

“Evangelii Gaudium” and the Social Dimension of Evangelization



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The fourth chapter of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation is entitled, *The Social Dimension of Evangelization*. There the Pope affirms that, “if this dimension is not properly brought out, there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization” (EG, 176). The Pope is insistent on that idea and further states: “The very nature of the Church is missionary; she abounds in effective charity and a compassion which understands assists and promotes” (EG, 179).

I am convinced that this chapter provides us with elements that illuminate an aspect of our pastoral ministry that is not always lived out in an integral manner, namely, in the evangelizing dimension of social action... one that Saint Vincent was most careful in fulfilling.

After reminding us that the Kingdom of God is central to the proclamation of the Good News of Christ, Pope Francis cites the apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which was promulgated by Paul VI: “Evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social” (EG, 29). Pope Francis views this concept of “complete” from the perspective of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in 2007 in Aparecida, Brazil. The Pope refers to that document when he states, “The mission of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ has a universal destination. Its mandate of charity encompasses all dimensions of existence, all people, all environments of community life, and all peoples. Nothing human can be alien to it” (Aparecida, 284).

The pastoral initiatives of the Church in the area of social action or social-charitable action are an expression of compassion and mercy, but are often not “complete” for two reasons: first, because they are

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not the result of true community ecclesial organization, and secondly, as they do not make visible the evangelizing dimension that should be part of all pastoral activity.

The lack of organization

Vincent de Paul spoke about the lack of organization when he wrote the Rule for the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon: “The poor have suffered a great deal more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons” (CCD: XIIIb: 8). Thus, we can ask the question: does the lack of ecclesial organization in the Church's charitable activity diminish the social dimension of evangelization?

The lack of organization not only diminishes the effectiveness of the Church's charitable activity, but it also reduces the exercise of charity to the individual level of a personal decision of a believer who perhaps is more aware than others. In reality, charitable activity is a community option that involves the whole Church as she accepts and continues the mission of Jesus Christ.

The ecclesial organization of her charitable activity should not be viewed as opposed to the generous gestures that all people are capable of extending toward persons who are in need. Nevertheless, ecclesial organization makes the Church's charitable activity more effective in a twofold manner. First, such organization guarantees the evangelical and ecclesial nature of the service that is being offered, and provides greater resources for the accomplishment of that service. Second, ecclesial organization further guarantees that the Church is “doing the things the loved person commands or desires” (CCD: XI: 35). Those are the words that Vincent de Paul used to describe effective love which he viewed as more significant than affective love. I believe that in those situations in which a person, in an individual manner, reaches out to the poor... in such a situation affective love is more prominent.

Therefore, Pope Francis, after exhorting us to listen to the cries of the poor for justice, clarifies the fact that the command of Jesus, “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” (EG, 188). The organization of charity promoted by Vincent de Paul, and the work that today is being accomplished by the Vincentian Family is based on the Vincentian charism. This provided the original inspiration for what we call today as solidarity. This solidarity is the social dimension of charity.

Pope St. John Paul II described solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say

to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38). This concept enriches the principle of charity, organized in an ecclesial manner, and is in accord with the words of *Populorum Progressio* that state "such activity should involve the participation of those who are poor so that they become the protagonists of their own development" (PP, 15). This can appear as something that is difficult to do. Yet, if we place the poor on the margins of our charity and solidarity or our organization and activity, we have not brought to completion the social dimension to the process of evangelization.

The document from the Bishops' Conference at Aparecida refers to the preferential option for the poor and for those who are excluded, and stated:

"Solidarity likewise springs from our faith in Christ as a permanent attitude of encounter, brotherly and sisterly spirit, and service, which is to be manifested in visible options and gestures, primarily in defense of life and of the rights of the most vulnerable and excluded, and in continual accompaniment in their efforts to be agents for changing and transforming their situation. The Church's service of charity among the poor "is an aspect which must clearly mark the Christian life, the Church's whole activity and her pastoral planning" [*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 49]. (*Aparecida*, 394).

I am convinced that the Vincentian Family is prepared to include the poor in the task of organizing charity in a manner that strengthens the bonds of solidarity. How wonderful if we would share with one another the ways that we do this so that we might learn from one another!

The evangelizing dimension of social action

We exercise the ministry of charity through our social pastoral ministry or, as it is also called, the social-charitable activity of the Church. At times, however, we reduce such activity to simple social activity, which has much merit as it provides assistance and encourages human promotion. But all social activity undertaken by the Church should be decisively and clearly a part of the process of evangelization. For the Church, such ministry must include a preferential option for the poor, which is primarily a theological category and only secondarily a cultural, political and economical category. That fact enables us to better understand that as we evangelize the poor, we must allow ourselves to be evangelized by them as well. As Vincentians, we are not the only ones who go out to the poor in the name of Christ and represent Christ to the poor. They also come to us in the name of Jesus and represent Him to us.

That process of evangelizing the poor and being evangelized by the poor is highlighted in our Vincentian spirituality. Pope Francis also underlines that reality when he stated:

"That is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the sensus fidei, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. 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" (EG, 198).

Pope Francis even more strongly insists that, "the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care... our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care" (EG, 200). In the words of the Holy Father, we can hear the echo of Vincent's thinking. Here I want to affirm and recognize the fact that there are difficulties in living out such a commitment.

At times, because of the need for specialized professionals in the area of economics, sociology and community development, we place the Church's social-charitable activity in the hands of very capable people. However, those persons are often not people of faith, lacking a missionary understanding of their vocation, both of which are essential to the poor and the communities that will benefit from their activity. When we are committed to social pastoral ministry, what factors can lead us to neglect the evangelizing dimension of that ministry?

- That neglect can come about as the result of an incomplete vision of the human person, specifically, we have forgotten the principle that Pope Paul VI highlighted in his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*: "True development must be directed to all persons and to the whole person" (14). The spiritual dimension of the human person will often be ignored or devalued in those pastoral plans that place primary importance on the results desired on an organizational, economical, and political level.

- Such neglect can also occur when we forget Vincent's image he used for serving the poor, i.e., looking at them as both sides of the coin. When we do not give importance to looking at both sides of the coin, then we place limitations on ourselves and begin to see the situation of the poor as a difficult challenge to confront. Thus, we immediately begin to devote all our energy to that task. However, if we fail to see ourselves in the presence of Christ as

we stand before the poor, it becomes very easy to feel no need to help the poor, and to recognize the fact that they are the beloved of God.

- I believe there is a need for greater clarity in explaining the various dimensions of the Church's pastoral activity. Traditionally, this activity has been analogous to the threefold ministry of Christ as Priest, Prophet, and King, but that does not provide us with a precise understanding of Christ's role in the Church. As the document of Aparecida noted, "Therefore, Christ the Priest is the foundation of the Church's liturgical ministry; Christ the Word-Prophet is the foundation of the Church's evangelizing ministry; Christ the Servant is the foundation of the Church's social ministry; Christ the Good Shepherd is the foundation for the Church's collaborative ministry that creates the Church as communion and the parish as a community of communities" (Aparecida, 169-170).

Christ, the Servant, who came 'not to be served, but to serve' (Mk 10:45). Jesus is not only a model for ordained ministers or consecrated religious, but one for all believers. This is also true of those who are ministers of the Church's social pastoral activity, and those who live the ministry of charity as an expression of the service the Master demands of them (Jn 13:13-17). If we are clear about these dimensions of the Church's pastoral activity, then, as the Church is by nature missionary, we will also learn to make all our pastoral activity an evangelizing activity.

Mercy

Allow me to conclude with a commentary on number 193 of *Evangelii Gaudium*. The Pope begins that section with a reference to the beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, because they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7). He then cites the letter of Janes and reminds us that "mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jn 2:13). Those words follow the thinking that is expressed in the wisdom literature that attributes a salvific value to mercy. Pope Francis then quotes St. Augustine, who affirmed that, "as in the event of our being in peril from fire we would certainly run to the water in order to get the fire extinguished; so, if some flame of sin has risen from our own stack, and if we are troubled on that account, when an opportunity has been given for a most merciful work, we should rejoice in it, as if a fountain were offered us in order that by it the conflagration which had burst forth might be extinguished" (De Catechizandis Rudibus, 22).

The image of running to put out a fire is very familiar to us as members of the Vincentian Family. Vincent used that image and applied it

to the urgent need to minister on behalf of the poor. What is important here, however, is the motive that should impel us to minister in the manner of mercy. The concept of that word has been so confused and distorted, as the very origin of that word has been clouded, namely, God is merciful. Jesus demands us to "be merciful as the heavenly Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). The concept of mercy has also been misunderstood because people have not found a way to live that virtue with the proper balance between affective love (from the perspective of the heart that loves the poor) and effective love (from the perspective of the misery that crushes the poor).

Vincent de Paul's sense of justice followed that of Thomas Aquinas, and so for Vincent, mercy is not only a question of showing good will to those who are poor. It is also a question of justice. Thus we read and reflect on the well-known words that Vincent wrote to one of his first missionaries: "May God grant us the grace of softening our hearts toward the wretched creatures and realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy!" (CCD: VIII: 115). The first part of that phrase resounds like an echo in the words of Pope Francis: "We incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others" (EG, 193).

It is hoped that those who read *Evangelii Gaudium* will understand that being *deeply moved by the suffering of others* should not only result in some affective reaction, but should also awaken in people a sense of social justice that leads them to commit themselves to the defense of those who are poor. Such a commitment will enable the Church to be that which she is called to be, *the advocate of justice and of the poor*, a reality that was affirmed by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI as he addressed the Bishops who had gathered together in Aparecida in 2007.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.