

## Some gems from 'Evangelii Gaudium'

Pat Perriello | Dec. 9, 2013 NCR Today

The latest papal document is truly remarkable. I have only read the first 50 pages so far, but each page is filled with a richness just waiting to be tapped by the universal church. I believe it is safe to say that there has never been a papal document quite like the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*[1].

Let's start with the frequent use of the word "I" instead of the more formal "we." Pope Francis is speaking directly to you and me. There is almost no theological jargon, and he is not speaking so much as the head of the universal church but as a pastor sharing his thoughts and letting us know what he thinks needs to be done.

He says, "I am trying to express" and "I hope that all communities will." Note that he is not delivering an edict, but rather giving us the best of his thinking as an individual and encouraging us to move in the direction he thinks best. How refreshing.

It is also instructive that he makes a point of speaking to all Christians. His language is inclusive. He is speaking not just to Catholics, but to all who believe and confess Jesus Christ. He appears to see all Christians as part of the larger body of Christ, and calls all to be evangelizers. He speaks of the duty to proclaim the Gospel to all. No one is to be excluded.

Another important general characteristic of this exhortation is his constant references to the Second Vatican Council. It is as if the council has finally been brought back into its legitimate place in the church. For how many years has the church acted as if the council never existed? If it was mentioned, it was often reinterpreted to mean something far different than it was originally intended to mean. Pope Francis gives a full-throated endorsement of the council. He not only sees it as legitimate, but seems to use it as the most up to date and relevant expression of Catholic theology.

I want to take a look at a few of the issues Francis touches on in the first chapter of his colloquy. The first of these messages is about the need for change. Francis chides those who want a "monolithic body of doctrine ... leaving no room for nuance." He expresses concern that we may "hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance." He makes clear that times change and that the expression of the truth can take different forms.

Decentralization is seen as an important part of this movement toward change. He makes clear that the magisterium does not have all the answers. "It is not advisable for the pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issue," Pope Francis writes. In contrast to his predecessors, he is pushing for greater power for episcopal conferences. This kind of move represents significant change.

The pope speaks of a conversion of the papacy. He points to Pope John Paul II's comments about the need to find new ways to express the primacy of the pope. He adds that we have made little progress in that direction.

His words on structures are instructive. He writes that ecclesial structures can hamper the work of the church. He does not, however, believe new structures are the answer in themselves. For example, he mentions that

parish structures can be meaningful if they put us in contact with the lives of the people. Yet he adds that the parish needs to avoid becoming a "self absorbed group made up of a chosen few."

Francis is clearly seeking a church where people are given an opportunity to be "bold and creative." He talks about how at times, the bishop should lead, but at other times, he should walk behind so the faithful can "strike out on new paths."

On his principal topic of evangelization, he says, "I want to promote sound evangelization." He goes on to say it "should not be to impose new obligations" but rather to share one's own joy in the Gospel. He talks about the need to make the Gospel attractive by our lives.

Francis has important things to say about morality. He states that it is not a list of dos and don'ts but is based on "works of love directed to one's neighbor." What is important for Francis is not a "multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed" but the saving love of God. He speaks of preaching and how time should be spent talking about grace rather than law and Christ more than the church. Preaching should be about the Gospel and not "doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options."

Finally, I want to mention what I see as two specifics from this first chapter. He speaks strongly about sacraments and their availability. He says the Eucharist "is not a prize for the perfect, but powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak." He goes on to say, "The church is not a toll house -- it is the house of the father, where there is a place for everyone." He exhorts us to be facilitators of grace rather than arbiters. Hopefully, such words will put to rest any efforts to deny Communion to those with whom one disagrees.

He also says, "Customs ... even some which have deep historical roots" may no longer serve as a means of communicating the Gospel. He says they can be re-examined. Is he talking about celibacy?

As is clear, this first chapter contains a lot to ponder. I believe it represents a bold new vision for the church. I hope to review chapter two of this apostolic exhortation in my next submission. Chapter two looks at the inequality in resources and the duty to address the needs of the poor -- a primary focus for this pontificate.

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