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POPE FRANCIS AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

It would be an understatement to say that Pope Francis’s first official papal writings were eagerly awaited by many. In June of 2013 he released his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* (*The Light of Faith*), though it was written in large measure by his predecessor Pope Benedict. Later in the year he gave some formal and informal interviews that addressed a number of pressing issues: the mission of the Church to both believers and nonbelievers, several contemporary social, political, and ethical concerns, and what is called the new evangelization.¹ His first major papal writing, the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), was then issued in November. It was intended specifically to respond to the request of the 2012 Synod of Bishops, entitled the *New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, for a papal reply to their discussions and recommendations.² Pope Francis in the Exhortation takes up many of the thematics that have already emerged in his pontificate, developing them in a broad ranging homiletic style.

The new evangelization has been an initiative that has deep roots in the gospel injunction to proclaim the “good news” of salvation to all peoples. In more recent years, it has been articulated by Pope Benedict XVI as stemming from the need:

to rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith. In rediscovering his love day by day, the missionary commitment of believers attains force and vigor that can never fade away. Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy. It makes us fruitful, because it expands our hearts in hope and enables us to bear life-giving witness: indeed, it opens the hearts and minds of those who listen to respond to the Lord’s invitation to adhere to his word and become his disciples.³

Pope John Paul II had called for this missionary outreach as inspired by the very nature of the Church following the words of St Paul: “If I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16). The new evangelization is thus

“new” not in its content but in its inner thrust, open to the grace of the Holy Spirit which constitutes the force

of the new law of the Gospel that always renews the Church; “new” in ways that correspond with the power of the Holy Spirit and which are suited to the times and situations; “new” because of being necessary even in countries that have already received the proclamation of the Gospel.⁴

This Exhortation is Pope Francis’s further articulation of this way of proclaiming the gospel today.

One can approach a papal writing from a number of angles: theologically, historically, or pastorally. As will be evident, the Exhortation is meant to be approached pastorally: it is a ringing proclamation of what Pope Francis sees as the contemporary missionary task of the Church, based to great extent on Scriptural exegesis. It is a timely analysis of what he calls a “creative apologetics” (132).

I shall here present a threefold engagement with the Exhortation derived from some key thematics it develops, its view of the role of the interplay of faith and reason, and its outline of the role that education plays in evangelization. I shall also analyze how his model of the new evangelization has parallels to some key facets of Francis Libermann’s missiological writings. I shall then conclude with a brief summary of three key challenges for future action that the Exhortation presents.

Key Thematics of the Exhortation

The Exhortation hews to the path of many prior Magisterial teachings, not so much by presenting radically new directives for the Church as by developing new applications of a number of fundamental principles of Christian thought and action. It abounds with fresh counsels spanning several areas of Christian life: social teaching, the theology of the body, the call to be merciful, and most of all how to be faithful to the promptings of the Spirit in a manner unique to our new millennium.

The text essentially is a primer for how all the faithful should be dedicated to the “joy of evangelizing.” Evangelization is to instill into each a spirit of love for God. Like Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine*,⁵ the Pope emphasizes that one who truly loves something or someone wants to share that love with others: “What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known” (264). It is a love very much enriched and motivated by our encounter with Jesus, as someone who becomes our “pearl of great price” (Matt. 13:45-46).

...one who truly loves something or someone wants to share that love with others...

One responds to this prompting in the context of one's everyday interactions with neighbors, with those in one's work and home life, in one's political and social activity, and even with strangers (127). Evangelizing can occur in ordinary conversation with others, in direct engagement with the poor and work for justice, and in one's devotional and sacramental actions (128). Yet these evangelizing actions are not meant to be heroic or singular (12). Nonetheless, the Pope is not naïve about the challenges found in even these "ordinary" ways of living the gospel. He speaks of the "risk of face to face encounters with others" (88). All of these encounters demand that we "remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other" (169) while not resorting to a "therapy supporting their self-absorption" (170).

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Though the Exhortation is not a social teaching *per se* (184), it makes numerous references to prior Catholic social thought. It emphasizes the profound role that culture plays shaping our social actions – both positively and negatively (69; 115).⁶ Negatively, Pope Francis speaks of the way that our contemporary "culture of prosperity" fosters a profound "globalization of indifference" that has prompted a great inequality among humankind (54). This extends to what he terms the "paradox of our anonymity": our cultures provide us ever more access to various social media that will connect us, but we are often left in greater isolation (169). Yet, positively, the joy of the gospel inspires a social *solidarity*:

solidarity is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property. The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them (139).

Inspired by prior papal teachings, such as John XIII's *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Francis draws a fine line between the need for socially necessary constraints on private property, on the one hand, and the fact that property is a fundamental – though neither unconditional nor absolute – human right.⁷ One's care for all entails not a denial of private property, but rather a conviction that the sharing of goods brings communion with and commonality for all.

The Pope also shows forth some influences of Pope John Paul II's theology of the body.⁸ He uses our bodily existence as point of delineation as to how we live our gospel dedication. Our bodies are our initial points of contact for our action in the

world, rightly or wrongly. He speaks, for example, of the growing isolation that besets many today who are active and engaged yet avoid true intimacy with others to the point of succumbing to bodily sickness (91). Cosmetics can at times replace our true care for our bodies (232). He notes that “thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (215). He speaks of the problem of living a faith focused upon a “disembodied Jesus” (89). On the other hand, our bodily senses connect us to beauty. We are called to a life lived with a devotion to true beauty. He speaks of evangelization as succeeding by an attraction to what is beautiful, such as one would have to a banquet (15). We should even embrace the liturgy as something beautiful (24). The love that is inspired by the gospel moves us to embrace the beautiful.⁹

One could say that the key thematic of the Exhortation is mercy.

One could say that the key thematic of the Exhortation is *mercy*. Pope Francis speaks of how St. Thomas Aquinas considers mercy as the most important of virtues. Aquinas maintained that mercy is the most visible form of God’s power or omnipotence: it is manifest uniquely in his power to forgive sins. Forgiveness is what most closely leads us to our understanding of infinite goodness. Moreover, the effect of the divine mercy is the basis of all of God’s works. “For nothing is due anyone, except because of something already given him gratuitously by God” and thus mercy is the “first foundation of all good things.”¹⁰ For Pope Francis, mercy shows both God’s strength to forgive us but also God’s will that we be free (43). The poor are the first to receive this divine mercy. Thus when the poor are evangelized, they also evangelize those who bring the message of the joy of the gospel and the service of charity (198). Mercy is in no way opposed to justice but rather complements it. It inspires our work for justice and yet at the same time is the virtue that being just can bring.

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The Role of Faith and Reason

Since the time of St. Paul, the Church has proclaimed the intimate interaction between faith and reason. The interplay has been expressed variously, as “I believe that I may understand” (*fides ut intelligam*) by St. Augustine and “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*) by St. Anselm. As a correlative, Augustine states that no aspect of genuine faith can be inconsistent with the role of nature both as God creates, orders, and guides it and as a scientist properly understands it (142; 167).¹¹ Our task is to understand how to grasp the ways God orders creation and orders our lives in relation to it. The philosopher and the theologian play a key role in articulating this relationship (242).

How does reason order our way not just of belief but of evangelical action? To illustrate this relation, the Exhortation draws freely from four common philosophical concepts: time, unity, reality, and wholeness.

Pope Francis urges that for one living the gospel message, *time* should have priority over space:

This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time. One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that spaces and power are preferred to time and processes (223).

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This is a creative way of linking time (with its intrinsic link to movement and development) to the call to our proclamation of the gospel. We aim not for immediate perfection but for day by day working towards it. We need to live out our lives within a horizon of growth and decay, improvement and decline.

Pope Francis also encourages that we strive for the *unity* of peace. We ought neither to flee from or deny conflict, but rather to engage with its diminishment (227). Similarly, the unity of peace emerges not from elimination of diversity but from reconciliation with it (230).

Christians are sometimes criticized for operating on the basis not of everyday *reality* but of otherworldly ideals. The Pope has some sympathy with this criticism of over-intellectualizing, acknowledging that “it is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric” (231). These problematic ideals can range from a pietistic “angelic purity,” on the one hand, to a social-political “dictatorship of relativism,” on the other (231). Too strong a focus on ideals can give way to self-centeredness and even a type of Gnosticism. Ideals and concepts are not ends in themselves but are to serve evangelical communication and praxis that affect everyday life.

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The Exhortation utilizes the distinction between *whole* and parts to emphasize the priority of what is whole. Pope Francis applies this to the interplay between what is global and what is local. Though we need to focus on both in our collective actions, we also need to avoid an obsession with particular and limited questions (235). A truly global perspective preserves the distinctiveness of the particular. Socially, we strive for the convergence of all peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality while together pursuing the common good (236).

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Evangelization and Spiritan Education

Though not formally a document on pedagogy, the Exhortation stresses that the vocation to teach is a crucial component of evangelization. One teaches not rote doctrine, but “critical thinking” (64). The aim of teaching is to foster an “authentic Christian humanism” lived in an evangelizing spirit (68). As such, much of the Exhortation’s view of pedagogy finds strong resonance in some of Francis Libermann’s writings on teaching.

Libermann initially did not seem destined to lead a Christian religious order of missionary teachers and pastors. The son of a rabbi, he was effectively “chosen” within his rather large family to follow in his father’s footsteps. Though many of his siblings converted to Catholicism, it was Francis’s eventual conversion that seemed most difficult for his father to understand and accept. Francis seldom enjoyed robust health: he was racked at several times in his life with bouts of debilitating internal illness and eventually – and quite problematically – epilepsy. He suffered from psychological stresses as well. So, despite his enthusiasm and intellectual promise, it took him far longer than his confreres to be accepted for ordination to the priesthood. To most, such a lengthy delay of ordination would have been a severe embarrassment. But Francis, in his characteristic humility, not only bore these afflictions with equanimity but also thereby gained the lasting respect of a number of his peer priests and seminarian peers.

When he at last was ordained, things happened quickly: he soon found himself the head of a missionary order of priests, called the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. They were involved heavily in Africa and Francis coordinated this missionary work from Paris and its environs (rather amazing given the nineteenth century time in which this took place). These fledgling attempts at evangelization eventually became quite successful. Many joined the order, despite the difficulties of travel to and life in both Africa and other locations throughout the world. Eventually, in 1848, Francis accepted a merger between his order and the already existent Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

Much of the success that Libermann had in attracting men to join this international missionary work can be attributed to his psychological perspicacity. He understood that a missionary had to confront his inevitable psychological stresses and strains not by mere piety or mysticism, but by measured thoughtfulness and candor. So he urged that all training and education prepare

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students to be keenly aware of their own emotional and psychological temperaments.

Libermann took close account of the affective dimension of education as well. His letters to his fellow priests speak of their longings, desires, fears, sympathy, guilt, and worries. He urges that these various affects be not repressed nor sublimated, but confronted. But awareness of one's inner emotions is not an end in itself, for the educator needs also to instill a sense of virtues that are positive habits of actions. A key virtue that emerges is that of humility. Humility is not humiliation, but is rather the profound grasp of our dependence on God within a practical union with God.

This practical union, for Libermann, parallels the intimacy with Jesus that St. John of the Cross calls perfect union: a profound peace in the midst of life activity. As Libermann described it "since I raise my soul to God to ask his help at every new task, it means that the busier I am the more my union with God is strengthened."¹² At this stage of one's spiritual development "the supernatural life has become, so to say, natural."¹³ A student acquires this union as he applies his natural faculties to study in a spirit of recollection and love for God. For the missionary, it is

not only doing one's holy duties in the spirit in which they should be done, but also exercising a gentle and peaceful guard over one-self, and accomplishing everything according to God's good pleasure in a spirit of faith and love. The missionary's joys, difficulties, sufferings, works of zeal, and even failures are lived in the Spirit of God.¹⁴

Practical union emerges only through time, requiring much effort in a humble surrender to God in the midst of all of one's activities. It is much like the mercy of which Pope Francis speaks.

Libermann promoted an education for praxis. This praxis is meant in turn to inculcate a practical bent in the missionary. Education deals with the development of one's interior dispositions to do external works.¹⁵ But Libermann's emphasis on action does not abandon the need to inculcate careful reasoning. But reasoning is not primarily a habit of judgment, of systematizing, of imagining, or of restricting emotion.¹⁶ Rather it is a careful attention, when making decisions, to the promptings of the Spirit who moves us in directions greater than we can imagine. It is, paradoxically, in action that we discern these promptings – we dwell with them and communicate them in our subsequent action.¹⁷ As Libermann sums it up, one puts actions before words.¹⁸

A succinct summary of Libermann's views on education is found in his 1847 letter to Fr. Chevalier in Dakar, Senegal. Libermann is speaking about those Chevalier is educating:

It seems to me that it is absolutely necessary to make them [the students] overcome their weakness of character, to inspire them with a certain amount of self-respect, to make them understand and appreciate that they are free, to make them realize the beauty of the freedom and quality which they share with all of the children of God.¹⁹

So this pedagogical emphasis on praxis is meant to extend to believers and nonbelievers. Here we see clearly the missionary spirit of the Spiritans as it continues up to our own day. It includes academic acuity and certainly rigor, because what is at stake is high: the proclamation of the gospel. Every student is invited to develop a practical union with God in everyday life.

As a response to the *New Evangelization* Synod, Pope Francis encourages Catholic educators to engage with both believers and nonbelievers in much of the same way as Libermann had. Francis refers to this as a dialogue in "new Areopagi," referring to the place at which St. Paul spoke to the pagan philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:18). Pope Francis envisions this as a place "where believers and non-believers can dialogue about fundamental themes: the great values of ethics, art and science, and the search for the transcendent" (257).²⁰ This dialogue is directed in particular to those, as Pope Benedict XVI had noted, "to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown."²¹ In a distinctive way, Catholic educational institutions can promote such a dialogue.

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Three Challenges for the Future

In summary, evangelization is motivated by one's love for God. Like Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine*, the Pope emphasizes that one who truly loves something or someone wants to share that love with others: "What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known" (264). It is a love very much enriched and motivated by our encounter with Jesus, as someone who becomes our "pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:45-46). The Pope has thus presented three unique challenges that face us today in this task of proclamation of this love.

The universal scope of the evangelization. The Exhortation, as addressed to Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons, and the

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...an invitation to evangelize all.

...meant to apply to all aspects of the lives of those committed to the gospel.

Evangelizing is not a part-time engagement of one's faith.

Lay Faithful, is an invitation to evangelize *all*. The Pope includes in the text specific sections on ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox and other Christian believers, and on interreligious dialogue with Jews and Muslims. The Church is continuously called to this engagement (cf. Matt 28:19) aimed foremost at not conversion but dialogue. When Pope Francis does mention conversion, it refers not to the change of belief of non-Christians but to the change of lives of Christians themselves.

The demand of evangelization within all aspects of one's daily life. The new evangelization is meant to apply to *all aspects* of the lives of those committed to the gospel. This is expressed not so much as a prescription, but as a way of expressing a given fact: just as the message of the gospel in fact addresses every aspect of one's life, so every aspect of one's life can be part of what one expresses in response through words and actions. Evangelizing is not a part-time engagement of one's faith.

The personal nature of the evangelizing. The Exhortation emphasizes the "person to person" (127) transmission of the gospel message. In this intersubjective context, moments of evangelization can happen "unexpectedly," *at any time*, by means of an "art of accompaniment" (169) and "art of listening" (171). This can demand correction of others, not via explicit judgments as to their culpability, but by "recognition of the objective evil of their actions" (Matt 18:15) (172). This interpersonal dynamic of evangelization presents a genuine challenge, especially for those of us who live in cultures where detachment or avoidance can be customary ways of interacting with others about matters of faith.

The Pope poignantly ends the Exhortation with a prayer to Mary:

*Star of the new evangelization,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth,
illuminating even the fringes of our world.*

These words encapsulate the spirit of the new evangelization.

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Endnotes

¹See, for example, his interview “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America* (September 30, 2013), pp. 15-38.

²Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Citta del Vaticano, 2013), paragraph 16. All parenthetical numerical references in the text refer to the Exhortation’s paragraph numbers.

³Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Citta del Vaticano, 2011), 7.

⁴Pope Benedict XVI, *First Vespers: Homily on the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul*, 28 June 2010 (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Citta del Vaticano, 2010).

⁵(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶One sees also, for example in Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate*, the respect for the significance of culture in people’s lives “by which the individual defines himself in relation to life’s fundamental questions” (paragraph 26).

⁷*Populorum Progressio*, paragraph 23.

⁸See, for example, Pope John Paul II, General Audience 19:5 (20 February 1980): “So in man created in the image of God there was revealed, in a way, the very sacramentality of creation, the sacramentality of the world. Man, in fact, by means of his corporality, his masculinity and femininity, becomes a visible sign of the economy of truth and love, which has its source in God himself and which was revealed already in the mystery of creation.” This echoes the proclamation of the First letter of John: every Spirit that professes that “Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2).

⁹The term “beauty” occurs more than 25 times in the English translation of the Exhortation.

¹⁰See, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q.25, a. 3, r. 3.

¹¹He refers to Augustine’s emphasis on the association between beauty and the good. See, for example, St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), II, 16:23 (59); 25:34 (109); 48:43(110).

¹²*Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie du Vénérable François-Marie Paul Libermann* (Paris, Motherhouse, 1929- 1941), vol. I, 521.

¹³*Spiritual Writings of the Venerable Libermann* (Paris 1891), 554.

¹⁴*Notes et Documents*, vol. XIII, 697-702. See also *Spiritans Today*, sections 90-96, in http://archive.org/stream/spiritanstoday02cong/spiritanstoday02cong_djvu.txt

¹⁵See, *The Spiritual Letters of Venerable Francis Libermann*, vol. 3: *Letters to Clergy and Religious* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1962), p. 78.

¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 262.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁰Quoting *Proposito* 55.

²¹Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Members of the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2009.