

POPE FRANCIS' LETTER, THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL, AND ECUMENISM (Ecumenical Trends 43{Sept. 2014 #8} : 9/121, 13/125—16/128

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In over fifty years of studying papal documents, I have never come across one as unique as Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter, The Joy of the Gospel. Here I hope to sketch its importance in our search for unity with other Christians. In a future article, I hope to indicate its ground breaking value in our dialogue with our Jewish older brothers and sisters.

At first glance, Pope Francis' remarks on ecumenism are disappointing. The explicit passage is rather short, and contained in the section on Social Justice. But, on further examination, his insights could revolutionize the way all Christians look at our unity.

As Stephen Bevans, SVD, has remarked : "Something that has perhaps been lost in the years since the (Vatican) Council has been the close tie between mission and ecumenism."<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis makes it quite clear that the fundamental reality known as Mission, Evangelization and Proclamation is the key and core of all of Jesus' life and message. He puts it most succinctly in #6: "our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved." In #9, the pope recalls "several sayings of St. Paul... 'The love of Christ urges us on' (2 Cor 5:14); 'Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel' (1 Cor 9:16)." Then in #10 he exclaims, in one of the many very personal observations in the letter, "Consequently, an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!"

Thus Francis makes clear the primacy of the reality known as Evangelization. Whether it be Social Justice, Ecumenism, Dialogue, Catechism, etc.--every reality in Christianity answers to our need to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The opening does not mention non-Catholics as addressees (see also #200), but #3 does: "I invite Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day." The language of "encounter" reminds us that the Evangelical Protestants of Argentina sensed Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as a brother Christian.<sup>2</sup> "Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" is the hallmark of an Evangelical Protestant (and close to the Charismatic Catholic, "Have you been baptized in the Holy Spirit?"). His insistence on a daily personal encounter reminds me of the presence of the USA Southern Baptist Dr. C.B. Hastings as an observer at the Synod of Evangelization of 1974. Following the Synod, the Paulist ecumenist Father Alvin Illig, CSP, was chairing a small seminar on Evangelization at the 1978 National Workshop on Christian Unity. Both Hastings and I were present when a participant asked why Protestants speak of Evangelism, and Catholics Evangelization. There was a silence, and then Hastings explained that, during his participation in the synod, this explanation was given: Evangelicals stress the exact moment when one accepts Jesus as Lord and Savior. This moment then becomes a solid reference point. Catholics stress the ongoing action of accepting Jesus, and thus use an action noun, the continuing process of evangelization.<sup>3</sup> I suspect Francis' call for a daily encounter could help both Catholics and Evangelical Protestants converge.

I may be reading too much into Francis' intention. But I'm convinced that the outcome of Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics both studying this letter will push us into convergence regarding our daily encounter with Christ for the sake of sharing the Gospel. For me, this is all the more important because of the statement of Dr. James Hastings Nichols, after he had participated as a Presbyterian observer in the first session of Vatican II: "Even the best of liturgical scholarship, pastoral concern, theological power may not suffice today. All the resources of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism together will be strained to interpret and convey Biblical realities to the modern masses, dominated by the mentality of a technological industrialized age."<sup>4</sup>

From Evangelical Protestants in #3, let us look at Eastern Orthodoxy, strongly presented in the section on ecumenism (#244-46) as "but one example" of what we can learn from other Christian Churches: "their experience of synodality" (244) in relationship to Roman Catholic collegiality of the bishops. At Vatican II, the bishops, theologians and experts all focused on restoring to our bishops more authority as a body, which had been lessened by Vatican I's ending before the definition of papal infallibility could be balanced by its integration into the college of bishops. Francis notes elsewhere in the letter that the pope, and more importantly, in my opinion, "the central structures of the universal church" need to work much better with the bishops. His observation in #32 that "We have made little progress in this regard" is unusual in papal documents. They rarely admit a lack of progress. I could almost hear Protestant and Orthodox expressions of delight over this honesty.

For an excellent, short and readable explanation of synodality, see Father Ron Roberson, CSP, "Orthodox Church Highlights Synodality."<sup>5</sup>

Catholics speak of the problem of Rome being the center, and the rest of Catholicism "the peripheries."<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to lessen this problem, Francis goes geometric on us, asking us to consider the Church as a "polyhedron" (#236). It will be very interesting to see what our brother and sister Christian Churches make of this effort to insure that "each part preserves its distinctiveness," thus lessening the tendency for Rome, the other four traditional Patriarchal Centers, or even the national episcopal conferences to swallow up especially the sections of the Church which are either hurting or creating new initiatives and consequently misunderstandings with "the center."

In #33, Francis uses another expression, which, in the English translation, may have our brother and sister Christians chuckling. We call it "The Seven Last Words of the Church," when a rigid disciplinarian says "We have never done it this way." Francis' expression of criticism is "We have always done it this way." Instead, he wants "Pastoral ministry in a missionary key" to be bold, creative and communal. In the section on ecumenism (#244) he expresses more clearly than in any previous papal document that we must learn from other Christians: not just about being better informed, but "reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us" (246). We have progressed from the attitude of expecting that all Christians would return to the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church, to a more humble attitude that we are on pilgrimage together, each having not so much gifts, but necessities which the other needs, in order for us to be the Family of God.

From the very beginning of #244 to the end of #246, Francis looks at the needs of the modern world, and how our divisions as Christians frustrate our "credibility" (244). Our search for Christian unity is "urgent," and the divisions give rise to "ridicule...and scandal" (246). May each of us take to heart his plea that we "progress decidedly toward common expressions of proclamation, service and witness" (#246). Dr. Nichols, I suspect, is smiling from above at Francis' attempt to move all Christians to greater unity, for the sake of mission.

The coming Synod on the Family has already attracted the attention of the Association of Interchurch Families, in their search for greater flexibility of Eucharistic sharing.<sup>7</sup> I have written previously that we seriously overemphasize one of the truths of intercommunion, while neglecting the other. Yes, the Eucharist is the sign of unity in Christ, so it cannot be shared ordinarily with those who do not believe substantially as we do. But the Eucharist is also the cause of unity, and so we neglect the documents which say that, in cases of need, sharing is "commended." The word is not "tolerated," or "allowed."<sup>8</sup>

When Francis states "The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak" (#47, with a powerful footnote citing Sts. Ambrose and Cyril of Alexandria), I believe he is already having an effect on pastors and bishops who previously hesitated to widen the times of need. Let us pray that the Synod on the Family may find it opportune to make the Eucharist more accessible for divorced Catholics, for Protestants in interchurch marriages, etc. And may our example make it easier for Catholics in countries like Greece and Russia to be welcomed for Communion during Orthodox liturgies.

The English Methodist David Carter has noticed the "intriguing section on the evangelizing power of popular piety" (#'s 122-26)<sup>9</sup> Here is another area where study and sharing among our Churches will promote both unity and mission.

I hope we will hear more about how Francis treats the relationship between Ecumenism and Social Justice. At the end of #183, he senses the need for working with "other Churches and Ecclesial Communities" in the fight for justice. My fear is that Social Justice, with its many urgent areas of concern, is gobbling up Ecumenism. Practically every parish has a committee of some form or other working for social justice. Does it have a similar committee working for the unity of the Churches in the neighborhood?

I also look for a study of his use of the Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism in this letter: he cites it in #'s 24, 38, and 192. The Constitution on the Church is cited much more frequently, and it too has important ecumenical sections. If one looks for references to the Holy Spirit, the letter probably teaches more and at length about the Third Person of the Trinity than any previous papal document. Both the Eastern Orthodox and the Catholic Charismatics should find this noteworthy.

May this very personal and vital treatment of Christian unity find a large audience. It should help restore Ecumenism as a force for the Proclamation of the Joy of the Gospel.

- <sup>1</sup>. Stephen Bevans, SVD, "Mission, Vatican II, and Today's Missionary Church," Mission Update 23 (Spring, 2014, #1): 6-10, adapted from "Revisiting Mission at Vatican II: Theology and Practice for Today's Missionary Church," Theological Studies, June 2013.
- <sup>2</sup>. "Answer to Our Prayers," Christianity Today, March 14, 2013, website only.
- <sup>3</sup>. For the full account, see Harry Winter, OMI, Strengthening or Dividing, Sources, (Buffalo, NY: Keller Bros., 2003), p. 37; website [www.harrywinter.org](http://www.harrywinter.org), Five Ways page.
- <sup>4</sup>. James Hastings Nichols, Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1969), p. 169. I cannot recommend this book too highly, for examining all the strands of worship.
- <sup>5</sup>. Ron Roberson, CSP, "Orthodox Church Highlights Synodality," April 1, 2014, USCCBLOG.
- <sup>6</sup>. See for example Paul Philibert, OP, "When Not in Rome--Lessons from the Peripheries of the Church," America, March 24, 2014, pp. 22-23.
- <sup>7</sup>. See [www.interchurchfamilies.org](http://www.interchurchfamilies.org).
- <sup>8</sup>. Harry E. Winter, OMI, "Anniversary of Communion on the Moon, July 20, 1969," Ecumenical Trends 42 (Sept. 2013, #8): 14/126-15/127.
- <sup>9</sup>. David Carter, "Some Ecumenical Implications of Evangelii Gaudium," Ecumenical Trends 43 (March 2014, #3): 1/33-8/40, 14/46-15/47.