

A photograph of Pope Francis from behind, kneeling in prayer. He is wearing white papal vestments with red Maltese crosses on the back. In the background, several tall, lit candles are visible, creating a solemn and reverent atmosphere.

# PRIMACY OF GRACE

THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL  
AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

**BY AMANDA OSHEIM, PH.D.**

Pope Francis kneels  
before the Crucifix  
during the canonization  
Mass for Pope John XXIII  
and Pope John Paul II

Photo: The Catholic Church  
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Pope Francis' emphasis on the joy of the Gospel underscores that the mission of evangelization will become a dangerously empty shell if we do not also inquire about the agent of that mission: the Church. *Evangelii Gaudium* embeds evangelization within a vision of the Church that is called and capable to be an agent of God's salvation in the world. Francis indicates that the "principle of the *primacy of grace* must be a beacon which constantly illuminates our reflections on evangelization" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §112). To say that grace is primary is not to deny that evangelization requires us to be collaborators with the Spirit. Rather, grace's primacy reminds us that the initiative and the gift is God's. How we embrace the Gospel and in turn open our arms to others is our secondary, though necessary response.

The primacy of grace is a foundation not only for evangelization but also for the Church's self-understanding. Indeed, one flows from the other: through the grace we receive we are called to be engraced agents of salvation, evangelists sharing the Good News of God's love and mercy. We cannot share that Good News unless we have ourselves first received and attended to the gift; otherwise, evangelization becomes a shallow retort rather than a generous witness. The primacy of grace draws our gaze to the God in whose image we are made and renewed. Through God's grace, the Church's "inner" and "outer" life are made coherent with one another in the integrity of the Gospel.

## Foundations of Grace

Francis writes, "The kerygma is Trinitarian. The fire of the Spirit is given in the form of tongues and leads us to believe in Jesus Christ who, by his death and resurrection, reveals and communicates to us the Father's infinite mercy" (*EG* §164). The Good News is communicated to us through a communion, and the grace we receive is Trinitarian, the self-gift of three Persons in union. God's sending forth of the Holy Spirit and Jesus

Christ is the Good News. God has not stood apart in judgment, but rather as a parent to prodigal children opens the door and goes out to with joy and mercy to greet us. Francis states, "On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: 'Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you'" (*EG* §164).

The emphasis Francis places on the Trinitarian Gospel must not go unnoticed, for the Church is itself rooted in the mystery of the Trinity. The God who saves is a communion of love; in turn, our salvation can never be individual even though it must be personal. “No one is saved by himself or herself, individually, or by his or her own efforts. God attracts us by taking into account the complex interweaving of personal relationships entailed in the life of a human

community. This people which God has chosen and called is the Church” (*EG* §113). Through grace, God calls a people together and as that people we witness continually the gift of the Gospel received and unwrapped, lived and shared. Preparation for joining fully in God’s divine life is found within our graced common life together, limited and illuminated as we each are.

## Pilgrimage of Grace

Salvation calls God’s people together on a pilgrimage of grace. The Spirit’s indwelling in the people of God enables it to journey with the mind of Christ, to be one with the Father’s mercy, and to continue to grow through active discernment of the Gospel. The Church’s pilgrimage means that Baptism is not a safe harbor but is instead our response to God’s call to journey. Baptism is oil in the lamp of faith that is replenished and brightened by the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Guided by the light of faith, the people of God is a community of companions continually discerning the way forward to full communion with God.

The scriptural image of the people of God draws attention to the Church’s growth and conversion through its own continuing evangelization. The people of God has not yet reached its destination,

and both personal and ecclesial conversion are necessary to continue walking the path. Francis reminds us that “the Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ: ‘Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. . . . Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way . . . to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth’” (*EG* §26). The Church’s renewal involves our interpersonal relationships with God and each other, as well as the ecclesial structures that serve and embody those relationships.

If through attention to the Holy Spirit the people of God is “constantly evangelizing itself,”

then the Church is a place of both learning and teaching where we discover and respond to the promptings of the Spirit (*EG* §139). This discovery is dialogical as, through knowledge and love of one another, the Church recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of each person and unites the diverse charisms that provision the people of God on its journey. We learn of the diverse gifts the Spirit nurtures within the Church and collaborate with the Spirit and each other not in order to seek a monotonous uniformity, but rather to hear the harmonies these charisms create (*EG* §117). Francis acknowledges this will not be easy. Communion may be “painful” and differences “uncomfortable,” yet through the Holy Spirit there is hope for reconciliation (*EG* §§130–31). The graced process of reconciling antagonism without

obliterating diversity is in turn part of the Church's evangelization. If others "see the witness of authentically fraternal and reconciled communities, they will find that witness luminous and attractive" (*EG* §100).

In order to serve one another in a pilgrimage of mutual conversion, intimacy with God and each other is required. For example, in his lengthy discourse on homilies Francis emphasizes the need for cultivating a relationship with Scripture that reflects our relationship with God: "Whoever wants to preach must be the first to let the word of God move him deeply and become incarnate in his daily life"

(*EG* §150). Yet time with Scripture alone is not sufficient, for the preacher must also "contemplate his people" in order that God's Word be meaningful for human experience and offer a light to the Church's path (*EG* §154). God's people grow and mature by cultivating genuine intimacy; love is made manifest in encounter with Christ and each other that leads us to "accept and esteem" each other as "companions along the way" (*EG* §91).

## Cultures of Grace

The spiritual path walked by God's people does not transcend history but is rather incarnated within culture: "Grace supposes culture, and God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it" (*EG* §115). The call of the Gospel is received through culture, and through our cultures we respond. The result is a synthesis between the Good News and the lifestyles and relationships that make up a people's history. This synthesis is itself empowered by the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit is not only at work in and through the Church but through all persons and contexts (*EG* §178). This means the Church's expression of faith is not unidirectional in the sense that the Church has a culture that it then seeks to inculcate within other cultures. Instead, the Church

inculturates the Gospel by learning from diverse cultures the words, gestures, symbols, and actions that express the Gospel. The authentic catholicity of the Church is the ever ancient Gospel that is rediscovered and made ever new through cultural synthesis (*EG* §116). These diverse cultures challenge the Church's evangelization to "sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place, which is a gift of God. We can work on a small scale, in our own neighbourhood, but with a larger perspective" (*EG* §235). Just as the people of God is called to conversion in order to grow closer to God, so, too, it is called to grow in its understanding of salvation through Christ and the Spirit. That growth in spiritual knowledge

and wisdom is linked essentially to inculturation and the evangelization that flows from it.

Inculturation is personal and communal rather than monolithic. The love poured into our hearts at Baptism by the Holy Spirit makes us daughters and sons of God, and graces us with the *sensus fidei*, or sense of faith. The *sensus fidei* is our ability to discern what is of God, an essential gift for people on pilgrimage (*EG* §119). The people of God discerns the Spirit at work, not only in the Church, but also through culture so that "each portion of the people of God, by translating the gift of God into its own life and in accordance with its own genius, bears witness to the faith it has received and enriches

it with new and eloquent expressions” (*EG* §122). Francis notes particularly popular piety as the synthesis resulting from a living reception and transmission of the Gospel within culture. While operating more through symbols than discourse, in popular piety the Christian faith is expressed. In it Francis finds “the manifestation of a theological life” that ought not to

be ignored due to its “active evangelizing power” (*EG* §§125–26). The *sensus fidei* expressed in popular piety is a living faith that strives always to draw closer to the God who both calls and accompanies us on our pilgrimage. This longing and fulfillment represents the joy of the Gospel transmitted through culture and transformed into evangelization.

## Agents of Grace

Evangelization is the joy and hope, rather than the self-preservation, of the people of God. By sharing the Gospel, we live out our identity and become who we are called to be: “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” (*EG* §8). Narrowness and self-absorption are not only an individual’s problems for Francis, but are also the roots of social sin, whether inside or outside the Church. A church turned inward on itself is a church in need of conversion; it is “stuck” in its pilgrimage, entrenched in an oasis that prevents it from being

“bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets” walking with others (*EG* §49). Our deepening reception of grace is our expanding ability to communicate grace. Our conversion, charisms, and reconciliation become gifts for social justice and peace building. Our inculturation of the Gospel builds in us habits of listening and learning that are not mere strategies for evangelization, but are rather integral to evangelization itself.

The metaphor of pilgrimage finds its reality in “the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement” (*EG* §178). Our pilgrimage is for others’ sake as well as our own, and the mystery of grace means that God’s people cannot advance in its journey to the kingdom without others: “Accepting the first proclamation, which invites

us to receive God’s love and to love him in return with the very love which is his gift, brings forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek, and protect the good of others” (*EG* §178). The image of pilgrimage holds in tension the need to move forward with the need for patience and hope as we collaborate for the kingdom’s transformation of our world.

Through the Holy Spirit, all the baptized are “missionary disciples” and “agents of evangelization” (*EG* §120). The people’s pilgrimage is its responsibility—its living response—to the gift of salvation. That response is rendered authentic when God’s liberating mercy and love are shared with others. The Church does not evangelize with a message different from that which it received, which is most essentially

the Good News of “the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship” (*EG* §128). God’s merciful mission to and accompanying of the Church is both the means of our salvation and the model for our evangelization. Francis envisions a missionary Church, a people who go out in order to be with, even as God’s Son was sent to be with us as Emmanuel, even as the Spirit overshadows our path in the ongoing incarnation of the Gospel.

As God companions us, so the Church companions others. The “art of accompaniment” Francis writes of in relation to catechesis translates to the Church’s relationship with society as we joyfully rediscover that “our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us,” and that the relationship of the Church to the world “corresponds to the mercy which God has shown us” (*EG* §179). Part of sharing the Gospel will be a clear call for conversion, and Francis points us to a number of social sins that call for transformation by social grace. Poverty, exclusion, consumerism, abortion, sexual violence, and human trafficking are the concern of God’s people because they are what concerns God for all people. Yet that call for conversion is not made in a vacuum of relationships but rather within the Church’s walk with society.

Our walk is marked by advocacy arising from friendship, and solidarity that resists turning others into objects. In particular, Francis describes the poor not as street signs along our path but as the guides at the center of the Church’s pilgrimage (*EG* §198). Our contemplative regard for the poor is the essence of evangelistic grace because it involves learning to see another as God sees us: the beautiful beloved to whom we offer ourselves freely, without expectation of personal or political gain (*EG* §199). Our friendship with the poor, which is part of the Church’s mission, teaches us about that mission. As Francis remarks, “This is why I want a

Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. . . . We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them” (*EG* §198).

The Trinity that founds the Church in grace is the Church’s evangelizing path. The Trinitarian structure of the kerygma means that “at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others,” and therefore “evangelization is meant to cooperate with this liberating work of the Spirit” (*EG* §§177–78). The Church’s pilgrimage of faith moves us forward into deeper engagement with the world as agents of grace who are both transformed and impelled by the joy of the Gospel.



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