

## **The Joy of the Gospel – a personal sharing of the meaning of evangelization**

**Address to students at Saint Eugenia 2014-02-23**

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During the end of the year 1999 and the whole of 2000, the Holy See invited different groups to the Vatican to celebrate the jubilee of the new millennium. One of these gatherings was with representatives from all the larger faith traditions in the world in October 1999. The opening of the background paper reads as follows: “Joy is something to be shared. Just as families like to invite friends and neighbours to join them on happy occasions, so Christians will naturally wish to invite their friends and neighbours of other religions and faith traditions to share their joy in all manner of ways, in religious celebrations, symbolic rituals and festive occasions. It should be obvious that it is not demanded of people of other religions that they share the belief of Christians in Jesus Christ as the Son of God made man and the Saviour of the world. They are being invited to share the joy of Christians.”

The point is, are we really joyful? Or are we mere “sourpusses” as Pope Francis warns us of in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* which was published in November last year. The whole paragraph is worth quoting: “One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, “sourpusses”. Nobody can go off to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents. While painfully aware of our own frailties, we have to march on without giving in, keeping in mind what the Lord said to Saint Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 *Cor* 12:9). 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.”

The militaristic language may strike us a bit, but it certainly describes a person who is prepared to go with a light packing to meet his or her friends and foes with a smile and openness. It is a person who has time to meet with the other, to take the opportunity to dialogue, to share experiences and hopes as well as fears. Do we really believe in the words of the Lord to Saint Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”? Or do we prefer to rely on a heavy packing full of arguments and guarantees, but without joy and lightness? And the pope is encouraging us to be aggressive and tender at the same time! That means that we have to meet all and everybody with a tender

attentiveness, where we cannot pay any attention to our own ego, our own fulfilment or our own packing. Our whole society, and us included, has a strong tendency to separate the wheat from the weeds before starting out on our journey. We want to have guarantees to be safe and sound all along the way. We want people to be convinced of our ideas, our faith, long before we even meet them – and behold, they should also be without blame. We expect them to be perfect, in the image of ourselves! Yes, how much trust is there in our faith?

One of my theology teachers at Institut Catholique in Paris in the beginning of the 1980ties once burst out to us: “You are all little heathens and you will hardly ever become Christians! You may believe in the Creed, but you do not have faith!” I am afraid she was absolutely on the spot and I must admit that it has taken me years to discover what real faith is about. And when I get a glimpse of real faith, I get deeply scared because it asks of me to get rid of every burden, be it comfortable ones as well as heavy anxiety. It asks of me to be challenged by all and everybody I meet with an open mind and to be evangelized by people whom I least of all expect to be evangelizers. To live faith and to be evangelized I have to give up of being a control-freak. Humans and reality are never one hundred percent logic or rational – if they are really alive, they are imaginative, always ready to take a new path if it shows to be better, healthier and happier.

So what is faith and how can I be part of the evangelizing movement and above all, how can I be evangelized myself?

We believe that the Church is mission or otherwise she is not at all. It is the nature of the church to be mission, and *we* are the church. And if we are not evangelizing, that is bringing good news, glad tidings, to the world, to our neighbours, we are simply not church! And there is no use in teaching the doctrine of the church to develop faith in a person. That will merely transmit some beliefs and they will easily lose their meaning if they are not built on faith. Pope Francis warns us of becoming “mummies in a museum” (EG § 83) and says “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 this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few” (EG § 95).

Obviously, there are whole libraries on faith! Is it possible to put some few words on it, to explain it by some short sentences? First of all it is something deeper than doctrine or Christian beliefs, it is the very ground of life, of existence, of the reality we are living in. It is our trust in reality, if we dare being in reality at all, if we dare looking at it with non-judgmental eyes, without pre-coloured glasses. It is the horizon which becomes larger the more we approach

it, becoming more distant while still attracting us deeper into its being. It may be God who says “I shall be whom I shall be”<sup>1</sup>, the ever-expanding universe. If we are created in the image and likeness of God, we are part of the same evolution, we are on our way of becoming who we are, on our way to that which we are called to be, to fulfilment as human beings.

But faith cannot be sustained on its own ground. Faith needs to go hand in hand with hope and love. Hope is our capacity to be transformed, changed, but also our capacity to change things for the better ourselves. It is the capacity to read history and the present time in the light of the future, a better future, whatever name we put on it. It is the capacity of imagination, of research, of being active partners in the creation.

Love is more difficult to put words on. It is not charity, although charity is part of love. Love is not something you do, it is something you are. In one way it is like faith, the trust you are permeated with, the openness to all and everything. Love is being void of fear for that which is new, unknown, the other. Love is to meet the other with a tender attentiveness, to hear and see what the other has experienced in life. It is to share experiences on the deepest level possible.

Faith, hope and love are usually called “theological virtues” in the theological jargon. Theological, maybe, but not necessarily Christian! And that should be underlined in red! Faith, hope and love is something we all need to grow in, whether we belong to faith traditions or claim to be agnostics or atheists. The big challenge today is that the ever present materialism is threatening us not to take the necessary time and pain to ground our lives in faith, hope and love. As I said, we are control-freaks. Faith, hope and love are stifled, strangled, by a too heavy packing on our backs. And that packing can contain all sorts of things! It can be an ostentatious liturgy, it can be doctrines in form of dead letters, it can be material possessions, it can be jealousy, careerism, nostalgia, you name it! We all know all too well, what is our own heavy packing ... To exercise in faith, hope and love is to convert that packing into something lighter, more joyful, imaginative and transformative. And then we enter the sphere of evangelization.

With a too heavy and deadly packing we can never ever be evangelized nor evangelize anyone around us. And this is the core challenge of being Christian, of being church. So, with a light packing we are going off to the front, to continue with the metaphor of Pope Francis, and I quote from the famous interview that the Jesuit journalist Antonio Spadaro made with him last year:

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Mos 3:14, The New Interpreter’s Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994; note *b* to the New International Version, p. 708, note *a* to the New Revised Standard Version, p. 708, commentary p. 714

“When I insist on the frontier, I am referring in a particular way to the need for those who work in the world of culture to be inserted into the context in which they operate and on which they reflect. There is always the lurking danger of living in a laboratory. Ours is not a ‘lab faith,’ but a ‘journey faith,’ a historical faith. God has revealed himself as history, not as a compendium of abstract truths. I am afraid of laboratories because in the laboratory you take the problems and then you bring them home to tame them, to paint them artificially, out of their context. You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious.”

So what is it to be evangelized and to evangelize? First, of all there is an in-built tension in the activity of evangelization. There is both a sort of self-proclamation, of what it is to be Christian, and an open-ended dialogue, a listening to the experiences of the other. We are not in the lab, but at the border, both mentally and physically. This is very important to underline, because Christian doctrines are culturally limited, they are only part of my context, not necessarily of the context of my partner. I simply cannot start with expounding the Christian Creed if I am staying in a Zen Buddhist monastery in the mountains of Viet Nam. And there is simply no meaning in bringing a Zen Buddhist monk or nun into the European lab of Christendom. We have to share our spiritual experiences in a concrete way, to share that which is giving real meaning to our lives, in order to have a real dialogue. One of the more fundamental church documents on this issue is *Dialogue and Proclamation* which was published in May 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples. In *Dialogue and Proclamation* we find the basic church teaching on evangelisation. These two concepts, dialogue and proclamation, are considered as “component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelising mission of the Church” (DP §2). And the conditions of an authentic dialogue we will find in an encyclical by Paul VI which he wrote in 1964, *Ecclesiam Suam*.

For Paul VI dialogue is salvation in itself and he explains it in § 70: “Here, then, is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel it is God's Word that speaks to us. That fatherly, sacred dialogue between God and man, broken off at the time of Adam's unhappy fall, has since, in the course of history, been restored. Indeed, the whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.”

And in § 81 he says that dialogue “is a way of making spiritual contact”. Then he gives four characteristics of an authentic dialogue. First of all dialogue must be clear, that what is said should be intelligible. And I quote “It is an invitation to the exercise and development of the highest spiritual and mental powers a man possesses. This fact alone would suffice to make such dialogue rank among the greatest manifestations of human activity and culture. In order to satisfy this first requirement, all of us who feel the spur of the apostolate should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom?”

The second characteristic of dialogue is that it makes no demands, but is “peaceful and has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity.” The third condition for a true dialogue is that we show confidence in the “good will of both parties to the dialogue. Hence dialogue promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites them in a mutual adherence to the Good, and thus excludes all self-seeking.” And the fourth and last characteristic is that we must be at pains to learn the sensitivities of our audience, adapt the manner of our presentation to the susceptibilities and the degrees of intelligence of our hearers. In § 85 Paul VI also states that dialogue “does not hold fast to forms of expression which have lost their meaning and can no longer stir men's minds.”

There are also different forms of dialogue (DP §§ 45-46). We all have some kind of experience of the dialogue of life, meeting the other, our brothers and sisters of other faith-traditions or of none, in the lifts of our blocks of apartments, at our working places, in the school or wherever we spend our daily lives. We meet and share our life-stories in a natural way. Then there is the dialogue of action where we defend the rights of the other, of whatever kind it may be. The dialogue of theological exchange may be something for the academics, but more and more often all of us have to explain the foundation of our faith, that which is giving us meaning in life. And then we have the dialogue of religious experience which can be the most transformative moments in our lives. And it can take a long time to digest these experiences of dialogue.

Consequently, the foundation of all evangelization is dialogue, because God is in God's self the essence of dialogue. But now we have almost retired to the lab of dialogue and so we must get out to the border or the front-line again, to the dialogue of religious experience. One of the most terrifying faith-events in my own life was at a Zen Buddhist monastery of nuns in Da-Lat in Viet Nam. I was received at the monastery by the prioress, who fortunately spoke some English, by the rather mind-boggling welcoming words “Welcome to our monastery, here we do not believe in God!” I must admit that her words silenced me for a couple of minutes! Here was a nun who had given her whole life to meditation,

to a rather primitive manual work and a life-style which was far more radical than my own. But she had faith, faith as strong as the size of the mustard seed of which Jesus said that it could move mountains.<sup>2</sup> The bewildering force of her faith is at the ground of this world's existence. During three hours of dialogue we tried our best to get rid of our prejudices of one another. She understood that I didn't believe in the God she thought I believed in, but she also evangelized me in my faith. It may not be as strong as hers, but I hope I am on my way, and she became the living word of God to me on my faith-journey.

In *Dialogue and Proclamation* it is also said that “the members of the Church and the followers of other religions find themselves to be companions on the common path which humanity is called to tread” (DP §79). This also means that evangelization is about something social, political and material. To be “companions” is to share our bread together. This is something all the popes have put high on the agenda since the Second Vatican Council, and even before that. With Pope Francis it has become almost crucial, the decisive question if you can call yourself a Christian at all. And we cannot take refuge behind a comfortable political stance to the benefit of the poor. No, Francis urges us to change our own life-style to become trustworthy in the eyes, not only of the poor, but of the world as such. This goes very far, because then, we can only rely on the contributions of the poor, and not of the rich in line with the true words of ... *who pays the piper calls the tune* ...

To be evangelized by the other demands of me to have an open, non-defensive and imaginative mind. But to evangelize in my turn is claiming even more from my willingness to convert, to be transformed. My personal life-style must be adjusted in accordance with my discourse. And it is not enough with symbolic gestures, it has to be a real every-day transformation. To proclaim the contents of our faith should make us tremble. My theology teacher back in the 80ties was right, I am still an unconverted heathen. To be an evangelizer is to be in a kind of dialogue of action because it definitely affects my closest comfort zone. And once again, it is not about changing the ways of the other, it is about changing the way I am living myself among everybody else.

But the word “action” should not make us think that we necessarily have to do things, change things around us. We are not the solution, but we should be part of the solution. To evangelize is to accept that I need the other to be fulfilled myself. It is to put mutual dependence, or inter-dependence, as a rule for our living together as humankind, to strive for a “unity in diversity” and rely on collaboration. Francis mentions this in a rather drastic way in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* “Beware of the temptation of jealousy! We

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<sup>2</sup> Matt 17:20

are all in the same boat and headed to the same port! Let us ask for the grace to rejoice in the gifts of each, which belong to all.”<sup>3</sup> It is not demanded of us to like all and everybody, or to agree with everyone, but we must admit the gifts that the other has to share with society as a whole, for the common good of us all. To evangelize is to let in the other into my space, to stir my comfort zone, to challenge my own life-style.

The dialogue of action is to strive for “social holiness”. This concept was coined by John Paul II in an address to the participants in the Plenary Assembly and the First World Congress promoted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in October 2004. He said that “this is the time for a renewed season of social holiness, for saints who manifest to the world and in the world the perennial and inexhaustible fruitfulness of the Gospel.” Earlier in the speech, the pope invited the participants to open themselves to the horizons of charity, also social and political charity, which with the grace of the Gospel “will be able to enliven the human realities of work, the economy and politics, designing the paths of peace, justice and friendship among peoples.” And the *Compendium of the Social doctrine of the Church* also affirms that “even the economy and progress can be transformed into places of salvation and sanctification. In these areas too it is possible to express a love and a solidarity that are more than human, and to contribute to the growth of a new humanity that anticipates the world to come.”<sup>4</sup>

To evangelize is to make our hands dirty, it is to accept that life is ambiguous, and so is faith, and even more our beliefs. Let us return to the interview with Pope Francis where he says that “I see the church as a field hospital after battle. 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. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.... And you have to start from the ground up.” Being church, which is being mission, is not to tick off boxes of statements of doctrine. It is to be like Jesus Christ and healing a person and daring to say to him or her that his or her faith has saved him or her. *His* or *her* faith, not mine, and certainly not anybody’s doctrines or beliefs! Francis again: “Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent. The ones who quit sometimes do it for reasons that, if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage.” And a bit further on in the interview he says that “We need to proclaim the Gospel on every street corner, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing, even with our preaching, every kind of disease and wound.”

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<sup>3</sup> EG § 99

<sup>4</sup> § 326

So what should strengthen us, carry us on, in this evangelization? First of all the conviction that all of us have the same origin and are walking towards the same destination but that we should not trouble our intellects to put too many words on that. The Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, says that “Since all men possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin, have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition.”<sup>5</sup> There is no use in speculating of what may happen after death if we just can rest in this certainty. And life will be so much easier if we leave the heavy packing beside the road and lift up our heads and can feel the liberation in our own bodies. It is only then that we can rejoice in the good news, the glad tidings, of Jesus Christ, and also be able to share this joy with others. Having left the heavy packing at the roadside we will “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”.<sup>6</sup> We are part of a living tradition, not dead letters! With faith, hope and love we are called to do that which is impossible, because nothing should be impossible for the human being created in the image and likeness of God. We must have faith in the infinity of the thought, but also in the possibility to make that thought real.

And then we can go forth with Francis when he says “For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, § 29

<sup>6</sup> EG § 11

<sup>7</sup> EG § 8