NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Evangelii Gaudium: First Impressions

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 26, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Pope Francis this morning published his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium [1]*. Unlike his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, which was a duet begun by Pope Benedict and completed by Francis, this new text is a solo. It will need to be read again and again, although on my first quick reading this morning, there is nothing that surprises. The text will seem familiar to anyone who has been listening to the Holy Father's sermons and read his interviews. At times, the text is lyrical, like an aria. At other times, it has all the accessibility of a recitative. Either way, it is a song.

Pope Francis' song presents a very different face of religion from that with which we Americans are raised. We grew up singing "America the Beautiful," and in the second verse, we sing of the pilgrims' "stern, impassioned stress." Closer to our own times, the Rev. Jerry Falwell became the face of religion in America and his "Moral Majority" managed to combine a sense of superiority and exclusiveness in its very title. The crusades of the American Life League and others have been prominent in their efforts to, as Mencken said of the puritanical spirit, prevent anyone, anywhere, from being happy, or even consoled.

Pope Francis understands religion very differently. In September, Cardinal Sean O'Malley addressed the Knights of Columbus and said, "The truth is not a wet rag that we throw in other people's faces." *Evangelii Gaudium* is not a wet rag. Indeed, the title of the document itself self-consciously echoes back to Pope John XXIII's magnificent opening speech at the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*. There was hope then, and there is hope again, a hope born of the joy of the Gospel.

Throughout the text, again, as he has said so often before, the pope encourages us to "go out." This is the imperative of the Gospel. We are called to be missionaries, to proclaim the good news, but there is no invitation to proselytism here. He could not be more clear in his warning against spiritual worldliness:

This worldliness can be fuelled in two deeply interrelated ways. One is the attraction of gnosticism, a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings. The other is the self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism of those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past. A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others. These are manifestations of an anthropocentric immanentism. It is impossible to think that a genuine evangelizing thrust could emerge from these adulterated forms of Christianity. (#94)

I must say, the phrase "self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism" is a phrase to warm my heart. And the warning against gnosticism is as old as the Church and as relevant as any number of theological tracts published in the past 40 years that yearn to adopt the mind of modernity, even at its most faddish and peripatetic.

One of the dominant themes throughout the text is the confidence that comes from believing Christ is at work in the world. Francis writes:

Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force. Often it seems that God does not exist: all around us we see persistent injustice, evil, indifference and cruelty. But it is also true that in the midst of darkness something new always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit. On razed land life breaks through, stubbornly yet invincibly. However dark things are, goodness always re-emerges and spreads. Each day in our world beauty is born anew, it rises transformed through the storms of history. Values always tend to reappear under new guises, and human beings have arisen time after time from situations that seemed doomed. Such is the power of the resurrection, and all who evangelize are instruments of that power. (#276)

And Pope Francis does not intend to spare the papacy itself from this recognition that, at times, the forms and the rules can impede evangelization, taking on a life of their own, becoming "self-referential." He writes:

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".[36] [2] 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.[37] [3] Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach. (#32)

The issue of the juridical status of episcopal conferences is a very dicey one. This reference to juridical status, however, shows something about this pontiff's way of thinking. It is not all warm fuzzies. He is not shy about discernment, even when that discernment means taking on entrenched interest within what is now his own Curia.

My worry about any decentralization of authority from Rome is a worry Pope Francis addresses in this text. He warns against a spiritual pessimism:

One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, "sourpusses". Nobody can go off to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents. While painfully aware of our own frailties, we have to march on without giving in, keeping in mind what the Lord said to Saint Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Christian triumph is always a cross, yet a cross which is at the same time a victorious banner borne with aggressive tenderness against the assaults of evil. The evil spirit of defeatism is brother to the temptation to separate, before its time, the wheat from the weeds; it is the fruit of an anxious and self-centred lack of trust. (#85)

I have referred to certain American bishops as culture warriors. Now, I shall use the pope's word: "sourpusses."

The sections on the social doctrine of the Church, especially the poor, are magnificent and will be the source of our reflection tomorrow. What is key to point out here is the role that section plays within the entire text, because it is a key to understanding how the pope understands the call to the poor within the economy of evangelization.

Last week, I commended Archbishop Charles Chaput [4] for his very fine talk in Mexico City, especially those sections that treated poverty. Previously, in an interview published here at *NCR*, Chaput reminded Catholics that

if we do not serve the poor, "we are going to hell." True enough. But I think Pope Francis is encouraging us to view service to the poor differently. It is not, first and foremost, about securing our own salvation, a case of our moral status. It is about something deeper. It is about a genuine "culture of encounter" in which the faithful encounter the poor not only because we are commanded to, but with the awareness that the poor hold a privileged place in God's love. We will meet Christ when we "go out" to meet the poor. The privileged place the poor are accorded in the Gospels, must translate into their receiving a privileged place in the heart and mind and work of the Church if we are to remain faithful to the Gospels, if we are to be continually be nourished by the Lord, if our Eucharist is to be a worship in truth, not isolation. That vision permeates the text.

That vision is essential. Without it, the people perish. But vision is one thing and implementation another. I hope the Holy Father understands how much work he has cut out for himself. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that at the USCCB meeting in Baltimore, on Tuesday night, I saw half a dozen bishops climbing into the back of one of those obscenely large stretch Hummer limousines. They were certainly "going out," but one suspects they were not going out to encounter the poor. In Pope Francis' effort to call forth a new missionary vision for the Church, one in which we all leave plenty of room for the Spirit to be at work, the first obstacle he must overcome may be the hierarchy. I do not know if it is the same in other countries. In the U.S., far too many bishops are precisely "self-referential," and the appointment of new bishops still relies too heavily on candidates drawn from the ranks of seminary rectors who, through no fault of their own, are engaged in the work of the Church at its most self-referential. If Pope Francis wants the vision of *Evangelii Gaudium* to spread, he must begin insisting on ternas that include the names of pastors in inner city parishes, directors of Catholic Charities, and those who really have worked with the poor.

Evangelii Gaudium is remarkable the way Pope Francis is remarkable. He has set forth a bold vision for the Church, in this text and in the past nine months. The "sourpusses" are grumbling but we can hope that they, too, will catch the Francis Fever and see that it is not Francis' fever at all; it is the zeal of the Gospels, a Gospel that is credible when grasped and preached as attractive, not scolding, welcoming and not exclusionary.

Tomorrow, the social doctrine and the poor.

Source URL (retrieved on *01/17/2017 - 04:00*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/evangelii-gaudium-first-impressions

Links:
[1] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html
[2] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html#_ftn36
[3] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html#_ftn37
[4] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/msw-praises-chaput-hell-freeze-over-soon