



Leaving the self behind... to encounter others

With his Apostolic Letter

Evangelii Gaudium - „The Joy of the Gospel“

Pope Francis calls on the Church to move away from self-centered concerns to meet the needs of our world in a new missionary dynamic. In his powerful down-to-earth language he invites the whole Church and each one of us, to renew our relationship with Jesus and His Word, to break out of our individualistic preoccupations and our comfortable lives and open ourselves to the needs of the poor and weak. Evangelii Gaudium addresses with great openness, what has been going wrong in our world, in the Church and in ourselves. Pope Francis, marked as he is by the spirituality of St. Ignatius, wants to lead us from “desolation”, inner darkness and sadness to “consolation”, joy and inner peace of heart. The following texts from Evangelii Gaudium are meant to inspire us during the weeks of lent to personal reflection and common sharing.

- **The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.** Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love. (Evangelii Gaudium 1+265)
- **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 life to others... Life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means. (10)
- **The great danger in today’s world,** pervaded as it is by consumerism, **is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart,** the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fade. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ. (2)
- If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to **open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence.** (264)



- Which moods and attitudes are predominant in my life? The joy to be loved by God, a desire to do good, a sense of gratitude for the gifts of every day? Or is my life rather overshadowed by sadness, loneliness and emptiness?
- Do I try to live each day attentively and consciously or do I allow myself to be carried away by the useless worries and superficial attractions of life?



Temptations of Christ's disciples today

The temptations of Jesus: the quest for satisfaction, success and power, all these are also the temptations of every human being and of the church. They can take different forms according to cultural contexts and personal situations. Pope Francis draws our attention to the temptations that those who have dedicated their lives to the service of God's kingdom encounter today: a "spiritual worldliness", a feeling of failure, a "business mentality".

- The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather **activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality** which would permeate it and make it pleasurable. As a result, work becomes more tiring than necessary, even leading at times to illness. Far from a content and happy tiredness, this is a tense, burdensome, dissatisfying and, in the end, unbearable fatigue.⁽⁸²⁾ At times our media culture and some intellectual circles convey a marked scepticism with regard to the Church's message, along with a certain cynicism. As a consequence, many pastoral workers, although they pray, develop a sort of inferiority complex which leads them to relativize or conceal their Christian identity and convictions... They end up being unhappy with who they are and what they do; they do not identify with their mission of evangelization and this weakens their commitment. They end up stifling the joy of mission with **a kind of obsession about being like everyone else** and possessing what everyone else possesses. (Evangelii Gaudium 79)
- This **practical relativism** consists in acting as if God did not exist, making decisions as if the poor did not exist, setting goals as if others did not exist, working as if people who have not received the Gospel did not exist...⁽⁸⁰⁾ Today's **obsession with immediate results** makes it hard for pastoral workers to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross. ⁽⁸²⁾
- **Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety** and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being...

It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps.⁽⁹³⁾ In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time... In others, this spiritual worldliness lurks behind a fascination with social and political gain, or pride in their ability to manage practical affairs, or an obsession with programmes of self-help and self-realization. It can also translate into a concern to be seen, into a social life full of appearances, meetings, dinners and reception. It can also lead to a business mentality, caught up with management, statistics, plans and evaluations whose principal beneficiary is not God's people but the Church as an institution. ⁽⁹⁵⁾



- Which text reflects my personal temptations?
- What is essential for my own Christian identity? What is secondary and less important?



Hearing the cry of the poor and responding

„I want a Church which is poor and for the poor“. The option for the poor was a central concern for the Church in Latin America. Yet too often bishops and priests have stood on the side of the rich and the privileged. For Pope Francis a concern for the poor is the trade mark of the mission of the Church and of all who want to follow Christ. These texts from Evangelii Gaudium could make us question what unnecessary luxury is keeping us away from the poor and who are the poor and the weak that need our attention.

- ✿ We incarnate the duty of **hearing the cry of the poor** when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others. (193)... Sometimes it is a matter of **hearing the cry of entire peoples, the poorest peoples of the earth**, since “peace is founded not only on respect for human rights, but also on respect for the rights of peoples”. (Evangelii Gaudium 190)
- ✿ If we, who are God’s means of hearing the poor, turn deaf ears to this plea, we oppose the Father’s will and his plan... **A lack of solidarity towards his or her needs will directly affect our relationship with God.** (187)
- ✿ Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an **instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor**, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid. (187)
- ✿ Our commitment does **not consist exclusively in activities** or programmes of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, **but above all an attentiveness** which considers the other “in a certain sense as one with ourselves”. This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith... The poor person, when loved, “is esteemed as of great value”, and this is what makes the authentic option for the poor differ from any other ideology, from any attempt to exploit the poor for one’s own personal or political interest. (199) The worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. (200)
- ✿ It is essential to draw near to **new forms of poverty and vulnerability**, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits. I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others. (210)
- ✿ Jesus’ command to his disciples: “You yourselves give them something to eat!” (Mk 6:37): it means working to **eliminate the structural causes of poverty** and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as **small daily acts of solidarity** in meeting the real needs which we encounter. (188)



- Who are the poor and the weak in my world that need my loving attention?
- How do I use my opportunities to change „the structural causes of poverty“? By participating in elections, through my consumer choices or by supporting initiatives and campaigns?



No to an economy that kills!

As archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Bergoglio witnessed the devastating social effects of the financial crisis in Argentina at the turn of the century. The same destructive dynamics he now sees at work “in the sacralized mechanisms of the prevailing economic system”. With prophetic passion he calls on all to say “No!” to an “idolatry of money” which controls rather than serves; “No!” to an economic system which excludes people from a life in dignity and treats them as outcasts; “No!” to the growing social inequality which results in rising violence.

- ☀ Today we have to say “thou shalt not kill” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.... We have created a **“throw away” culture** which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”. (Evangelii Gaudium 53)
- ☀ The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the **idolatry of money** and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose... (55) **The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits**. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of **a deified market**, which become the only rule.... A new tyranny is thus born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules. (56)
- ☀ **Solidarity** is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the **social function of property and the universal destination of goods** are realities which come before private property. The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them. These convictions and habits of solidarity, when they are put into practice, open the way to other structural transformations and make them possible. Changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, oppressive and ineffectual. (189)
- ☀ Ethics... would make it possible to bring about balance and a more humane social order. With this in mind, I encourage financial experts and political leaders to ponder the words of one of the sages of antiquity: **“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.” (John Chrysostom) (57)



- How far has my personal lifestyle been influenced by today’s “throw away culture”?
- In what way can my consumer choices support the creation of a more humane and sustainable form of economy?



A bruised Church on the move

We are used to thinking of the Church as our mother, as holy, as a “perfect society” and as the guardian of eternal truth. Sexual abuse and financial scandals have shaken this idealistic image. We are a bruised Church, “hurting and dirty”. Yet, her source of life, Jesus Christ, is “always young”, a steady source of new life, always renewing her faithful. Pope Francis invites us break our “dull categories” with “the original freshness of the Gospel” and begin to become a “Church which goes forth”.

☀ **A Church which “goes forth” is a Church whose doors are open.**

Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way... Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. (Evangelii Gaudium 46+49)

☀ **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. (49)

☀ **I want a Church which is poor and for the poor.** They have much to teach us... We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them... We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them. (198)

☀ **The Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father,** where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems. 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. These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. (47)

☀ **Christ... is for ever young and a constant source of newness...**

God constantly renews his faithful ones, whatever their age... Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always “new”. (11)

☀ **Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life** and her missionary outreach. (32)

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigour!" (109)



- Which „dull categories“ need to be renewed by the Spirit of Christ to bring forth a new missionary creativity?
- Where would a certain “decentralisation” of responsibility be meaningful and life giving in our own communities?



The hidden fruitfulness of the cross

Churches are getting empty, religious communities die out, scandals rock the credibility of the Church, a secular culture pushes religion out of the public arena, prosperity suffocates the spirit and the search for God. As Christians we find ourselves in a spiritual desert. Failure can discourage those committed to evangelisation and pastoral work. Pope Francis reminds us that the cross is a source of living water, that no work of love, no generous endeavour is ever lost. The desert is the very place where we can rediscover the deep joy that comes from total trust in God.

- ✿ **Christian triumph is always a cross**, yet a cross which is at the same time a victorious banner borne with aggressive tenderness against the assaults of evil. The evil spirit of defeatism is brother to the temptation to separate, before its time, the wheat from the weeds; it is the fruit of an anxious and self-centred lack of trust. (Evangelii Gaudium 85)
- ✿ Those who entrust themselves to God in love will bear good fruit (cf. Jn 15:5). This **fruitfulness is often invisible, elusive and unquantifiable**. We can know quite well that our lives will be fruitful, without claiming to know how, or where, or when. We may be sure that none of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for others. No single act of love for God will be lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted. All of these encircle our world like a vital force. Sometimes it seems that our work is fruitless, but mission is not like a business transaction or investment, or even a humanitarian activity. It is not a show where we count how many people come as a result of our publicity; it is something much deeper, which escapes all measurement. It may be that the Lord uses **our sacrifices to shower blessings in another part of the world** which we will never visit. (279)
- ✿ In some places a **spiritual "desertification" has evidently come about**, as the result of attempts by some societies to build without God or to eliminate their Christian roots. In those places "the Christian world is becoming sterile.... In other countries, violent opposition to Christianity forces Christians to hide their faith in their own beloved homeland. This is another painful kind of desert. But family and the workplace can also be a parched place where faith nonetheless has to be preserved and communicated. Yet it is starting from the experience of this desert, from this void, that we can again discover the joy of believing, its vital importance for us men and women. **In the desert we rediscover the value of what is essential for living**; thus in today's world there are innumerable signs, often expressed implicitly or negatively, of the thirst for God, for the ultimate meaning of life. And in the desert people of faith are needed who, by the example of their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive". (86)
- ✿ In these situations **we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink**. At times, this becomes a heavy cross, but it was from the cross, from his pierced side, that our Lord gave himself to us as a source of living water. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope! (86)



- What desert experiences have I made in my own life... in my inner self and in situations I have lived through?
- Where have I found in my deserts „sources of living water“, „an invisible fruitfulness“, „the joy of believing“?



Passing on the treasure

The Second Vatican Council made every Christian responsible for the proclamation of the Gospel. Pope Francis wants the whole Church to be in a permanent state of evangelisation, not as a duty or a burden, but motivated by the personal experience of the love of Christ and the joy that comes from it. This is always possible for each and every Christian, either by open und direct proclamation of the Gospel or simply by the witness of fraternal affection and deep concern for the poor and the weak, leading in time to the new fusion of faith and modern culture.

- ✿ **To evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world.** ¹⁷⁶⁾
Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey. ⁽¹²⁷⁾ Life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means”. (Evangelii Gaudium 10)
- ✿ **The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus** which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him.... The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others. ⁽²⁶⁴⁾
- ✿ **We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive,** and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach... If we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel, surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people’s hearts. ⁽²⁶⁵⁾
- ✿ **It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but “by attraction”...**
Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. ⁽¹⁴⁾ I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). ⁽⁹⁹⁾
- ✿ The ultimate aim should be that the Gospel, as preached in categories proper to each culture, will create **a new synthesis with that particular culture...** ⁽¹²⁹⁾
Each people is the creator of their own culture and the protagonist of their own history... The ultimate aim should be that the Gospel, as preached in categories proper to each culture, will create a new synthesis with that particular culture. ⁽¹²²⁾ The faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture. ⁽¹¹⁸⁾



- What can I contribute so that my family, my community and my parish attracts others by our witness of mutual affection?
- The modern means of social communication have created a new culture, particularly among the younger generation. How can the message of Jesus find fresh expressions in this new culture?