not the sanctuary of the holy or perfect alone. Rather, she is Jesus Christ's wounded and glorified Body sent forth to the very margins of society. Those who are baptized into Christ's life are not called to a life of self-interest and self-regard. The New Evangelization seeks to head out to those margins, to places that need to hear the joy of the Gospel. To the poor who seek liberation from the social structures that kill their humanity. To the college student whose whole life has become focused upon climbing a ladder of success and whose turning to drugs, alcohol, and sex is a response to this emptiness. To the divorced man or woman, who wonders how everything has fallen apart, doubting the possibility that he or she is loved at all. To the prisoner whose humanity has been systematically erased through years of confinement. To the undocumented immigrant who endures maltreatment from employers, who take advantage of their fear of being arrested. The joy of the Gospel is for these. The joy of the Gospel requires that the Church enter into the darkness, into the places of loneliness and suffering, proclaiming anew that human life can be something more. Human life, even in its darkest moments, can be

transfigured when you come to know the God who is love. The God who is love and still is embodied this day in the preaching, the sacraments, and the pastoral care of this parish.

The work of opening up the imagination to this reality is a hard one. It requires a pastoral imagination that has become infused with the narrative of salvation, a keen eye for reading the signs of the times, a sense of missionary zeal learned through the Church's prayer. For this reason, the work of appropriating the New Evangelization, as laid out by Pope Francis, is not completed upon reading the document. Rather, it will require asking the difficult questions, pursuing the path untrod, living among the poor, immersing ourselves ever more deeply into Christ's own life in the Church. Such work, though, is not an onerous burden for it is the Holy Spirit that sends each member of the Body of Christ out to sanctify the created order with joy. Turning to Joseph Ratzinger or Benedict XVI (who is much closer to Pope Francis than some popular media have described):

Where joylessness rules and humor dies, we may be certain that the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus Christ, is not present. Further, joy is a sign of grace. One who is serene from the bottom of his heart, one who has suffered without losing joy, is not far from the God of the Gospel, from the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of eternal joy.¹

Joy and humor are not merely characteristics of the improvising Argentinian Pope. Instead, true joy is present in the life of every parish, school, and diocese that has learned the art of loving unto the end. It is the joyful Christian that is confident enough to gaze upon the world, discerning where sin and death still reign, while also seeing where the logic of the earthly kingdom has infected the Church herself. It is the joyful Christian that is able to speak truth in the midst of a world that privileges power above love. It is the joyful Christian that can speak and live the kerygma within the world. *Evangelii Gaudium* does not describe how this joy will be made manifest in every corner of the world. Instead, it invites each parish, school, and diocese to reflect anew upon this joy so that each Christian may offer this joyful gift to the world. *That is the New Evangelization*.



NOTES

1 Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 113.