

Fall 2014

## Evangelii Gaudium and Pope Francis' Pastoral Plan

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### Recommended Citation

Okoye, J. C. (2014). Evangelii Gaudium and Pope Francis' Pastoral Plan. *Spiritan Horizons*, 9 (9). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol9/iss9/11>

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# EVANGELII GAUDIUM AND POPE FRANCIS' PASTORAL PLAN

One often hears that Pope Francis has changed nothing, only the style. This article argues that the change is more than style. His encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), etches his pastoral plan, revealing some of his principles for governing the Church. It clearly manifests a change of style, while quite substantive changes in direction hide there in plain sight.

## The Office of Peter

Explaining why he would not say all that needed to be said on the subject, Pope Francis writes:

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.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralization” (16)<sup>2</sup>

These words are programmatic. Pope Francis strongly believes in collegiality. He does not see himself offering “a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church or the world.” He gives the reason: “It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local bishops.” He recognizes that bishops of particular churches have ordinary jurisdiction conferred by episcopal ordination and not by delegation of the pope.<sup>3</sup> For Pope Francis, the Word of God is a life to be lived, not a doctrine to be believed in. It is meant to bring joy to people in the concrete circumstances and contexts of their lives. And who are best placed to speak this word in context than the bishops for their particular areas. For the word to ring out in particular contexts, the papal magisterium must not usurp the magisterium of the bishops.

Pope Francis bemoaned the fact that “excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach” (32). The very preaching of the Gospel and its effectiveness are at stake. Many take this as a critique of current practices of the Roman Curia, for example, the micro-managing of liturgical translations. Pope Francis calls for ongoing assessment of church structures from the point of view of what he calls the “missionary option”:

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,.. (27)

*Such pastoral conversion starts with the papacy.*

Such pastoral conversion starts with the papacy.

Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy. It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelization... The papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion. The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position “to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated... (32)

Pope Francis already acted on this idea of collaboration and openness. On April 12, 2014, it was announced that he has formed a group of eight cardinals from around the world to “advise him on the government of the universal Church” and “to study a project of revision” of a document from John Paul II on the Roman Curia. This is new and breaks all papal protocol. Some observers say that this idea may have been mandated by the Consistory that elected Pope Francis. Be that as it may, no one was prepared for what the pope said next.

*But I don't speak, I just listen and that does me good.*

I am always present at the meetings, except for Wednesday mornings when I have the General Audience. But I don't speak, I just listen and that does me good. A few months ago, an elderly cardinal said to me: “You have already started Curia reform with your daily masses in St. Martha’s House.” This made me think: reform always begins with spiritual and pastoral initiatives before structural changes.”<sup>5</sup>

He continued.

Those who wanted to make proposals or send ideas have done so. Cardinal Bertello has gathered the views of all Vatican dicasteries. We received suggestions from bishops all around the world. At the last meeting, the eight cardinals told me the time has come for concrete proposals and at the next meeting in February they will present their suggestions to me (Ibid.).

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“The eight cardinals told me that the time has come for concrete proposals.” What I hear is that governing the Church is an exercise of communal discernment of spirits, of listening to the Spirit of God, not just exercise of hierarchical power over the Church. In fact, Pope Francis refers to this Jesuit discernment process just before analyzing contemporary reality.

We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also – and this is decisive – choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil (51).

### **The Bishops and Particular Churches**

Pope Francis compares the episcopal conferences to the ancient patriarchal Churches (see above). He desires a “juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority.” That is, they should have real magisterium. This runs counter to the 1983 Code of Canon Law.<sup>6</sup> In that Code, only the pope and the individual bishops are subjects of teaching. The then Cardinal Ratzinger harped on this.

No episcopal conference, as such, has a teaching mission; its documents have no weight of their own save that of the consent given to them by the individual bishops.<sup>7</sup>

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However, Pope Francis is more in tune with Vatican II theology of an order of bishops formed by episcopal consecration: “all are united in a college or body with respect to teaching the universal Church of God and governing her as shepherds.”<sup>8</sup> A “genuine doctrinal authority” recognizes this fact and gives it flesh as the first synod of bishops held on October 28, 1967 teaches.<sup>9</sup>

the office of teaching on questions of faith and morals authentically, that is, with the authority of Christ, has been entrusted to all successors of the Apostles. It belongs

to the Roman Pontiff personally and to the Episcopal College gathered in Ecumenical Council to meet the needs of the Christian people by the conscientious exercise of the magisterium.

But it is not limited to them, since every pastor of the Church, each in his own see or region, is by the reason of his office bound by the same heavy responsibility. *Today this sacred work is done more fittingly when it is done collegiately through the episcopal conferences* (emphasis mine).

It is therefore not surprising that Pope Francis, with conscious intent, includes the magisterium of national and regional episcopal conferences with the papal one.<sup>10</sup> Before his analysis of contemporary reality he says:

I take for granted the different analyses which other documents of the universal magisterium have offered, as well as those proposed by the regional and national conferences of bishops (51).

### **The Proclamation Itself**

The Apostolic Exhortation brings closure to the 2012 *Synod on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*. What does Pope Francis propose should be “new” in the new evangelization? The incipit answers: joy and enthusiasm for the gospel.

*...joy and enthusiasm  
for the gospel.*

The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus... In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy (1).

He returns to this towards the end.

How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction! (261)

Pope Francis can be humorous. He is shocked that “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter” (no. 6). For him, “an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!” (no. 10).

*...an evangelizer  
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funeral!*

Joy is both a psychological and spiritual human emotion. Pope Francis proposes a personalist and communal view of the Gospel, not a doctrinal and purely spiritual one. He writes (182):

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*It is no longer possible  
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heaven...*

*The primary reason  
for evangelizing is the  
love of Jesus which we  
have received...*

*...the Church grows  
“by attraction,” not by  
proselytizing.*

*The dogmatic and  
moral teachings of the  
Church are not all  
equivalent.*

It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven...It follows that Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life “related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good.”<sup>11</sup>

The Gospel transforms people from inside and equally transforms the circumstances in which they live. It must touch and change people in their vital lives. The simple proclamation that should ring out over and over must be: “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” (no. 164). In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead (36). The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known? (264). For, if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others? (8). Thus the Church grows “by attraction,”<sup>12</sup> not by proselytizing.

Pope Francis believes in the “hierarchy of truths.”<sup>13</sup> Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed (no. 35). He calls for “a fitting sense of proportion” (38)<sup>14</sup> lest “certain issues which are part of the Church’s moral teaching are taken out of the context which gives them their meaning. The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects” (34). We recall what Pope Francis said in his interview with the Jesuit *America Magazine*.<sup>15</sup>

We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the Church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the Church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.

The dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church are not all equivalent. The Church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the

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people...*

*...today we also have  
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inequality.*

necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the Church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow.

Pope Francis is not *obsessed* with the teaching on abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods as if they were the essence of the Gospel. He was reprimanded for that, but remains unrepentant. First and foremost, the love of God made manifest in Christ must be proclaimed; it is powerful enough to draw hearts. True morality flows from human love responding to God's love, and not from coercion.

The pope's point of view is being contested in some parts of the Church. For example, on Holy Thursday this year as the priests of Pittsburg diocese processed for the Mass of the Holy Oils, a protest group of conservative Catholics heckled them to preach more against abortion. The evening before, Bishop Zubik had failed to convince this group of the inappropriateness of the gesture.

Pope Francis is also insistent that love experienced opens the heart up to others, especially the poor: "We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them" (48). He continues:

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 (178).

"Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people" (268). Bringing all this together, Pope Francis writes that "to evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world" (176).

### **The Kingdom of God and the New Evangelization**

The new evangelization says no to an economy of exclusion.

Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an

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economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? (53).

A globalization of indifference has developed (54). The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Exod 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose (55). But 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 (183).

The new evangelization says no to spiritual worldliness. In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine, and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel has a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time (95). To this Pope Francis says, "God save us from a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings!" (97).

Pope Francis calls for solidarity, for the fair sharing of the world's resources:

*...the more fortunate  
should renounce some  
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more generously at the  
service of others...*

The mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity. It must be reiterated that "the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others"<sup>16</sup> (190).

Pope Francis is aware that his teaching may rub some people the wrong way, but these may be the very ones who need to hear it.

If anyone feels offended by my words, I would respond that I speak them with affection and with the best of intentions, quite apart from any personal interest or political ideology... I am interested only in helping those who are in thrall to an individualistic, indifferent, and self-centered mentality to be freed from those unworthy chains and to attain a way of living and thinking which is more humane, noble, and fruitful and which will bring dignity to their presence on this earth (208).

In fact, Rush Limbaugh, the conservative American Radio Talk Show Host, called Pope Francis' Exhortation "Marxist." Asked about this, the Pope said:

*But what happens  
instead, is that when  
the glass is full, it  
magically gets bigger,  
nothing ever comes out  
for the poor.*

There is nothing in the Exhortation that cannot be found in the Social Doctrine of the Church. I wasn't speaking from a technical point of view, what I was trying to do was to give a picture of what is going on. The only specific quote I used was the one regarding the "trickle-down theories" which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and social inclusiveness in the world. The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefitting the poor. But what happens instead, is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger, nothing ever comes out for the poor. This was the only reference to a specific theory. I was not, I repeat, speaking from a technical point of view but according to the Church's social doctrine. This does not mean being a Marxist.

### **Conclusion: The Primacy of Mercy and Love**

*The New York Times* of Wednesday, August 20, page 11 carried the story that Pope Francis has lifted the ban on the Salvadoran Archbishop, Oscar Romero, who was gunned down at Mass so his life may be examined for beatification. Pope Francis declared, "for me, he is a man of God." Pope Francis insists on the pastoral approach in the administration of the sacraments.

Nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason. This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself "the door": baptism (47).

In his Interview with Andrea Tornielli of *La Stampa*, he revealed that "last year in Argentina I condemned the attitude of some priests who did not baptize the children of unmarried mothers. This is a sick mentality."

Of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he writes:

I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy which spurs us on to do our best... 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 (44).

Continuing on the Eucharist, he had this to say.

The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine

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and nourishment for the weak (Cf. St. Ambrose, *De Sacramentis*, IV, 6, 28)... Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems (47).

These are powerful words, but do not expect Pope Francis to act unilaterally on this. He already revealed his style of government in his manner of meeting with the eight cardinal advisors.

The steps he has taken so far may, perhaps, be small steps, but the door is opening to the Gospel of the love and mercy of God.

### **Epilogue**

This article was completed before the October 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family began. The synod so far has illustrated Pope Francis' impact on the Church. Cardinal Péter Erdo's *Relatio* halfway through the synod proposes accepting people in their concrete being and this "requires that the doctrine of the faith...be proposed alongside with mercy" (11).<sup>17</sup> Mercy, a key word in Pope Francis' teaching, imbues this document through and through (it occurs no fewer than 8 times); the concept of "gradualness" occurs no fewer than 5 times. The *Relatio* refers also to the doctrine of levels of communion formulated by Vatican Council II (18), following which the Church "turns respectfully to those who participate in her life in an incomplete and imperfect way, appreciating the positive values they contain rather than their limitations and shortcomings (20).

The traditional doctrine of marriage is clearly affirmed: Jesus Himself...reaffirms the indissoluble union between man and woman (14); unions between people of the same sex cannot be considered on the same footing as matrimony between man and woman (51). Yet, it is affirmed that "homosexuals have gifts and qualities to offer to the Christian community" (50); in addition, "there are cases in which mutual aid to the point of sacrifice constitutes a precious support in the life of the partners" (52). As to civil unions and cohabitation, the *Relatio* notes that "when a union reaches a notable level of stability through a public bond, is characterized by deep affection, responsibility with regard to offspring, and capacity to withstand tests, it may be seen as a germ to be accompanied in development towards the sacrament of marriage" (22). Concerning the divorced and remarried, it says that the Church must avoid "any language or behavior that might make them

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*Pope Francis' image of  
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feel discriminated against (46); she may also seek to apply the law of gradualness to them on a case-by-case basis (47).

In summary, the spirit of Pope Francis is impacting the Church, the door is opening to his Gospel of the love and mercy of God, forging a new path of fidelity with love and mercy. As the *Relatio* affirms: "the truth is incarnated in human fragility not to condemn it, but to cure it" (25). It is intriguing how often the terms, "truth" and "mercy," are juxtaposed,<sup>18</sup> evincing a delicate balance between doctrine and pastoral care. Pope Francis' image of the Church as "a field hospital after battle" is becoming operative:

I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds...<sup>19</sup>

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#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Again in no. 51, Pope Francis says, "It is not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality," referring to the responsibility of national and regional episcopal conferences.

<sup>2</sup>The numbers in parentheses refer to the numbering in the Exhortation itself.

<sup>3</sup>"Episcopal consecration, together with the office of sanctifying, also confers the offices of teaching and of governing" (*Lumen Gentium*, 21). Granted that such power is exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and the members of the college.

<sup>4</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, 23.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Andrea Tornielli, *The Vatican Insider La Stampa*, December 14, 2013 at <http://www.lastampa.it/2013/12/14/esteri/vatican-insider/en/never-be-afraid-of-tenderness-5BqUfVs9r7W1CJIMuHqNeI/pagina.html> accessed August 20, 2014.

<sup>6</sup>Neither the Conference nor its president can act in the name of all the Bishops unless each and every Bishop has given his consent (canon 455.4).

<sup>7</sup>*The Ratzinger Report. An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 60.

<sup>8</sup>Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, 3

<sup>9</sup>Synod of Bishops, *Ratione Habita*, On Dangerous Opinions and on Atheism, 2.2. Austin Flannery, O.P., ed. *Vatican Council II. More Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982), 662-671, here 667.

<sup>10</sup>For example, the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document*, 29 June 2007, 12, cited at no. 83; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* (2006), 17, cited at no. 64; The Bishops of Oceania asked that the Church “develop an understanding and a presentation of the truth of Christ working from the traditions and cultures of the region” (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 17) cited in no 118.

<sup>11</sup>JP II, *Ecclesia in America*, 22 Jan 1999, 27.

<sup>12</sup>No. 15, citing Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass for the Opening of the 5th General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 13 May 2007: Aparecida, Brazil).

<sup>13</sup>Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11, cited in no. 36.

<sup>14</sup>“The same thing happens when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God’s word” (no. 38).

<sup>15</sup><http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview> accessed August 20, 2014.

<sup>16</sup>Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 14 May 1971, 23.

<sup>17</sup>*The Tablet*, October 11, 2014 accessed at <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/texts-speeches-homilies/4/462/synod-co-ordinator-highlights-synod-fathers-concerns-for-gay-catholics-cohabiting-couples-and-divorcees>. The numbers refer to the numbered paragraphs of the *Relatio* itself.

<sup>18</sup>“Truth and beauty of the family and mercy” (bis); “...in fidelity to the merciful kenosis of Christ. The truth is incarnated in human fragility not to condemn it, but to cure it” (no. 25); “...the guidance of the Holy Spirit will lead us to find roads of truth and mercy for all” (no. 58); “inviting us to the courage of the faith and the humble and honest welcome of the truth in charity” (ibid.).

<sup>19</sup>“A Big Heart Open to God,” Interview with Antonio Spadaro. *America* magazine (Sept. 19, 2013) at <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview> accessed October 15, 2014.