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POPE FRANCIS AND MISSIONARY SIGNS

Exploring the Vision of *Evangelii Gaudium*

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The Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis's lengthy apostolic exhortation of 51,000 words presented in five chapters, specifically focuses on the "proclamation of the Gospel in today's world." The Pope recalls that the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2012 sought to be attentive to "the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us together to read the signs of the times" (*Evangelii Gaudium* [EG] 14). Quoting Paul VI, he exhorts all communities to an "ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times" (51) and that one must continually "read [them]" (108) to engage in missionary evangelization today. One may validly assert thus that Francis is situating his missionary reflections within the framework of the imperative to always discern the signs of God.

For Francis, this task of examining current realities in the light of Christian faith is a "grave responsibility" (51). He proposes using an "evangelical discernment" which is "the approach of a missionary disciple" who is guided by "the light and strength of the Holy Spirit" (50). While he admits that "it is not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality," Christian faith does demand "recognizing and discerning spirits" and ultimately "choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil" (51).

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This presentation seeks to examine how Francis can be considered as employing a type of "signs of the times" methodology in *Evangelii Gaudium*, especially as he presents his insights in Chapter Two (sections 50–109) which bears the title "Amid the Crisis of Communal Commitment." For a more holistic presentation, however, this author will first provide some background perspectives related to the use of a "signs of the times" approach in recent decades, particularly as it emerged in the context of the Second Vatican Council.

A Vatican II Pope. It is remarkable that five popes took an active role in Vatican II: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. As manifested in *Evangelii Gaudium*, however, Francis, who is the first pope in many decades who was not actually present at the deliberations of the Council, is clearly imbued with its perspectives, in addition to having canonized three of its popes (John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II). He frequently quotes from several Vatican II documents, generously employs copious references to both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), and asserts that "it is important to draw out the pastoral consequences of the Council's teaching" (38) for fulfilling the Church's mission of evangelization in the world today.

Francis directly quotes the words of John XXIII's opening address to the Council in two places (41, 84), recalling at length the latter's clear disagreement with the "prophets of doom" (84). He also notes that the Church, even "fifty years after the Second Vatican Council," does not adopt a "naïve optimism" but this does "not mean that we are any less trusting in the Spirit or less generous" (84).

Francis also frequently uses texts from Paul VI. He quotes *Ecclesiam Suam* twice, Paul VI's first encyclical which was written in 1964 during the Council (26, 51). One also finds at least a dozen quotes from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ([EN], e.g., 10, 12, 146 [2x], 150, 151, 154 [3x], 156, 158, 176, 181). Francis also directly cites Paul VI's 1975 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, a document that obviously influenced the writing of *Evangelii Gaudium*, in the first two quotes of the latter. One recognizes, moreover, that Francis is remarkably conversant with the popes, documents, and theological themes of Vatican II even without presenting a full documentation of the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

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Historical Background of a "Signs of the Times" Methodology. The Second Vatican Council was convoked by John XXIII in the apostolic constitution *Humanae Salutis*, dated December 25, 1961. He first used the expression "signs of the times" in this document, and here one finds the beginnings of a new direction in theological methodology. Indeed, John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* has a section concluding every chapter which is entitled (by its editors) "Signs of the Times." In this his last encyclical, the pope enumerates three major signs as important characteristics of our age: the evolving roles of (1) laborers and (2) women and (3) the "new" nations that were formerly colonies.

It is without a doubt that the impetus given by John XXIII to this inductive method of theologizing on life's events and empirical reality is one of his innovations. As a result, this methodology sees the "signs of the times" as a valid *locus theologicus*, although methodological precision must be provided for its use within contemporary theology. The method is found at the basis of some Council documents, the best known passage being from *Gaudium et Spes:* "The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (4). Priests are to cooperate closely with the laity "so that together with them they will be able to recognize the signs of the times" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9), and the laity must promote solidarity among all peoples as one of the key "signs of our times" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 14). The Council also encourages "all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism" (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 4). Other passages that manifest an understanding of God's work in human history are *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 43 and *Gaudium et Spes* 11, 42, and 44.

It is interesting to note that the Second Vatican Council created a special sub-commission (*de signis temporum*) in 1964 to assist it with crafting a descriptive definition and explanation of what was meant by the signs of the times. In the first draft of their document written principally by Fr. Bernard Häring, the commission members planned to use the expression *vox enim temporis, vox Dei est* (the voice of the time is the voice of God). They later softened this expression and attempted an explanation, asserting that one may discern the visible

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presence and action of God in the great signs of the times that are present within the human community. As one perceives God's action directing humanity toward the fulfillment of God's designs, one can discern God's purposes being made manifest to humanity in these great movements and aspirations, including great secular movements that occur in history.

An insightful discourse on the signs of the times can be found in the address of Paul VI for his general audience on April 16, 1969.[1] There the pope provides abundant clarity of direction on the proper use of the signs of the times as a theological methodology, noting that the expression itself has taken on "a current use and a deep, very wide and interesting meaning" and that it is "the theological interpretation of contemporary history." Francis would resonate with these insights on how a genuine discernment of current events is necessarily associated with the Church's evangelizing mission in the contemporary world.

Brief Clarification of Terms and Method. The *biblical* expression "signs of the times" (Mt 16:2-4) originates from Jesus's reference to the messianic signs present in his life. He invites the Jews to open their perception to these signs and see the fulfillment of God's prophecy to God's people regarding the coming of the Messiah.

The *theological* meaning of the signs of the times is somewhat different; indeed, the scriptural reference quoted above does not appear in the official text of *Gaudium et Spes* 4 out of respect for exegetical accuracy. Paul VI, in speaking of the "signs of the times" (April 16, 1969), notes that the expression only has a "remote evangelical reminiscence." Nevertheless, while all these clarifications provide precision, they in no way jeopardize the valid use of the signs of the times as a *locus theologicus*.

Successfully interpreting contemporary history in a theological light demands methodological precision in using the theology of the signs of the times. What, then, is the correct procedure to follow for this form of theologizing (an approach that will be helpful in understanding

[1] *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 2:17 (April 24, 1969): 1, 12.

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Evangelii Gaudium)? According to the Vatican II sub-commission that dealt with the proper understanding of this approach, the signs of the times must be seen as operating on a double plane, that is, on the levels of the *sociological* and the *theological*.

There is a dual reality that is present within the sociological level itself. First, the signs of the times emerge from great changes in science and technology, transport and communications, medicine, computerization, etc. Society becomes more complex in its organization, the world becomes more economically interdependent, humanity finds itself living in a "global village," and the march of history seems to have been sped up. These are simply some of the great changes taking place in the modern world, a lining up of the "sheer facts" that make up the first dimension of the *socio-historical* level.

The second aspect of the sociological level has to do with an investigation of these changes using the behavioral and social sciences. This is carried out to determine *what effects* all these developments have on human consciousness and social life. How does such rapid and all-pervasive change affect human minds, human hearts, and human life? What impact results from change—the impact on human awareness, knowledge, sensibility, aspirations and desires, and so on? The signs of the times are *not* the mere facts alone; these are, as it were, only the *materia ex qua*, the matter from which the signs of the times arise. The "signs" are more properly the human desires and questions that arise because of the avalanche of change. In short, what is the "human impact" of these events on humanity's total environment? As Paul VI noted in his address, the world becomes a book for us. The Church must give a close reading of this book to see how all of humanity has been affected—and what implications are present for her mission of evangelization.

However, while sociological thematization is essential to this methodological approach, it is incomplete by itself. In describing the "method to follow," Paul VI remarks:

> We willingly admit that sociology is a science of great merit in itself and for the purpose that interests us, that is, the search for a higher and

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> indicative meaning of the facts themselves. But sociology cannot be an independent moral criterion, nor can it replace theology.

The method necessarily moves to the *theological* level. *Gaudium et Spes* 4 insists that it is the task of the Church to *scrutinize* the signs of the times (*sociological* level) and *interpret* them in the light of the Gospel (*theological* level). Empirical and historical thematizations of reality must be discerned through the lens of Christian faith and Gospel values.

This discernment on the theological plane is accomplished by a reflection on the direction in which these signs point. Are they leading human history to be a fulfillment of God's plans for humanity? Are they (in Paul VI's words) events that "spontaneously meet higher plans, which we know to be Christian and divine (such as the pursuit of unity, of peace, of justice)?" Do they suggest "a simultaneous step forward of the kingdom of God in the human kingdom?" Are they a clear manifestation (as John XXIII spoke of in his *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* opening speech at Vatican II and which Francis also quotes in EG 84) that

> divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church?

This is clearly the *theological* level where the reflection of faith enters to see just how precisely these developments are furthering or hindering the designs of God.

This "theology of the signs of the times" is obviously not a methodology that is independent of the ecclesial community. Yet while Paul VI acknowledges the role of all Christians and the reality of the *sensus fidei* (see also EG 119, 198), he asserts nevertheless that "the assistance of the hierarchical magisterium will always be provident and decisive," especially when "the ambiguity of the interpretation deserves to be solved either in the certainty of truth or to the benefit of the common good." The necessity of the Church's role, therefore, arises from the fact that this approach deals with "signs" which by their nature need interpretation. She is the privileged place for the discernment of

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the signs of the times because the Spirit is present within her, leading her to the fullness of truth (cf. Jn 16:13).

Schematic Presentation of the "Signs of the Times" Theological Method. Readers may find it helpful at this juncture in the presentation to view the "signs of the times" theological method in the form of a visual schema. The pivotal "signs" quote from *Gaudium et Spes* 4 will thus be integrated into the following overview.

A. On the *sociological-historical* level, one must:

1. *investigate* empirical reality (data and its context) and
2. *thematize* it (the "human impact" of this reality or environment).

This first task (**A**) is seen as a "scrutiny of the signs of the times"; the second task (**B**) is the "interpretation in the light of the Gospel" (cf. GS 4).

B. On the *pastoral-theological-missiological* level, one must offer a "faith-evaluation" of the "signs" which necessarily incorporates the following:

1. the Word of God/Holy Scripture,
2. Christian Faith and Tradition,
3. the *sensus fidei* of the believing community,
4. the specific guidance of the hierarchical magisterium,
5. the reality of sin (personal and social) within the world,
6. the centrality of the person of Christ, and
7. the role of the Holy Spirit.

This brief schematic overview can serve as a kind of concluding synthesis to the theory and theological bases of the "signs of the times method" whereby the Church seeks to be deeply engaged with the realities of the contemporary world for a more effective preaching of the Gospel. In light of these helpful clarifications, therefore, on the "signs of the times" inductive approach to theological reflection, the presentation now moves back to Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

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Francis's View of the Church's Task. In several places throughout *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis expresses his insights on the imperatives facing the Church as she practices an "ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times" (51). He admits that the Church would not be "well served by a purely sociological analysis which would aim to embrace all of reality" (50) and that it is "not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality" (51). This, however, does not militate against the "grave responsibility" (51) of the Church to be deeply engaged in understanding and serving both contemporary society and humanity. What Francis envisions is a genuine "evangelical discernment" that is "the approach of a missionary disciple" (50).

> We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God's plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also—and this is decisive—choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil. (51)

In this discernment process, he notes: "I take for granted the different analyses which other documents of the universal magisterium have offered, as well as those proposed by the regional and national conferences of bishops" (51). He thus employs a world-wide perspective in his discerning of the signs of the times, citing favorably numerous insights from conferences of bishops around the world (e.g., those in Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States, France, Congo, Oceania, India, Brazil, the Philippines, etc.), and humbly admits that it "is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory" (16). "It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country" (184), to read effectively the signs for their own location and local Church.

Francis is also clearly aware of "today's vast and rapid cultural changes that demand we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness" (41). Once again, he quotes John XXIII's opening speech to the Second Vatican Council: "The deposit of faith is one thing … the way it is expressed is another" (41). Francis goes on to assert that the Church will realize, in her "ongoing discernment" of current signs and trends, that some

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customs and practices "may be beautiful, but [that] they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them" (43). A commitment to discerning the signs of the times will help the Church realize that she "has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people's lives" (43).

The open vision and perspective of Francis in discerning concrete events of history and their impact on people lead him indeed to many helpful insights. "When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity" (117); in fact, "the faith and life of the Church [can] be expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture" (118). The pope appreciates "the challenge of an inculturated preaching" (143) for an effective communication of the Gospel; indeed, such "signs-sensitive" preaching actually becomes "an exercise in evangelical discernment" (154).

Francis's desire to link the concrete reality of people's lives with the values of the Gospel is also manifested in one of his lengthy quotes of Paul VI: "We know that 'evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of [the human person's] concrete life, both personal and social'" (EG 181). He then takes this perspective and applies it to the human family "with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses" (183).

The pope then notes, in a later section:

> I intend to concentrate on two great issues which strike me as fundamental at this time in history. I will treat them more fully because I believe that they will shape the future of humanity. These issues are first, the inclusion of the poor in society, and second, peace and social dialogue. (185)

To address these signs, he enunciates four principles which he believes are foundational for "building a people in peace, justice and fraternity" (221-237).

The foregoing citations from *Evangelii Gaudium* are, in the opinion of this author, an affirmation that Francis is deeply involved in a "faith-

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reading" of the signs of the times (although his actual use of "signs of the times" terminology only appears three times in his text: 14, 51, and 108). The pope is humble in his pastoral approach, admitting that "the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue" (241), and states his objective clearly:

> Starting from certain social issues of great importance for the future of humanity, I have tried to make explicit once again the inescapable social dimension of the Gospel message and to encourage all Christians to demonstrate it by their words, attitudes and deeds. (258)

Francis thus invites all Christians to engage the ever-changing world as "Spirit-filled evangelizers" who are "full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction" (261).

A Brief List of Signs. As one navigates through *Evangelii Gaudium*, the great panorama of subjects that Francis treats emerges. More than just a catalogue of topics, these many areas may be considered as "signs" which the Church must attentively address as she embarks upon "a new chapter of evangelization" (1). Here is a brief sampling of such areas, among many others, as noted by the pope:

> health care, education and communications (52),
> a "throw away" culture (53),
> an impersonal economy (55),
> widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion (56),
> inordinate consumption (60),
> attacks on religious freedom (61),
> human trafficking, the narcotics trade, the abuse and exploitation of minors, the abandonment of the elderly and the infirm (75), [and]
> heightened individualism (78).

Francis is not overwhelmed by current realities. He asserts that

> the evils of our world—and those of the Church—must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervor. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow.… Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. (84, 109)

Evangelii Gaudium provides, time and again, a profound faith-perspective that assists Christians in their reading of the "signs" and

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living out of their commitment as missionary disciples. As Francis boldly states, "in our time humanity is experiencing a turning-point in its history" (52). "Seeing reality with the eyes of faith, we cannot fail to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is sowing" (68). The Church is to recognize that

> the changes taking place in these great spaces and the culture which they create are a privileged locus of the new evangelization.… What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. (73-74)

In the "new world" in which we live, Christians must "realize that a uniform and rigid program of evangelization is not suited to this complex reality" (75).

Challenges, however, exist not only in the external world; they are also present within the Church. As Francis notes,

> one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity, and a cooling of fervor. These are three evils which fuel one another.… They end up stifling the joy of mission.… It pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealously.… Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act? (78-79, 100)

Creative Responses to Challenging Signs. To assist Christians in addressing profound challenges both within and outside the Church, Francis presents an innovative list of eight "no" statements and seven "yes" exhortations. Employing a kind of *via negativa*, he alerts us to factors that could diminish the Church's effectivity in the world today, bluntly saying

> no to an economy of exclusion (53-54),
> no to the new idolatry of money (55-56),
> no to a financial system which rules rather than serves (57-58),
> no to the inequality which spawns violence (59-60),
> no to selfishness and spiritual sloth (81-83),
> no to sterile pessimism (84-86),
> no to spiritual worldliness (93-97), [and]
> no to warring among ourselves (98-101).

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He also exhorts us to be vigilant and not to let ourselves be "robbed" of pivotal dimensions of the Christian life:

> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm! (80)
> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization! (83)
> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope! (86)
> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community! (92)
> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel! (97)
> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love! (101)
> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor! (109)

These "no" statements and "yes" exhortations clearly show that Francis is neither naïve nor unrealistic in his efforts to promote the new evangelization within the Church. He is simply reflecting the realism needed to read the "signs" for a more effective missionary evangelization, and affirms that

> in spite of everything, Saint Paul's exhortation is directed to each of us: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). And again: "Let us not grow weary in doing what is right" (Gal 6:9). (101)

Asian Echoes in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This author has been (by God's grace and mercy) an "Asian missioner" (Philippines and Bangladesh) for five decades. It is from this perspective that he can affirm that Francis's exhortation has found wide acceptance and resonance in the Asian context. In addition, moreover, to his very personal style of writing and heartfelt appeal for a joyful and enthusiastic commitment to evangelization, the pope has also recognized the dedicated work and insights of the local Churches of Asia. He quotes *Ecclesia in Asia* six times in particular (see footnotes 58, 77, 78, 95, 99, and 134 of *Evangelii Gaudium*), and in these places he speaks about

> the stability of the family … the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord … joyful, patient and progressive preaching … [that] faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture … [that] the Holy Spirit is the principal agent [of evangelization] … [and] a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery. (62, 110, 118, 122, 171)

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On another—and perhaps even more profound—level, Francis's inductive approach to reading the "signs" as a pivotal means of discerning the Church's mission of evangelization is characteristically Asian. In the context of Asia, the Church's mission is seen as emerging *concretely* and *pastorally* from life's realities, which are considered as the locus of doing theology. A type of "ground up" or "emerging from below" pastoral-missionary praxis has prospered ever since the 1970 meeting of 180 Asian bishops with Paul VI in Manila, and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), which emerged from that meeting, promotes a unique pastoral methodology to facilitate the growth of inculturated and missionary local Churches. The FABC has evolved a unique approach of pastoral engagement; their four-stage "Asian" approach is termed the "AsIPA method"—the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach.

AsIPA begins with *exposure-immersion*, or what may also be called "entering into a dialogue-of-life." Exposure-immersion follows the basic principle of the Incarnation—local Christians seek to share the daily lives of their neighbors and communities and read the "signs of the times." The second stage of *social analysis* follows in which communities try to evaluate the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious systems in society. They observe and analyze events and trends, discerning the impact of rapid social change on human lives, and evaluate the signs of contemporary times, events of history, and the needs and aspirations of peoples and communities.

Asians have also seen the necessity of integrating social analysis (stage two) with the *contemplative dimension* of integral evangelization (stage three). This third stage of faith reflection emerges from Asia's religio-cultural heritage. Through this contemplation, people discover God's presence and activity within social realities, discerning not only negative and enslaving social aspects but also the positive and prophetic aspects of life that can inspire genuine God-awareness and spirituality. This stage in the total process has proven very beneficial; for example, it enables the poor (who are a central focus for Francis) to make their unique contribution to the Church and society. The AsIPA method thus brings prayer and spirituality into the mission of evangelization.

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The third stage of ongoing spiritual-theological reflection issues into the fourth stage called *pastoral planning*, which seeks to translate the previous three stages into actual and realizable mission plans of action. Concrete and inculturated programs of evangelization are ultimately necessary, and they are best conceived, in the perspective of the FABC, through this Asian process (AsIPA) that actively reads the "signs" and discerns what the Lord of history is challenging the Church to be and do. In this process, Francis and the FABC are truly kindred spirits indeed!

Joy, the Pivotal Sign of Missionary Disciples. The obvious focus on joy in *Evangelii Gaudium* is manifested in the sheer number of times that terms such as joy, joyful, and joyfully are repeated (nearly a hundred). Francis has mined the treasures found in the two interrelated apostolic exhortations written by Paul VI in 1975: *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelization in the Modern World) and *Gaudete in Domino* (On Christian Joy). The lack of joy and hope is an obstacle to effective evangelization; indeed, *both* popes constantly assert that the Gospel will not be heard at all by contemporary humanity if it is not heard from "joyful evangelizers." In the introduction of *Evangelii Gaudium* (10), Francis extensively quotes the sentiments of Paul VI who believed that joy would enable the world of our time "to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ" (EN 80).

The success of the "new evangelization" requires "renewed evangelizers." Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." Joy is convincing; joy evangelizes. All the daunting "signs of the times" and complex dimensions of the "new evangelization" will not overwhelm those whose lives have been transformed by a joyful encounter with the Risen Lord. With heartfelt emotion, Francis writes:

> I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.… I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.… I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy. (3, 1)

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Missionary disciples must listen frequently to the admonition of St. Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near" (Phil 4:4). Be transformed by joy. Surrender to the "Lord of Joy" for he is *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring!* Respond to the invitation of Pope Francis! Become a joyful herald of the new evangelization!

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