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This is another section in the apostolic exhortation that strikes a chord with me. We in the Vincentian Family have often re-echoed what St. Vincent reminded us: we need to allow ourselves to be evangelized by the poor. But what this means cannot be revealed by discursive meditation. Rather it is by patient and faithful contemplation that we begin to appreciate why God chose to be born in our world as a poor person.

Living in poverty gives us an opportunity to experience the depth of God's love for us, the "mysterious wisdom" that has a room for everyone in need. If we are to know what God wants us to do with the poor, we need to go back to our life with the poor. There, the poor will point us to what God wants. Exactly what Vincent experienced! The inspiration for me *Evangeli Gaudium* is this line: "That is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor". Amen! Alleluia!

THEME:

Vincentian Bishops Reflect on
"Evangeli Gaudium"

The Social Dimension of Evangelization



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1. The Synodal Document

After each Synod, the Holy Father has published an Apostolic Exhortation. Such was the case with *Evangeli Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel") which will be referenced as "EG" throughout this article. The document that Pope Francis published on November 24, 2013 was developed as a result of the conclusions of the XII Ordinary Synod (October 7-28, 2012) that had as its theme, "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith". The Pope took advantage of the situation to elaborate the conclusions of the Synod on Evangelization, and he used this opportunity to present a program of pastoral action. We might even dare to say that he presented "Francis' Program", for his pontificate and for the Church throughout the world.

He did this in "Francis' style": highly motivational, lively, and bold, although the text itself is quite dense. The document is written in a colloquial manner: as we read *Evangeli Gaudium*, we feel we are listening to a message of Pope Francis. His writing style, which is welcomed by the ordinary people who view the Pope as close to them as he speaks, is little appreciated by certain more learned ecclesiastical sectors.

2. Key insights of EG

For the Pope, 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 fades" (2).

In light of this great danger, Francis proposes that the world participate in an experience like the one that he himself had, namely, to experience divine mercy, the source of true joy and offers people the possibility of a life of wholeness and meaning. Christ, the God who became man, came to bring salvation to all men and women, came to bring people news – the gospel – the good news which results in joy (the title of the Apostolic Exhortation reminds us of that reality).

Therefore, the Pope proposes that the Catholic Church engage in a profound and formidable transformation that makes her a missionary church, that is, a church that goes out to encounter those who do not know or do not accept Christ's message. It is meant to be a church that goes out in a special way to encounter the poor to minister with them and to learn from them.

Thus, the Pope highlights two distinct realities which the church must confront. On the one hand is an internal element which involves those Christian men and women who have lost or have not known the joy of the Gospel. On the other hand is an external element that involves a world that is dedicated to consumerism and individualism. Yet despite the excess of material goods that many people may possess, such a world cannot give meaning to human life.

3. The structure of the document

The document begins with an Introduction, although not labeled as such, but rather with the name of the document: the Joy of the Gospel (1-9). The first chapter (20-49) is a proposal with regard to the Church's reform, a proposal to make the church an authentic missionary Church.

The second chapter (50-109) undertakes a profound and all-encompassing analysis of the present world, especially its message of consumerism and materialism that creates a selfishness, which in turn blinds people to the needs of their brothers and sisters.

The third chapter (110-175) refers to the proclamation of the gospel and is an exhortation to avoid every form of elitism. All the baptized are called to transform themselves into active and not merely passive subjects. More specifically, there is a recognition of the need for the poor to become active subjects in the Church and therefore, not simply the object of attention from other church members.

The fourth chapter (176-258) highlights the social dimension of the proclamation of the Gospel and speaks energetically about the option for the poor and their social inclusion in society and in the Church. This theme will be developed more later in this essay. The fifth chapter (59-288) develops the theme of spirituality and mysticism of the evangelizer, the missionary disciple.

4. The social dimension of evangelization

4.1. *Foundation of the social dimension and the social teaching of the Church*

In chapter four of the Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis establishes a foundation for the social dimension of the gospel and the process of evangelization. In this section, we find statements concerning those realities, which the Church must be clear about and often, is quite unclear about. Institutions such as **Caritas** and the **Department of Social Justice Ministry** should not have to exist in a parish or a diocese, because all baptized men and women, with a clear understanding of the Gospel's social dimension, ought to be Caritas or ministers concerned about social justice. (However, those institutions ought to coordinate the diverse activities of the laity).

"To evangelize is to make the Kingdom of God present in our world" (EG, 176). The proposal about the Kingdom of God implies that people love God so God might reign in the world: "To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity. Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society. We are seeking God's kingdom" (EG, 180).

We should read paragraph 178 in a reflective manner, in order to understand the faith, which we profess, implies a profound conversion in living the social dimension of the gospel. All this, as the Pope states, arises from several scriptural texts in paragraph 179. Why is there a need to explain the relationship between the Gospel and its social dimension? Because "the message is one which we often take for granted, and one that we can repeat almost mechanically, without necessarily ensuring that it has a real effect on our lives and in our communities. How dangerous and harmful this is, for it makes us lose our amazement, our excitement and our zeal for living the Gospel of Fraternity and justice! God's word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us" (EG, 179).

Then, utilizing texts from the gospel of Matthew and Luke, Francis states that those passages express the absolute priority of going forth from ourselves towards our brothers and sisters as one of the two great commandments which ground every moral norm and as the clearest sign for discerning spiritual growth in response to God's completely free gift. For this reason, "the service of charity is also a constituent element of the Church's mission and an indispensable expression of her very being. By her very nature the Church is missionary; she abounds in effective charity and a compassion which understands, assists and promotes" (EG, 179).

Just as the clear social message of the gospel has no real impact on the life of many Christian men and women, so also the church's social

teaching remains as a body of generalities that does not lead people to ask questions. Pope Francis states "the Church's pastors, taking into account the contributions of the different sciences, have the right to offer opinions on all that affects people's lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being" (EG, 182).

Nevertheless, in a simple and humble manner *Evangelii Gaudium* reminds us that neither the Pope nor the Church has a monopoly on the truth or on solutions to the urgent problems of today's world. In fact, political institutions bear a responsibility to concretize the just order of things. At the same time, the Church must continue to contribute to the struggle for justice. Therefore, it is recommended that we read and study the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Pope Francis reminds us of the admirable words of Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens*, where he stated that "Christian communities, together with pastors, are the co-authors of the Church's social doctrine" (OA, 4).

4.2. *The social inclusion of the poor*

With regard to the social dimension of evangelization, Pope Francis addresses two matters. The first is related to the poor and their inclusion in society, a theme that flows from "our faith in Christ, who became poor and was always close to the poor and the outcasts" (EG, 186). The Pope expresses with conviction and clarity that "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" (EG, 187). When this reality is not understood and people do not listen to the cries of the poor, then "we oppose the Father's will and his plan... and the lack of solidarity will directly affect our relationship with God" (EG, 187). The text is blunt and forceful, and Francis emphasizes that this is not a task reserved for just some of Jesus' disciples. Furthermore, we must not only care for those who are hungry and naked, but also work to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor (an exhortation that was also made by Paul VI in his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*).

For the Pope, it is incomprehensible that there are people who live with less dignity as a result of being born in a place with fewer resources. Furthermore, Pope Francis is scandalized by the reality of hunger, especially in light of the fact that there is enough food to feed everyone: "Hunger is the result of a poor distribution of goods and income. The problem is made worse by the generalized practice of wastefulness" (EG, 191).

The challenge is not simply to alleviate hunger and misery. The Pope wants all people to experience prosperity. As Pope St. John XXIII stated

in *Mater et Magistra*, we must be concerned about the "temporal welfare and prosperity of all humankind" (MM, 3). Therefore, "this means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use" (MM, 192).

Once again, using Scripture, Pope Francis points out that his ideas are part of the doctrine that arises from the Old Testament and are deepened in the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers, that is, the manuscripts of theologians and writers from the first to the eighth century. This is seen when synthesizing the second chapter, when Francis states that his emphasis is new but his doctrine is not. In light of the content of the Apostolic Exhortation, "this message is so clear and direct, so simple and eloquent, that no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it" (EG, 194). The Pope returns to confront those within the Church who seek, through every form of argument, (including theological ones), for some way to escape from their social responsibilities that arise from the Gospel. He states it simply, but directly: "Why complicate something so simple?" (EG, 194).

The option for the poor, as a concrete proposal, was emphasized in the Latin American Church. The documents of Medellín (1968) did not use that phrase but the concept is clearly expressed there. Years later, during the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla (1979), there was a clear expression of the preferential option for the poor. Several years would pass before John Paul II would use that phrase in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987). There it was pointed out (with an expression also used in *Evangelii Gaudium*) that the option for the poor is understood as a "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness" (EG, 198). Francis is forceful when he states that this option is primarily a theological category, rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one (EG, 198).

In light of this option, the Pope repeats a phrase that had a powerful impact on people in the first days of his pontificate, when at an audience with news reporters he said that he wanted "a Church which is poor and which is for the poor". He repeated that phrase and then went on to say: "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).

The Pope points out the far-reaching consequences of this option for the poor. Therefore, it is necessary that the Church's ministers (especially those involved in social justice) make a profound examination of conscience. It is relatively easy to obtain food, clothing, and medicine and to bring such supplies to those in need. (It is true some might find this difficult to do). But to integrate the poor into the everyday tasks of the Church, and with their culture and way of living out their faith and then, to allow them to evangelize us... is that possible? Is today's Church capable of something like that? In various places, priests, religious and laity have drawn closer to those who are poor, and those poor men and women have become protagonists in the process of evangelization. Nevertheless, is this also possible on the parish or diocesan level and on the level of the various lay movements? Pope Francis says that "Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programs of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an untruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other in a certain sense as one with ourselves" (EG, 199).

Only with this full integration of the poor into our ecclesial life will it be possible (as John Paul II requested in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, #50) to insure that "in every Christian community the poor feel at home" (NMIU, 199). We must also remember that according to Pope Francis, the worse discrimination that the poor experience is not social, but rather the lack of spiritual care. Therefore, "our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care" (EG, 200).

This section concludes with a reflection that no one should distance themselves from the poor because they have to take care of other distinct matters: "None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice" (EG, 201). Even though the Pope, with his keen sense of reality, realizes his words can remain as simply another commentary on evangelization with little practical effect, he nevertheless trusts in the openness and willingness of Christians. He also them to seek concrete ways to put these proposals into practice.

4.3. Concern for the vulnerable

The objective in this next section is to point out a series of urgent tasks that society and the Church must carry out with regard to "the least among us", those with whom Christ identified in a special manner. "We are called to care for the vulnerable of the earth. But the current model, with its emphasis on success and self-reliance, does not appear

to favor an investment in efforts to help the slow, the weak or the less talented to find opportunities in life" (EG, 209).

The list of the marginalized is a long, seemingly endless one: the homeless, addicts, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly, migrants, women who are mistreated and excluded from society, as well as the unborn. Others may be also added to the list. Once again, we hear the prophetic cry of the Pope from Latin America: "I have always been distressed at the lot of those who are victims of various kinds of human trafficking. How I wish that all of us would hear God's cry: 'Where is your brother?' (Genesis 4:9). Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? Where is the brother and sister whom you are killing each day in clandestine warehouses, in rings of prostitution, in children used for begging, in exploiting undocumented labor?" (EG, 211).

All these vulnerable situations are part of our reality as members of society. Therefore, they ought to lead us to question ourselves. The Pope requests we put aside our hypocrisy, and even though he does not use those exact words, he expresses that reality in a more eloquent manner: "Let us not look the other way" (EG, 211). He demands that we put our words into action.

Throughout 2014, Pope Francis had denounced corruption, including the Mafia, realities that promote the abuse of men and women. The Pope made these denunciations at places in Italy where those forces have a powerful influence, and often go unpunished. It is not easy to struggle against the Mafia and other examples of corruption, but such a struggle must be undertaken because God continues to ask us the same question placed before Cain: "Where is your brother? Let us not look the other way. There is greater complicity than we think. The issue involves everyone! This infamous network of crime is now well established in our cities, and many people have blood on their hands as a result of their comfortable and silent complicity" (EG, 211).

On various occasions – and in this document – the Pope cautions us about focusing all our attention on certain specific themes, such as abortion, bio-ethics, gay marriage, etc. He is not saying that these matters are no long part of the Church's agenda, but he does not want those matters to be the only points on our agenda, as occurs in certain ecclesial sectors and movements. Finally, among the vulnerable and defenseless individuals, *Evangelii Gaudium* reminds us about creation, and the responsibility of men and women as its custodians. The Pope also places before us the person of Francis of Assisi, the saint of peace and brotherhood and sisterhood, the saint of the oneness of all creation, the saint whose name the Pope took at the time of his election. Pope Francis places this saint before us as the model of our guardianship (EG, 115, 116).

5. Vincentian echoes in the Apostolic Exhortation

Here I will highlight some aspects relating to the fourth chapter. The inclusion of the poor and care for the vulnerable members of society is themes here closely related to our Vincentian charism and the on-going and necessary process to achieve our charism! Vincent placed the poor at the center of his message, his activity, and the program that he passed on to the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the Confraternities of Charity. That was Vincent's spiritual experience, one that he shared with the Vincentian Family and with the Church of his era. When we listen to the phrase, *preferential option for the poor* (a constant in the Latin American Church and a reality that is reaffirmed in the life and the teaching of Pope Francis), we begin to recall Vincent's words, teachings, and ministry.

The centrality of the poor in the experience of faith is a *leitmotiv* in Vincentian spirituality. It is true that here, there was an evolution in Vincent's thinking as well as that of the Church: from serving and caring for and providing for the needs of those who are poor, we moved to a vision to give the poor an active role in the process of evangelization. The poor are no longer simply the object of our assistance and care, but they are the subject of their own human promotion and that of their brothers and sisters. There has been a movement away from a passive attitude toward an active attitude in which the poor become protagonists in this whole process. Vincent had similar insights in this regard, for example, when he sought the human promotion of poor people so that they themselves would be able to better appreciate their own worth as human beings.

There is a beautiful phrase in the exhortation: "*To draw closer to the poor, to become their friend, to lend our voice to their cause*"; in other words, we should not look at the poor from afar. This means we become involved in the life of the poor and we allow the poor to evangelize us, and to so with their faith, culture, their understanding of life, and their experience of divine providence and hope. We allow them to evangelize us in their ability to celebrate, even in the midst of poverty and marginalization. Becoming a friend to the poor is a value that should make us raise questions and examine the way in which we live our life: who are our friends? Do we allow the poor to teach us? The poor can teach us: the closer we are to the poor, the more meaningful Vincent's words become, that namely, "*love is inventive unto infinity*".

There are times when we feel powerless and overwhelmed by so much misery and suffering that surrounds us. There are time when our ecclesial communities experience desert moments, monotony, lack of joy; and yet, if we draw closer to the poor in those moments, our missionary spirit and fervor will be renewed. If we become that church

that goes out to encounter the poor, we will breathe in new air and experience new graces that will enable us to continue to renew the Church. It is also true that as we become the church that goes out to encounter the poor, we move out beyond our comfort zone. As we do this repeatedly, we will discover that those encounters with the poor will change our appearance and give us a new vitality.

The poor are the sacrament of Christ. Our option for the poor is rooted in our faith; it is not something 'extra', but rather an essential element of our faith. We could say this is not an option, but a command of Jesus, namely, that we do what Jesus did and teach what he taught. Every brother and sister, every community ought to ask themselves what they are doing for the poor and with the poor. As Vincentians, we cannot avoid such a question. We cannot live our life on the level of beautiful ideas, insightful reflections, and good intentions. A concrete real commitment with the poor is the authentic sign of our faith and of fidelity in following Jesus.

In both our personal and community plans, we are encouraged to move from ideas to action, from affective love to effective love. Such is the personal and pastoral conversion of which Pope Francis refers. Together as a Vincentian Family, we are exhorted to seek out and engage in concrete projects and plans to draw us closer to those who are poor. This means that we must become involved in the life of the poor and allow the poor to interrupt our calmness and security. We are challenged to make this vocation of love manifested in simple, humble, and effective service, to make this vocation a reality that is attractive to others.

In the Diocese of Santiago del Estero, one of the poorest areas in Argentina, as a diocesan church (priests, religious, lay leaders), we are on a path of pastoral conversion. We have developed some concrete plans in the area of addiction. Drugs have become very accessible to the poorest sectors of society and are wreaking havoc. Now with competent individuals and volunteers, we are becoming involved in projects that promote drug prevention and rehabilitation to integrate the recovering addicts back into society. We still have much to do. Yes, there are times we feel as though we are putting out this fast-spreading fire with just a bucket of water. But this reality of drug abuse is a pervasive form of poverty that has touched every home and has made us question our ministry.

The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis provides us with greater motivation to live out our Vincentian charism. We should feel truly motivated at the present time. As we read and re-read the exhortation, let us discover in the background of that document the life, the spirit and the ministry of Saint Vincent de Paul.