

Pope Francis is *not rejecting* the 'secondary aspects' of our faith; but he is giving the Church a very real wake-up call with respect to how our witness to the Gospel is perceived. Rather than hearing the first or primary proclamation that Jesus loves us, that he died and rose for us, and that he is living for us now – the proclamation which the Pope calls 'the very heart of the Gospel' – many people hear only words of condemnation and moral reproof from the Church. The first duty of the Church is not to be a school mistress wielding a yardstick but rather a messenger bringing news of comfort and joy.

The Social Dimension of the Gospel

Of course, one of the most striking aspects of Pope Francis' ministry is that he expresses such a concrete love for the poor and charity towards the most lowly and forgotten of our society. Thus it is no surprise to anyone that *Evangelii Gaudium* dwells at great length on the question of social justice and communal commitment to our neighbours. But this too is to be seen within the Pope's total 'system' in which the Gospel is at the heart and centre of the Church's reason for existence. In §199 of *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes:

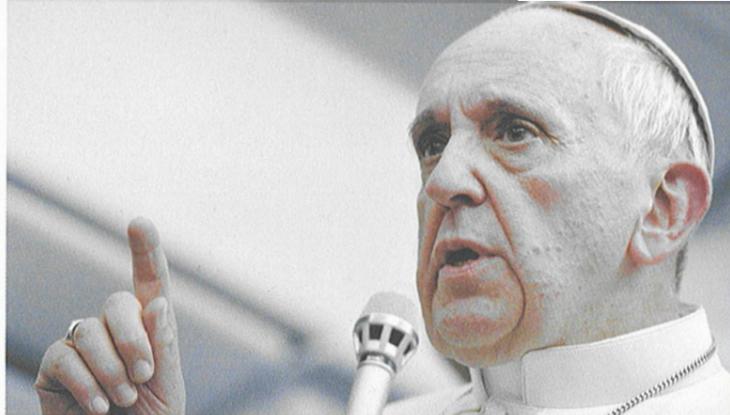
Without the preferential option for the poor, 'the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today's society of mass communications'.

That quotation is from Saint John Paul II, from his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001), so it isn't as if it is something new with Pope Francis. The 'first proclamation' of the Gospel is not only at risk when we find ourselves preaching moralism rather than the Good News, it is also at risk when we fail to show the charity and love which is at the very heart of the Kingdom of God which the Good News proclaims.

One reason to rejoice in the teaching and example of Pope Francis is that he brings truth and love together. They have never been alternative options for Catholic Christians, of course. Here is how Pope Francis explains it in §39 of *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Just as the organic unity existing among the virtues means that no one of them can be excluded from the Christian ideal, so no truth may be denied. The integrity of the Gospel message must not be deformed. What is more, each truth is better understood when related to the harmonious totality of the Christian message; in this context all of the truths are important and illumine one another. When preaching is faithful to the Gospel, the centrality of certain truths is evident and it becomes clear that Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others...If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church's moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk. It would mean that it is not the Gospel which is being preached, but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options. The message will run the risk of losing its freshness and will cease to have 'the fragrance of the Gospel'.

Here we see once again how the Pope's entire message conforms to his understanding of the Gospel as the heart of the Church's mission.



Conclusion: 'Evangelii Gaudium': An Encounter with Jesus

To understand Pope Francis, we must understand him as an apostle of the Gospel. He is so attractive to the world precisely because in his own self he appears to embody all the 'meaning, beauty and attractiveness' of the Good News of Jesus. People see in him what they might perhaps see in Jesus if they were to encounter him face to face.

Here we must highlight a key quotation about 'the very heart of the Gospel' which Pope Francis takes from Pope Benedict XVI's first Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (§1) and includes at the very beginning of *Evangelii Gaudium*:

I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: 'Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction'.¹²

Pope Francis understands that this encounter takes place primarily when a person hears and receives the *kerygma*, that is, the proclamation of the Gospel in word and action. Would it not indeed be something if the joy of the Gospel that radiates in our Holy Father also radiated in every one of us, so that everyone who encountered us in fact encountered the living God in Jesus and his Gospel of love and mercy?

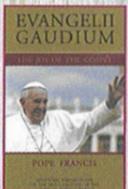
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Questions:

1. What is the content of the *kerygma*?
2. How might we come to experience 'the joy of the Gospel'?
3. How might we go about sharing the content of the *kerygma* with our friends in word and deed?

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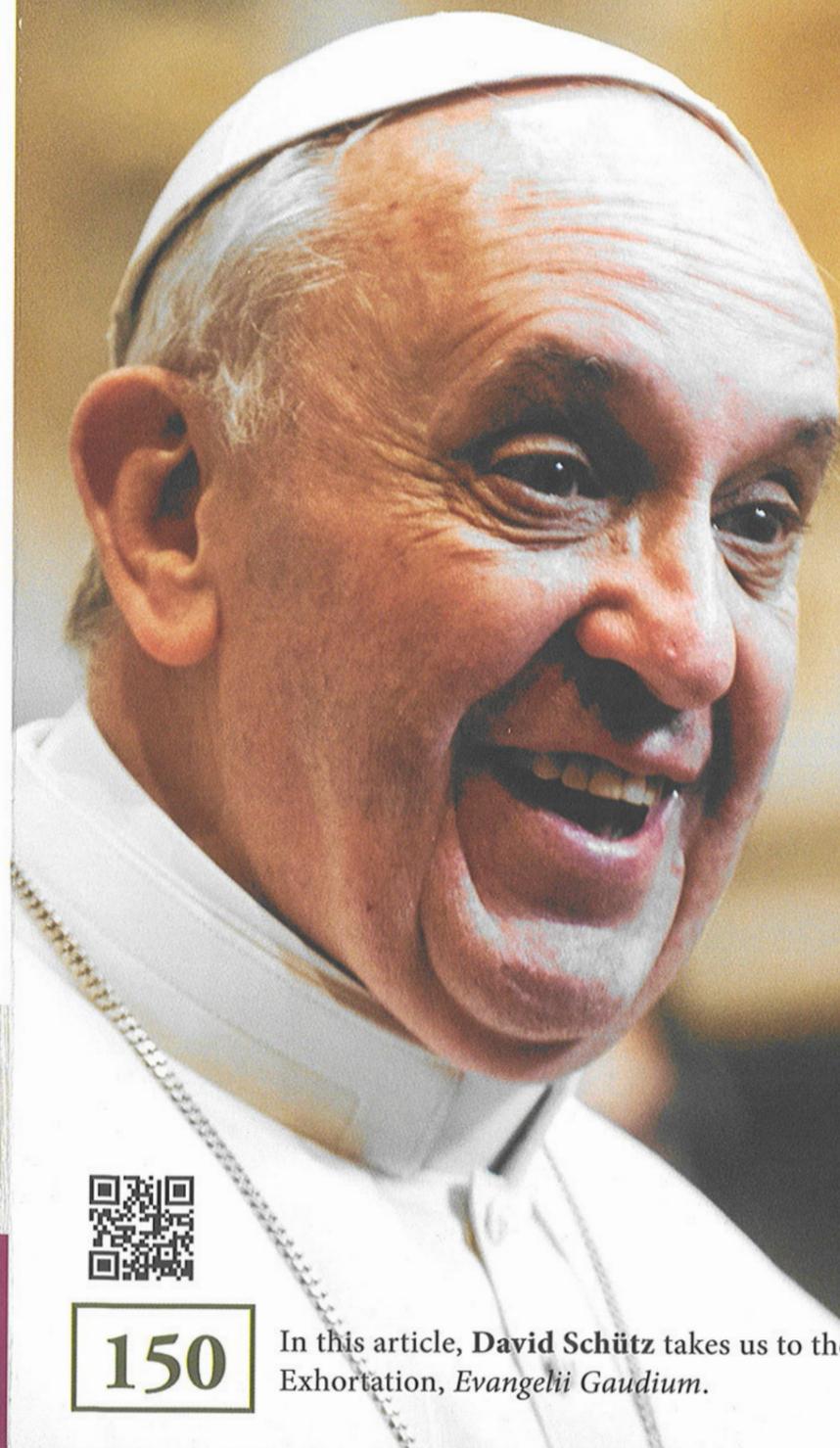


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On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World



POPE FRANCIS' First Apostolic Exhortation 'Evangelii Gaudium'

The Joy of the Gospel



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In this article, David Schütz takes us to the very heart of Pope Francis' first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Introduction: What is 'Evangelii Gaudium'?

Evangelii Gaudium is an Apostolic Exhortation written by Pope Francis. The occasion for its release was the conclusion of the 'Year of Faith', which marked the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Known popularly in English as 'The Joy of the Gospel' (from the English translation of its opening words in Latin), *Evangelii Gaudium's* 'true' title is 'On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World'.

An Apostolic Exhortation is a document from the Bishop of Rome which takes the form of an encouragement addressed to either a part or the whole of the Catholic Church on a particular topic in the life of our community following an ordinary or extraordinary Synod of Bishops. *Evangelii Gaudium* is the summation of the work of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome during October 2012 on 'The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith'.

Why is 'Evangelii Gaudium' important?

Evangelii Gaudium is the first major teaching document released by Pope Francis which is entirely his own work. When he released his first Encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* ('The Light of Faith'), Pope Francis himself acknowledged that the text had largely been prepared by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. So when *Evangelii Gaudium* was released, the Church and the world were hungry to hear what our new Holy Father had to say for himself in his own words.

The Pope seems to have been well aware of this and, as a result, *Evangelii Gaudium* is not just the usual *pro forma* conclusion to a Synod of Bishops. The Pope has taken the opportunity to address the Church at length on the most fundamental issue of her mission: the proclamation of the Gospel and the handing on of the faith to future generations.² Despite its length (51,500 words long), one should not regard *Evangelii Gaudium* as Pope Francis' 'definitive or complete word' on any particular matter contained within it.³ It is rather a document to encourage us to *begin* thinking about the issues he addresses.

Many have commented on the significance of the fact that Pope Francis was elected during the 'Year of Faith'. In his book *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church*⁴ (released just before the Pope's election) George Weigel claimed that we are standing poised at the conclusion of a revolution in the Church's vision of herself, which has been underway for more than a century! According to Weigel, starting with the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII and concluding with that of Benedict XVI, there has been a steady transformation from an *inward-looking* 'Counter Reformation' Catholicism centred on the *preservation of the Faith* against hostile attacks from the world to an *outward-looking* 'Evangelical' Catholicism focused on the *proclamation of the Gospel* and the renewal of all human society. *Evangelii Gaudium* fits perfectly into this trajectory.

How to Read 'Evangelii Gaudium'

First, read the whole document! In a document this long, there is a great temptation just to skim over most of it, and only really to dig into the bits that interest us personally, or that directly touch upon our own work in the Church. The danger of focusing on only a portion is that we miss Pope Francis' overarching vision. Fr Paul A. McGavin, an Australian priest, recently commented that our Holy Father is 'a system thinker'; that is, 'he tends to locate the questions with which he deals in view of a whole understanding

of the work of God in Christ (the Gospel, 'Evangelium'), and that whole understanding in the varieties of situations that are evoked'.⁵ This means that if we want to understand what the Pope is saying about particular situations, we have to grasp his overall understanding of the Gospel.

Secondly, the Pope seems so familiar to us and uses such simple language that we might fall into the trap of assuming that what he is saying is simple and familiar and read the document too hastily. We should remember that the author is not an Australian or a European or even a North American. His vantage point, both culturally and socially, is Latin America, and we do well to remind ourselves of this fact, especially when trying to understand some of his comments about human society.

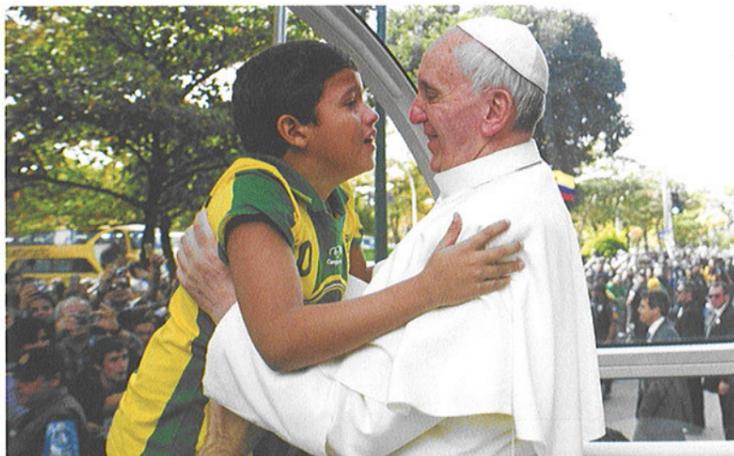
But more importantly, it is his theological understanding of 'the very heart of the Gospel'⁶ and its place within the Catholic Faith as a whole, which has become unfamiliar to many of us; unless we grasp this, we will miss the point of *Evangelii Gaudium* and the real joy that is to be found in its message.

What is at the 'Very Heart' of 'Evangelii Gaudium'?

We usually expect a writer to make their most important points at the very beginning of a text with a view to developing them later in the following chapters. But in this case, many of the Pope's main points appear well into the body of the text.

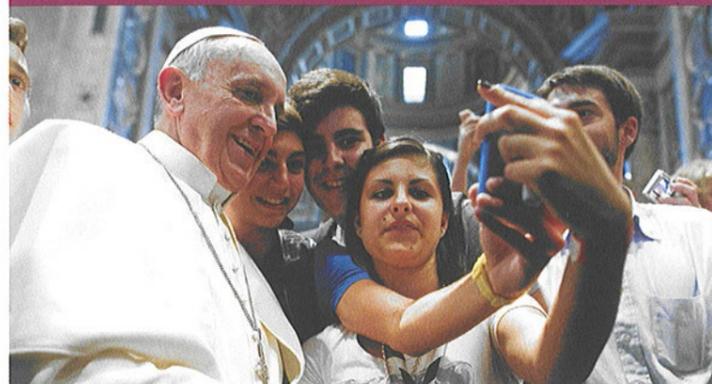
The *Wikipedia* article on *Evangelii Gaudium* will tell you that in the 47,560 word document (not counting footnotes!), our Holy Father uses the word 'love' 154 times, 'joy' 109 times, 'the poor' 91 times, 'peace' 58 times, 'justice' 37 times, and 'common good' 15 times. But it won't tell you that he uses the word 'proclamation' 58 times and the word 'witness' 25 times, nor will it tell you that he uses the term *kerygma* eight times and 'first proclamation' five times. The repeated use of these last two unfamiliar terms mark out a section in the centre of the document from paragraphs 160 through to 185; I believe it actually shows us the key to *Evangelii Gaudium* and to the whole of the Pope's 'system thinking' about the Gospel.

These two terms – *kerygma* and 'first (or primary) proclamation' – might be quite new to most of us. *Kerygma* is in fact just the New Testament Greek word which describes the mode of communicating the Good News by proclamation. It is often translated simply as 'preaching' in the New Testament, but should not be narrowly associated with giving homilies or sermons. We may be more familiar with some counterpart Greek words for communicating the Good News such as *catechesis* or *didache* (which both refer to teaching) or even the term 'dialogue'. >



On the lips of the catechist the *first proclamation* must ring out over and over: '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.'

When preaching is faithful to the Gospel, the centrality of certain truths is evident and it becomes clear that Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults.



The Pope does not give us a straightforward definition of what he means by *kerygma* and 'first proclamation', but some explanation is to be found at §164 of *Evangelii Gaudium*:

In catechesis too, we have rediscovered the fundamental role of the *first announcement* or *kerygma*, which needs to be the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal. The *kerygma* is trinitarian. The fire of the Spirit is given in the form of tongues and leads us to believe in Jesus Christ who, by his death and resurrection, reveals and communicates to us the Father's infinite mercy. On the lips of the catechist the *first proclamation* must ring out over and over: '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.' This *first proclamation* is called 'first' not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the *principal proclamation*, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment.⁷

If the 'first announcement or *kerygma*' is to be 'the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal', it must be pretty important. So what is it? In this paragraph, the Pope gives us an example of what the 'first announcement' might sound like 'on the lips of the catechist'. As he articulates it, it consists of the following proclamations:

- 1) **Jesus Christ loves you**
- 2) **Jesus Christ gave his life to save you**
- 3) **Jesus Christ lives at your side to enlighten, strengthen and free you.**

He also makes the point that the *kerygma* is 'Trinitarian': it proclaims the mighty acts of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Note how the Pope explains this:

- 1) **The fire of the Spirit is given in the form of tongues and leads us to believe**
- 2) **in Jesus Christ who, by his death and resurrection, reveals and communicates to us**
- 3) **the Father's infinite mercy.**

With that last word, 'mercy', we are back on familiar territory with the Pope. We know that 'mercy' is at the heart of his message about God's love. But God's mercy has come to us very specifically through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and comes to us when the Holy Spirit compels us to believe in Jesus who died and rose again to eternal life! This is the Gospel announcement that Pope Francis (like the Christmas angel) believes is 'good news of great joy for all the people'.⁸ It is 'the first proclamation' which

must never be lost or pushed into the background, but rather form 'the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal'.

'The Very Heart of the Gospel'

And this should clear up one or two points about some things our Holy Father has said recently. One of his most controversial statements – endlessly repeated and misunderstood by the press – has been the following:

'We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods... When we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in context,' he said. Adding that the church should not be 'obsessed' with transmitting 'a disjointed multitude of doctrines,' Pope Francis said: 'We have to find a new balance; otherwise the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.'⁹

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope reaffirms that 'all revealed truths derive from the same Divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel'.¹⁰ Remember that Pope Francis is a 'system thinker'. In his system, the 'first proclamation' of the love and mercy of God that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus must have pride of place in the Church's communication with the world. The Pope explains this at length in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

If we attempt to put all things in a missionary key (that is, if we put 'the first proclamation' at the heart of our message), this will also affect the way we communicate the message. In today's world of instant communication and occasionally biased media coverage, the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects. In this way 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 which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ's message. We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness.¹¹ >

¹ cf. EG §14.

² cf. EG §16

³ cf. EG §16

⁴ (New York: Basic Books, 2013)

⁵ WHAT'S NEW IN 'EVANGELII GAUDIUM'? by Paul-Anthony McGavin located at <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350762?eng=y>

⁶ EG §177

⁷ Emphasis in italics added

⁸ Luke 2:10

⁹ Rakesh Ramchurn, 'Pope Francis: Church's 'obsession' with gays, abortion and contraception means it risks 'falling like a house of cards', *The Independent*, Thursday 19 September 2013, in reference to Pope Francis' interview with Antonio Spadaro, S.J., published in *America Magazine* 'A Big Heart Open to God' 30 September, 2013

¹⁰ EG §36

¹¹ EG §34

¹² EG §7

