THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CONVERSION OF THE CHURCH

Warszawa, September 27, 2014

Talk 2: The Implications of *Evangelii Gaudium* for the New Evangelization

A first point to note is that *Evangelii Gaudium* is the post-synodal exhortation following the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization. Normally, the post-synodal papal documents are devoted totally to the theme of the synod. *Evangelii Gaudium* is in fact Pope Francis’s first official teaching document. A Pope’s first teaching document is usually a form of policy statement for the pontificate. Pope Francis has indicated clearly that *Evangelii Gaudium* is like his vision statement and programme for his ministry as bishop of Rome. It is not obviously a document devoted to the new evangelization. So what does this mean?

The Church is Mission

We used to think that mission meant that the Church in countries where Christianity was established, especially Europe, sent missionaries to convert the people in non- Christian lands, especially Asia and Africa. But Vatican Two already in 1965 taught that “The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Decree *Ad Gentes*, para. 2). St John Paul II repeats this in his encyclical *Redemptoris* Missio (1990), but this document while mentioning the new evangelization was especially directed towards reawakening missionary zeal for the unreached peoples of the world. Pope Francis is taking this foundational truth that the Church is missionary in its essence and insisting that it shape the whole of the Church’s life.

At the heart of Pope Francis’s vision is “the pastoral and missionary conversion” of the whole Catholic Church. This is what *Evangelii Gaudium* is about. This is an expansion or enlargement of the New Evangelization. It means that the New Evangelization is not just an additional task for the Church, but it is a call for the whole Church to become mission-oriented, in everything proclaiming Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. A sign of this change of approach is Pope Francis’s comment about programmes: “We might think we should work out programmes of evangelization carefully, thinking of strategies and making plans, but these are only tools, small tools. What matters is Jesus and letting ourselves be led by him. We can then plot our strategies but this is secondary.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Why are strategy, programmes and big events secondary for the pope? Because for him, evangelization is not something extra we do in addition to our regular Christian life. Without pomp, without ceremony or warning, he shows us that evangelization is inherently personal, about relationship. It is simply being a Christian who goes out to others in love. We can like to hide behind programmes and structures, and think we have done our duty!

A Converted Missionary Church

New Evangelization has from the start concerned conversion – the conversion of the unconverted and the half-converted. Now the call of Pope Francis is for everyone in the Church and for all the ways of functioning in the Church. Francis is not just encouraging Catholics to evangelize, but saying everything and everyone has to be transformed to the Gospel going out. “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 channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.” (EG, para. 27). So it is not just personal conversion that is an aim of the New Evangelization, but the conversion of the Church, personally, corporately, and structurally.

However, I do not think we should see this as Pope Francis correcting too narrow an approach to the New Evangelization. It is God’s providence preparing the way through St John Paul II and Benedict XVI in their call to a New Evangelization so that under Pope Francis this ecclesial conversion can become possible. For conversion requires a proclamation of the Gospel, of the kerygma.

The Holy Spirit and Evangelization

We have to be convinced of the total necessity of the Holy Spirit for any evangelization to be effective. It is not possible to preach the Gospel without the Holy Spirit; it is not possible to believe the Gospel without the Holy Spirit. Only those who are truly converted can bring a message that converts the hearers. Only those who love the Lord can convert the hearers to a love for the Lord. It is only the message of the saving death and resurrection that produces the death and resurrection of conversion in the hearer. Note the tight link here in the apostle Paul in Romans 6: 3 – 11.

From the start of the turn of the Catholic Church to evangelization, the role of the Holy Spirit was emphasized. Most notably, Paul VI taught: “The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization.” The last section of Pope Francis’s document Evangelii Gaudium is headed “Spirit-Filled Evangelizers”. I want to look at distinct areas where the Holy Spirit’s role is foundational:

1. *The Content of the Gospel*

The Holy Spirit gives light to understand what is at the heart of the Gospel message. “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” (1 Cor. 2:12). So it is only by the Spirit of God that anyone can say [with conviction] “Jesus is Lord” (see 1 Cor. 12:3).

It is only by the Spirit of God that Christians can understand the difference between the kerygma that converts and the didache that enlightens the heart how to live out the Gospel. This has been a rediscovery of biblical, liturgical, and patristic scholarship; and was required by the Council’s decision to restore the catechumenate for adults (RCIA). “the kerygma which needs to be the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal” (EG, para. 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.” (EG, para. 36).

2. *Conviction of the Truth of the Gospel*

It is one thing to have heard Catholic teaching, for example concerning the identity of Jesus, and his saving death and resurrection, and it is another thing to be convinced of this truth in the heart. This conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit. See how Paul writes in Romans: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.” (Rom. 10: 9-10). This is a description of the working of the Spirit in the believer. It spells out what conversion means. Conversion means a change of heart, a transformation that changes the direction of our lives. But the heart-change is made real when we commit ourselves publicly in explicit confession.

Without this conviction that is the work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no effective evangelization.

3. *Conviction of the Need for People to hear the Gospel and to be Converted*

It is another aspect of the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit that Christians need to understand the need of all people for conversion. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). “There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for us all. (1 Tim. 2:5).

Many Catholics have come to think in the following way: God is merciful, most people are basically good, we try to set a good example, and God will have mercy on them when they die. Any thinking of this kind undermines all evangelization. For it is not recognizing the need of every person for salvation from sin. Only the Holy Spirit can shake us up out of this laziness and complacency. It is not that we have to think that everyone who has not witnessed to an explicit conversion is going to hell. It is that explicit conversion and confession in Jesus is the demonstration of the one appointed way to the Father. While we always trust in the mercy of the Father, we have to know that there is no security in any other place.

My experience is that unless people have a real familiarity with the Bible, they will not have an adequate understanding of the need of all people for conversion, they will not have a clarity on the Gospel message and they will not understand the role of the Holy Spirit

A Different Approach to the Liturgy and the Sacraments

In the past, many priests were trained to focus everything on the sacraments. Preaching was not considered so important (there were of course exceptions). In this pastoral approach, the priest’s pastoral efforts were directed at getting people back to the sacraments and his ministry was the administration of the sacraments. This strategy was overwhelmingly directed to the “lapsed” who had stopped going to Church. But this approach did not pay much attention to conversion. Effort was made to get serious sinners to stop sinning gravely, but conversion was not part of Catholic terminology (it meant non-Catholics becoming Catholics). This was also true of the Church’s missionary work, where the emphasis was on getting people freely to accept baptism and the Catholic faith, rather than on personal conversion to Jesus Christ. Now with Francis’s call for conversion, his centring all on following Jesus, and presenting the life, there is a stronger emphasis on teaching and the example of Jesus, and that the sacraments have to follow the Word. “In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization.” (EG, para. 63). This is a call for a massive shift in Catholic pastoral practice. This has nothing to do with downgrading the sacraments, but everything to do with laying the right foundations in Jesus that will make it possible for the liturgy and sacraments to bear fruit.

Boldness for All

What Pope Francis is doing seems to me to be a radicalization of living the Gospel. This is implicit in the change from speaking of “renewal” to speaking of “conversion”. Renewal can be understood as improvement, as a reordering of priorities. But conversion means a death and a resurrection. This way of thinking leads to being more willing to make radical changes. “Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God’s newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?” So Pope Francis is calling for a pastoral boldness, not to be afraid of making mistakes. Has not our paradigm in the past often been safety? Such an approach never leads to joint evangelization, because you immediately list all the possible dangers. But Francis is calling for us to look first at the opportunities, at the primacy of the Gospel proclamation. When we think positively, the advantages of working together are huge: a witness of the power of the Gospel to overcome historic divisions and antipathies; the need to focus on the most basic, on which we are most agreed.

Pope Francis is calling for a pastoral boldness, not to be afraid of making mistakes. Has not our paradigm in the past often been safety? Such an approach never leads to joint evangelization, because you immediately list all the possible dangers. In the words of Pope Francis: we need “the grace not to be afraid of the newness of the Gospel or of the renewal that the Holy Spirit carries out; and not to be afraid to let go of the short-lived structures that imprison us.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The shortest paragraph in *Evangelii Gaudium* says this: “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigour.” (EG, para. 109).

All in the Church are called to this boldness: bishops, priests and deacons. No longer afraid that boldness will lead to disapproval: of the bishops by Rome, of the priests by the bishop, of lay people by the priest. If this word of Francis is heard, it will lead to a great unleashing of energy in the service of the Gospel.

Evangelization and the Wider Ministry of the Church

It is especially since the Synod on the New Evangelization in 2012 that Catholic dioceses have been taking up this call. But a problem in a number of places has been a lack of understanding of the kerygma and the need for this basic proclamation. When this is not understood, there is a tendency for Catholic to relabel what they are doing already and call it New Evangelization. That changes nothing. Is there a danger that this will happen following *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which the Pope is presenting his programme for the whole life of the Church?

I do not think this is a danger if people read *Evangelii Gaudium* with an open heart! It is true that Pope Francis also addresses the injustice of the world economic system and the need for decentralization in the running of the Church, as well as many practical questions, such as how bishops should exercise leadership, how priests should prepare homilies, and the inadequacy of a “desk-bound theology” (EG, para. 133). But because Francis centres everything on following Jesus and manifesting Jesus to the world, he really does bring everything into evangelization. The result is a Gospel-centred vision of all Christian life. This means that we can avoid the dichotomies that we have often known: evangelization versus social justice; action and contemplation; mission and dialogue; ecumenism and conversion. They all belong together in the following of Jesus.

Creativity and Diversity

Pope Francis is strongly encouraging creativity in all people and at all levels. When the Holy Spirit works in us, there is great diversity because the Holy Spirit is the Creator God. The Holy Spirit does not produce clones. The more we follow the Holy Spirit the more variety there will be, but also if we are obedient more harmony. In the past Catholics have often needed to find precedents for some new approach, and to show that this was approved by the Church. This fear of innovation cripples the evangelistic mission of the Church. So the Pope encourages all to follow the Spirit and to discover the riches of the Lord’s creativity. What is needed is not sameness everywhere, but discernment everywhere – that people are truly being led by the Spirit and not being deceived.

Francis writes that “today’s vast and rapid cultural changes demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language that brings out their abiding newness.” (EG, para. 41). To do this we have to soak ourselves in the teaching of Jesus, be serious about living it out in the Spirit, and then we will find that the Holy Spirit gives us the right words and language to reach the people we meet. Again, get rid of fears that we are saying the wrong thing, that we haven’t got the right formula, etc.

The Pope has some strong comments about taking the Gospel into other cultures. For the Pope what matters is proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus with love in all situations and environments. “What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost soul of our cities.” (EG, para. 74).

1. To New Ecclesial Movements, Vigil of Pentecost, May 18, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Meditation at Mass, July 6, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)