



A Notre Dame undergraduate
converses with a resident of the L'Arche
community in Washington, D.C.

Photo courtesy of the Center for Social Concerns.



LEARNING
FROM THE
POOR
LOCALLY
AND
GLOBALLY

A RESPONSE TO *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

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How might I best express my enthusiasm as I read and reflect on Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*? Our work at the Center for Social Concerns resonates deeply with the message that "at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §177).

In the Center's service-learning courses, we have witnessed many students who have encounters with people who are marginalized. We resonate with what Francis writes:

Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people. (*EG* §270)

Encountering people who are on the margins of society often opens us to new questions and deeper understandings of the Christian faith as our lives become more "wonderfully complicated." I would like to explore two themes from the document in relationship to a faith-based service-learning pedagogy.

Not only evangelizing but being evangelized by the poor

Although Francis explores many dimensions of how Christians are called to evangelize, I am most struck by his sensitivity to individuals and the Church being evangelized by those who are poor. Francis, and many Christians who have lived and worked among people who are poor, recognize that “not only do they [the poor] share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them” (*EG* §198).

The term “evangelized by the poor” is not new, but echoes back to St. Vincent de Paul, liberation theologians, and Maryknoll Missionaries.¹ What are the messages that the poor have for the non-poor? One is an understanding of the theme of this apostolic exhortation: joy. In a consumer society that looks for instant gratification as the source of happiness, where do we look for the meaning of joy? Francis observes, “The most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to” (*EG* §7).

When encountering people who live on the margins of society, we can learn at a deeper level what it means to depend on God, what it means to give from one’s substance, not from one’s excess. Francis writes, “The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church’s pilgrim way.” He continues, “We are called . . . to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*EG* §198).

Francis explains that we must listen to those whose voices are not often heard. This resonates with a principle in service-learning, that the voice of the community must be heard in order to determine the ways in which we can work together to address the challenges that face those who are poor. We are not the saviors, the ones with the answers. We come to listen and learn, and together move to action.

Pope Francis genuinely embraces those who are poor and asks all to do the same, to enter into relationships with people who are on the margins and to be evangelized by them. But Francis goes even farther by calling the Church to be poor (*EG* §198). His example of living simply demonstrates the way of Christ in a refreshing manner in our culture of consumerism. How are we, too, asked to live more simply through the example of Francis?

Direct Service and Structural Change

In service-learning courses we want students to engage in relationships with people who are marginalized, but also look at structural change as a way to alleviate poverty. Francis speaks to both direct service and action for justice. He writes, “an authentic faith—which is never comfortable or completely personal—always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it” (*EG* §183). We hope that students have exposure to learn about the “tenderness” in relationships that Francis describes, but also use critical thinking skills as they explore ways to address poverty and injustice.

Francis names many social issues of our time and calls for moral leadership in politics and economics, with reference to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI: “As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality,² no solution will be found for the world’s problems or, for that matter, to any problems” (*EG* §202). In teaching service-learning courses, we need to continually address the personal and the structural dimensions of alleviating poverty.

What informs our work going forward?

Evangelii Gaudium offers many themes for further study and discussion in faith-based service-learning courses.

In addition to the points of resonance mentioned above, I see three challenges in the document for our work.

Local & Global

Francis points out that one of the challenges of our time is to be both rooted in our local communities but also attuned to what is happening globally. He states, “We need to pay attention to the global so as to avoid narrowness and banality. Yet we also need to look to the local, which keeps our feet on the ground” (*EG* §234).

As students engage in service in a particular community, locally, nationally, or internationally, in what ways can we foster attention to the specific community where they are, as well as build their awareness of the ties to global issues? In what ways can we explore the human dignity of all persons as we work toward the common good?

Discernment & Critical Thinking

Francis writes, “We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data—all treated as being of equal importance—and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values” (*EG* §64).

In what ways does the education we provide assist students in moral discernment and critical thinking? There is a growing need for interdisciplinary approaches, integrating the theological studies of our courses with economics, political science, and business. In what ways can moral discernment more deeply enter our work with students?

All Are Called to Respond to the Poor

Action on behalf of justice is a concern for all Christians. Francis exhorts, “No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas . . . none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and social justice” (*EG* §201).

Assisting students in vocational discernment that reflects the call for everyone to be concerned with and involved in creating a more just society is integral to faith-based service-learning. Notre Dame has a University-wide committee that is addressing ways to engage students in discernment beginning in their first year. One of the aims is to assist students in their reflections about their profession in light of Catholic social thought.

I have touched upon a few themes in *Evangelii Gaudium* that resonate deeply with the learning goals of our service-learning courses and programs. I applaud Pope Francis for naming the Christian call to evangelize while at the same time being evangelized by those who are often seen as the least among us. My hope is that, in response to reading this document, our students will transform Francis’ words into action in their local, national, and international immersions.



NOTES

1 See *Vincentian Constitutions*, 10. See also Joseph Heim, *What They Taught Us: How Maryknoll Missioners Were Evangelized by the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009).

2 Footnote in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “This implies a commitment to ‘eliminate the structural causes of global economic dysfunction’: Benedict XVI, ‘Address to the Diplomatic Corps’ (8 January 2007): AAS99 (2007), 73.”



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