



# Spreading the Joy of the Gospel

By STEPHEN BEVANS, SVD

I fell in love with Pope Francis during his inauguration as pope on March 19, 2013. I already had been pretty impressed when, appearing on the balcony of St. Peter's immediately after his election, he asked the thousands of people gathered there to pray for him before he gave them his first papal blessing. But during the procession to the altar for his inauguration Mass, when he stopped the popemobile and went over to embrace — so tenderly — a man who was completely paralyzed, I fell in love with him.

Here was a pope that the church needed today. Here was a pope, as the next weeks and months proceeded, who spoke constantly of tenderness and mercy, who washed the feet of juvenile prison detainees — among them, Muslims and women — and who, when asked why he did not live in the apostolic palace, is said to have shot back a question: “Isn't ‘apostolic palace’ an oxymoron?” Here was a man who, as he had exhorted priests to do as well, had acquired the “smell of the sheep.”

Francis has talked a lot, in his young pontificate, about evangelization. Sadly, we Catholics tend to think of evangelization in rather negative terms — people knocking on the door and asking, “Have you been saved?” Or, as I see every time I go into the Chicago Loop, someone with a microphone standing on the corner of State and Jackson streets warning people that Jesus is coming soon, red hot in anger toward sinners.

But this is a caricature of what evangelization means. Evangelization is, literally, sharing with people the good news that God is a God of incredible love and mercy, who can lead us to a life of

meaningfulness and joy. This is the love embodied in Jesus in his life and ministry and expressed most radically by his giving his life for us on the cross, a life that broke the bonds of death in his resurrection. It is a love embodied, as well, in Pope Francis. This is why any reflection on Pope Francis' understanding of evangelization has to start with the man himself.

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Pope Francis personifies the joy of the Gospel and writes eloquently about it in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, a truly extraordinary document he issued in late 2013.<sup>1</sup>

In 2012, the bishops of the world met in Rome to discuss what they called “The New Evangelization.” It is customary for popes to write a document in the wake of these kinds of meetings, and



Illustration by Lorraine Tuson



in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis accordingly clarifies and summarizes what the bishops had been saying. But then he goes beyond.

Francis sketches, in rather vivid detail, how he thinks the church should evangelize. For him, the Gospel message is one of irrepressible joy, a message that transforms a person and makes her whole. And this is a message embodied in Francis.

A long time ago, I read a line from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* that has always struck me. As far as Nietzsche was concerned, Christians don't look redeemed. But this is not the case with Pope Francis. He does look redeemed. And this is what he calls the church to, as well. We need to look redeemed. We

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need to show the world that, as the Latin American bishops put it, "life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating it to others."<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis embodies evangelization in his person; we, the church, must embody it as well. It's not enough to preach about Christ and tell people about the joy that the Gospel brings. We Christians — in our ordinary lives — need to demonstrate that joy and fullness of life by the way we live.

Evangelization today, then, is more about being than about doing or speaking. The church grows, writes Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, not by high-pressure tactics or even less by threatening people with eternal punishment, but by appearing "as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet." It grows, in a line from Pope John Paul II that Francis quotes, "by attraction."

#### **A CHURCH WITH OPEN DOORS**

Francis writes about how the church should be "a mother with an open heart," the house of the

father of the prodigal son in Luke's parable, "with doors always wide open." In a homily he gave a few weeks after Easter in 2014, Pope Francis spoke of the church's ministry as "door-keeping," always greeting people, always meeting them, but "never the closed door," never barring entrance. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he writes that the church is "not a tollhouse," but "the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems." Even sacraments like the Eucharist should not be a closed door. It is not "a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak," he says.

In the Sept. 30, 2013, interview by fellow Jesuit Antonio Spadaro for *America* magazine, Pope Francis spoke of the church as a "field hospital after a battle." He could just as easily have used the image of an emergency room. As one theologian noted, the important word in this description is "field." The church often has referred to itself as a healer, but the pope's image says something even more important in terms of evangelization. The church should, first of all, be interested in the basics, and not burden people with what is not absolutely necessary. In a

field hospital, in an emergency room, "it is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else," the pope said.

The pope goes on to speak of the church's ministers as women and men who need to accompany people "like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans, and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin." We have seen the pope, during the short time he has been in office, reaching out to those whom the church has traditionally placed on its margins: homosexuals, divorced and remarried Catholics, couples married outside the church. "The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow," he told Spadaro.<sup>3</sup>

#### **A GOD OF MERCY AND TENDERNESS**

Francis, I believe, can be so open, so joyful, so "redeemed looking" because he is deeply convinced that the heart of the Gospel is the good news of a loving, tender and merciful God who can transform humankind and all of creation. Early on in *Evangelii Gaudium*, he quotes Thomas

Aquinas, who wrote that “it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree.” Further on, Francis writes that “the Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.” This is the key, the center, to evangelization, and why the church should make itself so open and attractive. Rather than rules and strictures, for which the church is only too well known, everything should begin with the reality of God’s love and God’s active work of salvation.

#### **A LIFE-GIVING MESSAGE**

This joyful way of being is the *sine qua non* of evangelization. If the church isn’t attractive, it just won’t attract. And if people can’t open up to the Gospel, they cannot be the women and men that they have the potential to be. But being attractive doesn’t mean that Christians have to cave in to the values of contemporary society — not at all, as Pope Francis insists in a rather long section of *Evangelii Gaudium* — it means that they have to demonstrate clearly by their lives that the values of the Gospel are actually life-giving, even though they may not be easy to live by.

Pope Francis’s fellow Jesuit, the great theologian Karl Rahner, speaks of a paradox in this regard. He says that, ironically, the more one is open to God and to the Gospel, the more human and free one becomes. Francis might very well be alluding to this paradox when he quotes the Latin American bishops in one of the opening paragraphs of *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others.”<sup>4</sup>

The kind of evangelization that Pope Francis calls for, then, is not a compromise with contemporary culture, but a commitment to speak to it honestly and relevantly. In every culture — even pretty secular ones like ours in the United States — there are “positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived.”<sup>5</sup> Keeping this in mind, “we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness,” Francis says.

Just because an expression or an idea is “orthodox,” Francis says, does not give it evangelizing power. In fact, such language may have the oppo-

site effect — it might give people “a false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian. In this way, we hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance. This is the greatest danger.” So learning to speak clearly and honestly and relevantly — what we sometimes call inculturation — is at the heart of a faithful and effective evangelization.

Pope Francis has a long section on the homily in *Evangelii Gaudium* in which he insists that preachers should prepare well, and do it with “an ear to the people.” Those who preach need to do so in a way that “sets hearts on fire.” Who knows who is in the congregation — a father mourning a fallen son, a widow seeking meaning in life, a person dealing with a serious or fatal illness, a young woman who has just fallen in love. Homilies are the place where inculturation must take place. Christians and other attendees at Christian services have a right to a worthy homily, he says.

#### **POOR AND FOR THE POOR**

Pope Francis insists, too, that evangelization has a radical social dimension. “An authentic faith,” he writes, “— which is never comfortable or completely personal — always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.”

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First and foremost, Francis says, Christians must reach out to the poor of this world. In very strong terms, he condemns the “disposable culture” which he sees spreading throughout the world, the result of a “culture of prosperity” and an “idolatry of money” which deadens people to the plight of the world’s majority. People are not just oppressed or exploited; they are simply forgotten, “the outcast, the ‘leftovers.’” And so action on behalf of justice for these forgotten, in continuity with the great social justice tradition of the church, is very much at the center of what evangelization means for Francis.

Francis is no simple socialist. He speaks of



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those in business as part of a “noble profession.” His only caution is that business must be about the common good of all, and not engaged in for the profit of a few. To be a church faithful to the tradition of Catholic social teaching, Francis says, means to be “a Church which is poor and for the poor.” He calls for Christians to be evangelized by the poor, and says that evangelization “is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church’s pilgrim way.”

Francis’s vision is the vision of John Paul II, whose hope was that “in every Christian community the poor feel at home. Would not this approach be the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the kingdom?”<sup>6</sup> We must work for justice and the dignity of all, Francis says, but — going back to being having priority over doing — we need to be a church that demonstrates our commitment to the poor.

An increasing part of Catholic social teaching in the last several years has been a concern for cosmic and ecological wholeness. Francis spoke eloquently in his inaugural homily about “protecting creation,” and he emphasizes, though briefly, in *Evangelii Gaudium* that “the earth is our common home, and all of us are brothers and sisters.” Evangelization is ultimately not only concern about the welfare of human beings, but also of all creatures on this earth and in the entire creation. Pope Francis will soon publish a papal encyclical on ecology and the care of creation, and this aspect of evangelization will no doubt be further clarified.

**CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS AS EVANGELIZERS**

What might all of this mean for women and men involved in Catholic health care institutions? It might mean that such institutions commit themselves to being environments that cultivate — in the powerful phrase of Pope Francis — the “culture of encounter,” where the doors are always open, where the essentials of Christian faith and values are apparent, where the mercy and tenderness of God are palpable, where the poor are treated with dignity, where every employee radiates joy.

Evangelization is not something that official “church people” do. It is something to which every Christian is called. Pope Francis exudes the joy of the Gospel, and he calls us to be people of joy ourselves, spreading the joy of the Gospel by the way we live our lives.

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**NOTES**

1. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).
2. Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *Concluding Document* (Aparecida, Brazil: 2007) 360. [www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf](http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf).
3. Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America*, Sept. 30, 2013, [www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview](http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview).
4. Aparecida Concluding Document, 360.
5. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania* (Nov. 22, 2001), 16. [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20011122\\_ecclesia-in-oceania\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20011122_ecclesia-in-oceania_en.html).
6. John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Jan. 6, 2001), 50.

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