

FRANCIS' HEALTHY REMINDER

ON THE PRIORITY OF JOY
IN THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST


BY LEONARD DELORENZO, PH.D.



The Gospel belongs to everyone; it is our common good.

Wholeness is the condition of the Gospel's joy and receiving the joy of the Gospel requires one to accept that this joy is meant for all. With his persistent appeal to this fundamental conviction, Pope Francis offers a fresh presentation of the Church's inherent missionary character. *Evangelii Gaudium* exhorts Christians to embrace again the universal goodness of the Lord whose name we bear.





Pope Francis greets a crowd of the faithful gathered in Varginha, a shantytown in the slums of Rio de Janeiro during his visit to Brazil for World Youth Day

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Jesus Christ is a personal savior, not a private savior. Privatization of the Gospel is self-contradictory and therefore the primary subject of Pope Francis' broad critique. Christians can never relent in opening themselves to a "renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §3) because otherwise we close in on some "false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian" (*EG* §41). To encounter Jesus and know his Gospel is to find what is good

for oneself *and* for all, not just for oneself or one's group alone. The Gospel is not a private treasure but a public treasury, one in which personal relationships are born and immediately outgrow the confining spaces of private possessiveness.

All of the critiques and corrections that Pope Francis makes are secondary to a primary affirmation—an affirmation of joy. The incomparable goodness of the Gospel comes first. It is simply

given. If *Evangelii Gaudium* is revolutionary, it is because it brings about a revolution in perspective. The exhortation itself—and Francis' pontificate in general—takes up a different point of view(ing) from those to which many have become accustomed. From this position, he invites us to look upon the same Gospel of Jesus Christ that the Church always proclaims and to see, first of all, joy.

Joy is healthy.

Joy is both a sign of health and an agent of healing. Salvation is the state of full health—*salus*—and joy is the fruit of this salvation. Before we can understand what ails us, we must have some sense of what full health would be. In foregrounding the *joy* of the Gospel, Francis asks us to see again the healthy goodness for which all are destined and only from there measure the deviations from wholeness that afflict us today.

The joy of the Gospel is a holistic reality; it deals with whole persons, whole cultures, the whole of humanity, and the whole of creation. If one neglects the good of another, whatever one experiences is something other than joy. It may be comfort, it may be security, it may be safety, but it is certainly not joy. Joy only attains in sharing in what is good for one another.

It is vain, then, to attempt to protect the joy of the Gospel for oneself by neglecting to share this joy with others. There is no joy in the Gospel—there is indeed no *Good News*—if this goodness is not proclaimed and given to others. The intrinsically communicatory

character of this Good News makes itself known when we experience deficiencies to joy. As Francis puts it, “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” (*EG* §49). The Christian cannot rest until the joy of the *other* is complete.

The Gospel is always, first and foremost, an affirmation: it is an affirmation of the joy to which all are called, the joy of a God who provides, the joy of a Savior who heals what ails us. This joy is so capacious that it holds within itself all manner of sacrifice and suffering. Before moving on to the ailments themselves, Francis is keen to proclaim this joy once again. In doing so, he resembles his namesake, for whom all that was contained within his particular holiness was ultimately an expression of joy. As G.K. Chesterton so aptly muses in his whimsical biography of the saint:

The whole point about St. Francis of Assisi is that he certainly was ascetical and he certainly was not gloomy. . . . There was nothing negative about [his life]; it was not a regimen or a stoical simplicity of life. It was not self-denial merely in the sense of self-control. It was as positive as a passion; it had all the air of being as positive as a pleasure. He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the modern mind in the whole problem of the pursuit of happiness.¹

Quick as the modern mind might be to fixate on the ailments, it is the positive quality of full health that is the only starting point for healing.

Fragmentation, disintegration, and isolation are symptoms of social illness.

These are not the conditions of joy. Contained within each and every social injustice that Francis tries to bring to our attention is the predominant message of exclusion. The separation of one from another according to the apportionment of material and spiritual goods that are meant for all is a violation of the Good News spoken in Christ. Acts of communication anticipate and instantiate bonds of connection, for through acts of communication two or more who are not the same are bound together in what they hereby share in common. When exclusion and isolation are communicated, the very capacity for building communion becomes a conduit for division and exclusion. Injustice is the breakdown of communication.

Not only is injustice unhealthy, it is also a mark of inhumanity. The meaning of humanity which the Gospel discloses and inaugurates is predicated upon the sharing of concern, self-identification with the condition of others, and action of willing the good of another. Christ is himself the embodiment of fullness of humanity in union with

his divinity: in him, the properties of one nature communicate the good of the other nature. On the pattern of his person, Christians are called to accept what he offers and give as they receive. To be “in thrall to an individualistic, indifferent and self-centered mentality” (*EG* §208) is to cling to a way of being that forfeits the joy of the Gospel—the joy of our common good. With his own voice, Francis echoes the call of the Gospel “to be freed from those unworthy chains and to attain a way of living and thinking which is more human, noble, and fruitful, and which will bring dignity to [our] presence on earth” (*EG* §208).

Movement from a possessive mentality to a more open and indeed human way of living and thinking is an issue of conversion. In the terms Francis lays out, conversion is a process of stepwise reintegration. Incrementally but decisively, those who cling to tendencies of excluding others and protecting ourselves must go outside the orb of our own self-interests and harbors of security. For Francis, the obsessive urge

to privatize goods is the great enemy of the Gospel’s common good. The journey of conversion consists of many small steps away from claiming goods for oneself to the exclusion of others and towards sharing with others—even and especially at a cost to oneself—according to each one’s needs. Such “small step[s],” Francis assures us, “in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties” (*EG* §44). In the end, it is often precisely by such acts based upon limited, definitive decisions that the Gospel is communicated to those who have been pushed towards despair, for “everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings” (*EG* §44). Every step is a new beginning when we seek to reintegrate the human community in hopes of sharing in our final good together.

Evangelization is healing.

Indeed, the mission of sharing the Gospel is the only failsafe self-help method. In seeking to heal the other, one also heals oneself. The evangelizer affirms his own healthfulness in acting towards the common good. And lest we think evangelization is an issue of the “haves” giving to the “have-nots,” we are reminded that those of us who are poor must share our suffering with others so they may learn from us the suffering of Christ (*EG* §198). Evangelization occurs by the modes of both sharing one’s good and making present one’s needs.

Just as those with goods have a responsibility to seek out those in need, those in need have a responsibility to allow themselves to receive that of which they are in need. “To desire, seek, and protect the good of others” (*EG* §178) is the task of the Gospel and the work of evangelization, but it is never reducible to mere altruism. Desiring the other’s good refreshes our desire for what is, in fact, good for ourselves. Acting on behalf of the other’s good purges us of our urge to protect and withdraw ourselves from the common good,

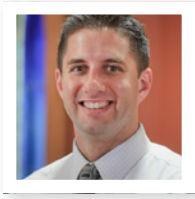
or, as Francis puts it, to engage in the tragedy of a “slow suicide” (*EG* §272). And in allowing ourselves to receive from the hand of another, we likewise acknowledge that the good of the one who is in the position to give is inextricably tied up with the act of giving to me and for me. Whether in the position of giver or receiver, seeking the other’s good redirects our energies towards what we ultimately desire: the sharing together in God’s own goodness that is united to our humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

Going forth from oneself and seeking out the good of another as our bond of communion is not a matter of performing a gradable task; rather it is, objectively speaking, our subjective affirmation of the one true good, which cannot ever be a private possession. The common good of the Gospel demands and builds upon the “general temporal welfare and prosperity” of all people, especially the poor (*EG* §192). The solidarity to which the Gospel calls us therefore “presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the

priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few” (*EG* §118). This mindset, which is fed by and becomes incarnate in concrete actions, is first and foremost a fundamental affirmation of the greatest of all goods: “*the love of God [that] has been poured into our hearts by the holy Spirit that has been given to us*” (Rom 5:5; cf. 8:14–17, NRSV). This love is greater, more capacious, of deeper depth and infinitely broader horizons than any inclinations we might act upon or deny, any fancies we might accept or reject. As Francis boldly announces, “Beyond all our preferences and interests, our knowledge and motivations, we evangelize for the greater glory of the Father who loves us” (*EG* §267).

It is in healing others that we ourselves are healed, in seeking the good of others that we discover our own good, and in desiring others’ joy that we accept Christ’s joy in us (see Jn 15:11).





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NOTES

1 G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton, vol. II* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 77–78.