

A POPULAR, ACCESSIBLE STYLE

"The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus." So begins Pope Francis' first letter (or Apostolic Exhortation) to the Church, published in November 2013. Over the next 12 weeks, we will be taking a closer look at this letter, noting its main themes and reflecting on its meaning for our own lives and the life of our parishes. Pope Francis writes in a more popular, accessible style than his predecessors, often using vivid images to make his point. The central theme is a new evangelisation based on the joy that comes from knowing the Lord.

For Pope Francis, evangelisation is not simply about personal conversion and salvation, but allowing the transforming power of Christ to permeate the whole of society, the whole of the world. His message looks at various ways of evangelising, some of which might seem surprising if we believe that we have to talk about God or persuade people to believe, in order to evangelise. Each week, we will read the pope's own words, reflect on the challenge posed to us individually or to our parish, and have a pause to pray.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

I invite all 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. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord."

Jesus Christ is for us all, and to those who struggle with faith, he does not demand it, but requires simply an openness. Those who do encounter the Lord will be joyful and, as will be noted later in the series, are already evangelising simply by seeking and welcoming his presence.

This is a daily duty, not simply something undertaken once which thereafter becomes automatic.

LENT WITHOUT EASTER

T here are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realise of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.

We don't have to smile all the time in order to be joyful. Real joy isn't just a feeling, or something we do, it's an orientation of our life. Knowing that God personally and infinitely loves us changes how we live. The challenge for us is that people should be able to see from our faces whether we are living and spreading the Gospel. Pope Francis writes, "Consequently, an

evangeliser must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!" When we pray, when we come together for Mass, when we read the Scriptures, we must seek the encounter with Christ which is essential to our life of faith, and which is the source of our deep joy. The way we celebrate Mass together, for example, should reflect our joy, along with a profound sense of reverence in the face of the mystery amongst us: the presence of Christ. If, as is possible, we lack a sense of Christ's presence; if we're not sure whether or not we're having that vital encounter, we pray to the Lord trusting that our prayer will be heard. In this way, waiting on him, we become more attuned to his presence, and deeper joy will be ours.



PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Lord, help me to believe in your presence, even when it seems you are not near. Fill my heart

with the joy of knowing you, so that others might learn of your love by looking at my life. Let me live as an Easter person, knowing you are alive, and call me to life. Amen.

PARISH POINTERS

- This series could help you as a parish reflect on the issues Pope Francis raises
- Can you find others in your parish who will pray the Pause for Prayer each day? ■

Based on paragraphs 1-17 of The Joy of the Gospel

7 September 2014 – 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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FIRST Letter

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Season colour: **GREEN**

SERIES: The Joy of the Gospel

In this series, **Fr Ed Hone, C.Ss.R.** examines Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*

Today's readings:
Ezk 33:7-9
Ps 94
Rm 13:8-10
Mt 18:15-20



EVERYTHING MUST SERVE THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Last week we reflected on the joy we experience in our encounter with the Lord, and how this joy is a mark of his presence. Pope Francis identifies this joy as a “missionary joy,” associated with sharing the Good News. This missionary activity of the Church is God’s activity, and cannot be precisely dictated or controlled. As Pope Francis says, “God’s word is unpredictable in its power...and the Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking.”

This means that our sharing the Gospel with others should be exciting as well as joyful — setting God’s word loose on an unsuspecting world! The pope is clear, however, that we cannot share our faith without getting involved in the often messy lives of others. He writes, “An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelisers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. Spreading our faith is never easy.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

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 evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.

In other words, the Holy Father is calling for a change of mentality in the Church, that it takes on a whole mission orientation. As we shall see, he believes that this should happen at every single level, from the parish to the pope. But he is not calling for change for its own sake, but to serve the spread of the Gospel of Christ.

Parishes are not outdated structures, Pope Francis maintains, because they are flexible. Each parish is the presence of the Church in a particular place, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers. Whilst painting this ideal picture of the perfect parish, he wryly admits that not enough work has been done to renew parish life to fit this picture. Following on from this, the pope writes, “I encourage each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform.” Writing of bishops, he says that sometimes they must lead, sometimes walk in the midst of their flock with an “unassuming and merciful presence” and sometimes walk after them to help those who lag behind, but above all bishops must allow the flock “to strike out on new missionary paths.”

THE CONVERSION OF THE PAPACY

Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy. It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelisation.

CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

So the reform that is called for is root and branch, and is to happen in every part of the Church. The scale of the pope’s proposals begins to become clear — everything must change to better serve the mission of the Church, the Gospel of Christ.



PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Lord, may your Church be ever more faithful to the Gospel, that she be renewed, and that your salvation be known in the whole world. Amen.

PARISH POINTERS

- Have a parish conversation on The Joy of the Gospel
- Think about ways of making your parish more missionary. ■

Based on paragraphs 18-33 of The Joy of the Gospel

14 September 2014 – The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

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The Church MUST change!

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Season colour: **RED**

SERIES: The Joy of the Gospel

In this series, **Fr Ed Hone, C.Ss.R.** examines Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*

Today’s readings:
 Num 21:4-9
 Ps 77
 Phil 2:6-11
 Jn 3:13-17



FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIALS

The context for Pope Francis' call for Church reform that we looked at last week is to promote the mission of the Church. He is quite clear that we should "adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion." This means that the message we share must focus on the essentials, what is "most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary."

IN HIS OWN WORDS

First, it needs to be said that in preaching the Gospel a fitting sense of proportion has to be maintained. This would be seen in the frequency with which certain themes are brought up and in the emphasis given to them in preaching. For example, if in the course of the liturgical year a parish priest speaks about temperance ten times but only mentions charity or justice two or three times, an imbalance results, and precisely those virtues which ought to be most present in preaching and catechesis are overlooked. The same thing happens when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God's word.

This is a wake-up call not only to preachers (more about them soon!) but also to every Catholic. When we talk about our faith, do we focus on the essentials, or on the relatively unimportant details? If the Church becomes over-moralistic, its moral teachings not radiating the Lord's invitation of love, then "the edifice of the Church's moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards," liable to collapse.

And of course we must all practice what we preach: "...all religious teaching ultimately has to be reflected in the teacher's way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love and witness."

"Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God 'are very few.'" So we focus on what's important, and the rest will follow. In a reminder to priests, Pope Francis adds, "I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy which spurs us on to do our best."

THE WIDE-OPEN DOORS OF THE CHURCH

The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors

should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door. There are other doors that should not be closed either. Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason. This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself "the door": baptism. 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.

Pope Francis cannot alter the central teachings of the Church, but what he has done, from his first appearance on the balcony of St Peter's, is provide his own unique emphasis, and so alter the tone of Church teaching. To say that the Eucharist is not a "prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak" necessarily encourages further conversation about who should be excluded from receiving Holy Communion, and why. This new tone may disturb some, but will undoubtedly give encouragement to many others.



PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Heavenly Father, may your Church continue to be led by your Spirit into the ways of truth

and love, that she might witness to your everlasting care. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

PARISH POINTERS

- Who (if anyone) might we be excluding from our community that Christ would welcome?
- What does our parish do well? What might we do even better? ■

Based on paragraphs 34-48 of The Joy of the Gospel

21 September 2014 – 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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ALL things in a missionary key

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Season colour: **GREEN**

SERIES: The Joy of the Gospel

In this series, **Fr Ed Hone, C.Ss.R.** examines Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*

Today's readings:
Is 55:6-9
Ps 144
Phil 1:20-24,27
Mt 20:1-16

A CHURCH IMMERSSED IN THE WORLD

There are two words in common usage that appear to mean the same thing: evangelism and evangelisation. They are, however, quite different. The first refers to the personal conversion of people, the second to the bringing of the Gospel to the whole of creation, including the social and political structures of society. It is in this latter understanding that Pope Francis writes about economics, and their effects on society. This means that the focus of our faith is not merely on our own personal salvation, but on the salvation of the world.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.

Here the focus is clearly on the Church being wholly immersed in the world, not locked in its buildings, or a prisoner of its fears. The first people the Church should look to, according to Francis, are “the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked.” The temptation might be to call a conference to find out who are the poor and the sick who need the Church’s help. But the Holy Father urges us to resist adding to what he calls “diagnostic overload” where we are bombarded by facts, figures, charts and projections. What he calls for is, rather, an examination of reality in the light of the Gospel — looking at the world from the perspective of Jesus, acting in the spirit of Jesus. This is where some of Pope Francis’ strongest language emerges.

Invoking the Commandment Thou shalt not kill, he applies it to economic activities and structures that lead to the exclusion of the poor — “Such an economy kills.” This is a part of what he refers to as an “idolatry of money,” something which we as Christians must never espouse. Again, he speaks directly: when the economy on a national or global scale does not serve people it is the equivalent of worshipping the golden calf as the people of Israel did (Exodus 32:1-35).

NOT TO SHARE ONE’S WEALTH WITH THE POOR IS TO STEAL FROM THEM

Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs...Money must serve, not rule!...the rich must help, respect and promote the poor. I exhort you to the return of economics generous solidarity and to the return of economics and finance to an ethical approach which favours human beings...

For Pope Francis, the pro-life stance of the Church is more than opposition to abortion and capital punishment — it is a commitment to maintain the rights and dignity of every human person, especially those least able to help themselves. He says further inequality spawns violence, and unless this inequality is tackled, violence will be inevitable.



PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you fed the hungry, healed the sick, reached out to those on the edges of society; you emptied yourself, giving even your life, that others might live. Fill us with that same love of humanity that you have, that we might be more fully your presence in the world. Amen.

PARISH POINTERS

- Would a visitor to our parish see obvious signs of our commitment to serving the poor?
- What could we do to build our outreach to those in need, at home and abroad? ■

Based on paragraphs 49-60 of The Joy of the Gospel

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28 September 2014 – 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time



NO to a Gospel of exclusion

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Season colour: **GREEN**

SERIES: The Joy of the Gospel

In this series, Fr Ed Hone, C.Ss.R. examines Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*

Today’s readings:
Ez 18:25-28
Ps 24
Phil 2:1-11
Mt 21:28-32

