Landas 35:1 (2023) 95–111

REKINDLING THE CHURCH'S MISSIONARY FIRE

Pivotal Insights from Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium*

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Abstract. Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis's first major document, was written in the same year he was elected Pope (2013). It sets forth his vision for a renewed Church which is "permanently in a state of mission" (25) and seeks to "put all things in a missionary key" (34). This article of modest length seeks to digest the rich content of this lengthy apostolic exhortation (51,000 words) by identifying ten major themes that emerge from a reflective reading of Francis's work.

Undoubtedly, one of Francis's key emphases throughout this inspiring document is to renew the "fire for missionary evangelization" throughout the entire Church. He repeatedly summons all of us to become "missionary disciples" (120) and be an evangelizing community where "missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples" (173). Each of the ten themes in this presentation contributes to a comprehensive appreciation of Francis's profound and inspiring agenda for the Church which is truly *alive in mission*.

Keywords. Pope Francis; mission; evangelization; Second Vatican Council; Church social teaching; popular piety

The Joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*),[1] the first apostolic exhortation issued by Pope Francis, appeared only a few months after his election as pope on March 13, 2013. It is a lengthy document (51,000 words) and unfolds in five chapters across 288 numbered sections; its subtitle focuses on the "Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World." Truly an extraordinary document, it sets forth Francis's vision for the Church that is "permanently in a state of mission" (25).

Francis notes that the 2012 XIII General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome sought to renew the Church and to be attentive to "the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us together to read the signs of the times" (14). For Francis, this task of examining current realities in the light of Christian faith and mission 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). Holistic, integral evangelization demands that all the baptized must continually "read the signs of the times" (108) as they live out their Christian evangelical vocation in today's complex and challenging world.

This modest presentation attempts a synthetic examination of *Evangelii Gaudium*, identifying ten pivotal insights which this author believes will contribute to renewing the missionary fervor of the Church. These ten themes seek to reflect a comprehensive integration of the numerous profound—and often very personal—insights of the Church's 266th pope; they draw heavily on Pope Francis's very own words in *The Joy of the Gospel.*

I. Missionaries: God-centered Prayerful Persons. Early in his exhortation, Francis boldly states:

> 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. (3) … I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: "Being a

[1]Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013). Hereafter referenced inline as section numbers.

> Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." (7)

Mission demands a "personal encounter with the saving love of Jesus" (264). Francis believes that

> the primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known? If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. (264)

Undoubtedly, mission originates and overflows from an encounter with the very person of God, the Trinity, which is *fontalis amor*, a fountain of overflowing love. As missioners personally encounter the fount-like love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they become "the pilgrim Church which is missionary by her very nature" (*Ad Gentes* 2).[2]

Francis asserts:

> Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work. Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelization, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts. (262) … Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of our weariness and difficulties, and our fervor dies out. (262)

We may end up seeking "a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross" (88).

An entire section of *Evangelii Gaudium* deals with "the challenge of a missionary spirituality" (78-80). Here Francis identifies various realities that may "end up stifling the joy of mission" (79). He encourages "evangelizers fearlessly open to the workings of the Holy Spirit" (259). Indeed, "Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence" (259).

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[2]Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* (1965).

Missioners need "the fire of the Holy Spirit [that] burns in our hearts" (261); they will frequently turn to Mary, "Mother of Evangelization" (284-288). Poignantly stated: "Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people" (268).

II. Joy: Pivotal Sign of Missionary Disciples. The obvious focus on joy in *Evangelii Gaudium* is seen in the sheer number of times that words such as joy, joyful, and joyfully are repeated (nearly 100 times). Pope 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). *Both popes* constantly assert that if the Gospel is not heard from "joyful evangelizers," it will not be heard at all by contemporary humanity. The lack of joy and hope is an obstacle to effective evangelization. In the introduction of *Evangelii Gaudium* (10), Francis quotes extensively 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" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 80).[3]

Pope Francis employs several catchy phrases to emphasize the centrality of joy in missionary evangelization. He notes that "an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral" (10). Missionaries must not be "Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (6). Mission challenges and difficulties must not turn evangelizers into "querulous and disillusioned pessimists, 'sourpusses'" (85); yes, Francis uses the very word "sourpusses"! People today "prefer to listen to witnesses" who "speak of a God whom they themselves know and are familiar with, as if they were seeing him" (150). "A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others" (272).

The success of evangelization undoubtedly requires renewed, joyful evangelizers. Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: "Joy is the

[3]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975). Hereafter referenced inline as EN.

most infallible sign of the presence of God." Joy is convincing; joy evangelizes. All the daunting challenges and the complex dimensions of mission will not overwhelm those whose lives have been transformed by a joyful encounter with the Risen Lord. With heartfelt emotion, Pope Francis writes: "I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy" (1). He believes that missionary disciples must listen frequently to the admonition of Saint 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; cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 18). Certainly, Francis would speak these encouraging words to each of us: Be transformed by joy! Surrender to the "Lord of Joy"! Respond to my invitation: Become a joyful herald of the new evangelization! Live joyfully as a dynamic missionary-disciple!

III. Integrating Vatican II Perspectives. Francis is the first pope in many decades who was not actually present at the deliberations of Vatican II. Remarkably, five popes did take an active role in the Council: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. Yet, as manifested in his *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis is clearly imbued with Council perspectives. He has canonized three popes of Vatican II (John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II) and beatified John Paul I; in effect, he has thus "canonized" Vatican II! Francis frequently quotes from several Council documents, generously employing copious references to both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. He asserts that "it is important to draw out the pastoral consequences of the Council's teaching" (38) in fulfilling the Church's mission of evangelization in the world today.

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

Francis frequently uses texts from Pope Paul VI who served as pope from 1963-1978. He twice quotes *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI's first encyclical, written in 1964 during the Council (26, 51). One finds over a dozen quotes from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (e.g., 10, 12, 146 [2x], 150,

151, 154 [3x], 156, 158, 176, 181). In the first two quotes of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis directly cites Paul VI's 1975 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, a document that obviously influenced the writing of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Furthermore, one recognizes that Francis, even without presenting a full documentation of the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, is remarkably conversant with the popes, documents, and theological themes of Vatican II.

Pope Francis is 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). And here, 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 in "her ongoing discernment" of current signs and trends, the Church will realize that some 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). In doing so, the Church is being faithful to the *aggiornamento* spirit of the Council.

IV. Missionary Evangelization is Central to the Church. Pope Francis constantly promotes an active missionary Church, a community that always reaches out to people; he asserts that "missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church's activity*" (15; emphasis in original). Indeed,

> today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church … the missionary task must remain foremost. (15) … All of us are called to take part in this new missionary "going forth." (20) … Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Jesus Christ; we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries," but rather that we are always "missionary disciples." (120; cf. 40, 119-121)

In the Church, "missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples" (173).

Jesus is "the first and greatest evangelizer" (12); he was sent into our world to bring us the Good News of the Kingdom of God. When he began his public ministry, Jesus noted that he was sent "to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to

the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19). In turn, he called and sent his own disciples on mission, to become "fishers of [women and men]" (Mt 4:19). In imitating Jesus, Francis asserts: "If the whole Church takes up this missionary impulse, she has to go forth to everyone without exception" (48).

Francis has a vision, a dream, for the Church:

> I dream of a "missionary option," that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. (27)

Concretely, this means that each local Church is invited "to make this missionary impulse ever more focused, generous and fruitful" through "a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform" (30).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, one repeatedly finds a holistic and comprehensive vision of mission, often expressed today using the words "integral evangelization"; thus, the Church employs an "authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization" (176). Francis directly quotes Paul VI: "any partial or fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it" (176; EN 17). Again, "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" (181; EN 29). Francis is emphatic, asserting that the entire Church must attempt "to put all things in a missionary key" (34)!

V. Becoming a Dynamic, Outgoing Church. In calling for a "mission-centered" Church, Francis offers various descriptions of such a renewed Christian community. His summons is filled with vibrant expressions and challenges. "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (49); indeed, the Church must avoid "remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security" (49).

Francis continues: "A Church which 'goes forth' is a Church whose doors are open" and seeks "to reach the fringes of humanity" (46). Such a Church "realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit" so that "it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street" (45). As Church, "all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel" (20).

How can this transformation be accomplished? One clear essential, alluded to earlier, is to engage in prayer and experience its "missionary power" (281).

> When evangelizers rise from prayer, their hearts are more open; freed of self-absorption, they are desirous of doing good and sharing their lives with others. (282) … Keeping our missionary fervor alive calls for trust in the Holy Spirit, for it is he who "helps us in our weakness" (Rom 8:26). (280)

Pope Francis singles out the roles of the laity and the youth in renewing missionary dynamism. He asserts that emphasis is needed on "the identity and mission of the laity in the Church" (102). In addition, Francis believes that "the rise and growth of associations and movements mostly made up of young people can be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit" (105). These directions, as noted earlier, are pivotal in seeking "to put all things in a missionary key" (34).

VI. Centrality of Mercy in Missionary Evangelization. Quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, Pope Francis has said that

> mercy is the greatest of all the virtues: "In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies. This is particular to the superior virtue, and as such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree." (37)

Consequently, "the Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel" (114).

Francis, inaugurating the Year of Mercy (2015-2016), noted in *Misericordiae Vultus* (24) that Jesus is "mercy-made-flesh"; God's mercy is incarnate in the person of Jesus. He went around the towns and villages of Israel, "teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness" (Mt 9:35). He "felt deep compassion" for the crowds (Mt 9:36), sensitively paying attention to everyone, especially the "little people," like the woman who donated her two small coins to the temple (Mk 12:41-44), the poor widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17), or the Gerasene demoniac (Mt 5:1-20). Jesus truly served the "little, lost, least, lonely, and last." Merciful service of the needy was the hallmark of his ministry.

Jesus's mercy overflowed when he invited Matthew the tax collector to follow him; he looked at Matthew with merciful love and chose him (Mt 9:9). Recall that Francis's own episcopal motto reflecting this scripture passage is *miserando atque eligendo*. Simply translated, it means "chosen through mercy"; this captures Francis's own vocational calling. In addition, Francis deeply appreciates Jesus's many parables devoted to mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the father with two sons (Lk 15:4-7, 8-10, 11-32). He frequently notes (for example, in his general audience on April 6, 2016) that "Jesus … is God's mercy made flesh."

Arising from his insights into God's mercy and its role in the Church's missionary evangelization, Francis summons everyone to a "revolution of tenderness" (88). Following Jesus, we are "to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others…, [and] enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness" (270). Jesus himself becomes the model of evangelization by which we touch the very hearts of people (cf. 269). Because "by her very nature the Church is missionary; she abounds in effective charity and a compassion which understands, assists, and promotes" (179). In a word, mission means making God's compassionate mercy visible, tangible, and perceptible through one's daily Christ-like deeds.

VII. Social Realities: Integral to Evangelization. Francis straightforwardly admits that "the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue" (241) that humanity faces. In response to the many and diverse challenges that arise in today's world, the Church

> supports those programs which best respond to the dignity of each person and the common good. In doing this, she proposes in a clear way the fundamental values of human life and convictions which can then find expression in political activity. (241)

It is noteworthy that the entire chapter four of *Evangelii Gaudium* is devoted to "The Social Dimension of Evangelization" (176-258). Certainly, this social engagement includes the discerning of the signs of the times as mentioned in the introduction of this presentation.

While retaining a broad concern for all important social challenges, Francis states:

> 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)

One may seek to know the foundation of Church social engagement. Francis is clear: "Our faith in Christ, who became poor … is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members" (186). Concretely, this demands 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 part of society" (187). In addition, this means "working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter" (188).

Francis constantly enunciates lofty Christian ideals and concretely links them with specific tasks to be undertaken. He believes that "we need to grow in a solidarity which 'would allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny,' since 'every person is called to self-fulfillment'" (190). Concretely, this demands that "in all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor" (191). In diverse places, Francis highlights issues such as education, healthcare, employment, just wages, injustices, consumption, etc.; the list of issues is undoubtedly varied and lengthy.

These many factors lead Francis to assert:

> 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. (198) … None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and social justice. (201)

Together in the Church, we must address "the new idolatry of money" (55), the "throw-away culture" (53), the "globalization of indifference" (54), "inordinate consumption" (60), "an economy of exclusion and inequality" (53), as well as multiple other unjust social realities.

Undoubtedly, Francis's words are often very strong and direct on social issues; some may be taken aback to hear the pope speak in such a direct manner. He explains:

> If anyone feels offended by my words, I would respond that I speak them with affection and with the best of intentions, quite apart from any personal interest or political ideology. My words are not those of a foe or an opponent. (208)

Francis says that he is only interested in promoting "a way of living and thinking which is more humane, noble, and fruitful, and which will bring dignity to [people's] presence on this earth" (208).

Succinctly stated, Francis is deeply interested in "generating processes of people-building" (224). He concludes:

> 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)

VIII. Popular Piety, a Vehicle of Evangelization. Francis devotes an entire section of his apostolic exhortation to "the evangelizing power of popular piety" (122-126). He builds upon the insights of recent popes, his own pastoral experience, and the 2007 *Aparecida Document* of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops. Bishop Jorge Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis, served as the main writer of the *Aparecida Document* and he quotes it directly five times in *Evangelii Gaudium*. His insights also reflect the thought of the *Directory on Popular Piety and the*

Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines issued in 2001 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

While Francis speaks of popular piety in various places in *Evangelii Gaudium* (69-70, 90), his focused profound insights appear in the section directly linking popular piety with evangelization (122-126). One can do no better than listening directly to Francis's words! He points out the culture-faith linkage:

> Once the Gospel has been inculturated in a people, in their process of transmitting their culture, they also transmit the faith in ever new forms.… One can say that "a people continuously evangelizes itself." Herein lies the importance of popular piety. (122)

> Popular piety enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on. Often looked down upon, popular piety came to be appreciated once more in the decades following the Council. In the exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI gave a decisive impulse in this area. There he stated that popular piety "manifests a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know" and that "it makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism." (123)

Francis also quotes what Pope Benedict XVI said about Latin America, pointing out that "popular piety is 'a treasure of the Catholic Church,' in which 'we see the soul of the Latin American peoples'" (123).

Quoting the *Aparecida Document*, Francis notes that popular piety is referred to by the bishops in various terms: "popular spirituality," "the people's mysticism," and "a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly" (124). They also assert that

> it is a legitimate way of living the faith, a way of feeling part of the Church and a manner of being missionaries; it brings with itself the grace of being a missionary.… Let us not stifle or presume to control this missionary power! (124)

Thus, "to understand this reality we need to approach it with the gaze of the Good Shepherd, who seeks not to judge but to love" (125).

Francis concludes his reflections (which most probably arise from his own direct personal experience of this living form of faith) by

noting that the Church must not underestimate the value of popular piety, for

> to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit.… Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization. (126)

Parenthetically, this author, whose faith was nourished by popular devotions and who has spent over five decades as a missionary in the Philippines and Bangladesh, deeply appreciates the valid, profound, and enriching insights of Pope Francis on popular piety and its contribution to missionary evangelization! This is the living faith-experience of millions of Catholic Christians!

IX. Two Crucial Dialogues in Evangelization Today. Within a larger section devoted to various forms of dialogue, Francis treats both ecumenical dialogue (244-249) and interreligious dialogue (250-254). Brief highlights of these two tasks of the Church are presented here.

In discussing ecumenism, Francis notes that

> the credibility of the Christian message would be much greater if Christians could overcome their divisions.… We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God's face. (244) … Given the seriousness of the counter witness of division among Christians, particularly in Asia and Africa, the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. (246)

Francis notes that

> the immense numbers of people who have not received the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot leave us indifferent. Consequently, commitment to a unity which helps them to accept Jesus Christ can no longer be a matter of mere diplomacy or forced compliance, but rather an indispensable path to evangelization. (246)

Through ecumenical relations, which Francis sees as "an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness" (246).

Recall the fact that in October 2016, Pope Francis travelled to Sweden for ecumenical gatherings in the cities of Lund and Malmo, joining the Catholic-Lutheran commemoration of the Reformation. He said: "We, too, must look with love and honesty at our past, recognizing error and seeking forgiveness." Simply stated, this very public action by Pope Francis manifested his commitment to ecumenism.

On the topic of interreligious or interfaith dialogue, Francis has given us some unique insights.

> Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. (250) … True openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one's own identity, while at the same time being "open to understanding those of another party" and "knowing that dialogue can enrich each side." … Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another. (253)

We also remember that Pope Francis has personally met with major Islamic leaders. In May 2016, he travelled to Egypt and met with Egyptian Grand Imam of al-Azhar Mosque Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed al-Tayeb. In his four-day visit to Iraq in March 2021, the first ever by a pope, Francis met with the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the holy city of Najaf. Such actions manifest the Church's public commitment to fostering interfaith dialogue.

X. A World-wide Vision of Evangelization. In surveying the content of *Evangelii Gaudium*, one comes to appreciate Pope Francis's broadly based vision of evangelization and his collegial approach. He directly quotes nine episcopal conferences (Latin America and Caribbean, USA, France, Congo, Philippines, India, Europe, Brazil, and Oceania); all the continents appear in his citations. For example, his lengthy quote from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) focuses on the current topic of ecology which was the subject of the 1988 CBCP pastoral letter *What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* Francis introduces the quote with these words: "Here I would make my own the touching and prophetic lament voiced some years ago by the bishops of the Philippines" (215).

An additional observation notes that there are many "Asian echoes" in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This author, an "Asian missioner" for over five decades, can affirm that Francis's exhortation has found wide acceptance and resonance in the Asian context. In addition to his very personal style of writing and his heartfelt appeal for a joyful, enthusiastic commitment to evangelization, Francis has recognized the dedicated work and insights of the local Churches of Asia.

Pope Francis quotes *Ecclesia in Asia* six times (see footnotes 58, 77, 78, 95, 99, and 134 of *Evangelii Gaudium*). In these places, he speaks about these themes: "the stability of the family" (62), "the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord" (110), "joyful, patient and progressive preaching" (110), "faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture" (118), "the Holy Spirit is the principal agent [of evangelization]" (122), and "a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery" (171). One naturally comes to the conclusion that Francis is truly a universal pastor with a vision of evangelization for the entire Catholic Church!

Within Francis's global mission vision, one finds a very creative response to contemporary mission challenges. To assist Christians in addressing profound challenges facing evangelizers today, Francis presents an innovative list of eight "no" statements and seven "yes" exhortations. First, employing a kind of *via negativa*, Francis alerts us to factors that could diminish the Church's effectivity in the world today. He bluntly says:

> 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).

Francis also exhorts evangelizers to be vigilant and not to let themselves be "robbed" of pivotal dimensions of Christian life and mission:

> 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), [and]
> Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor! (109).

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

Conclusion. Undoubtedly, *Evangelii Gaudium* is Pope Francis's blueprint for the missionary renewal of the Church as it seeks to proclaim the Gospel in today's world. Its scope is remarkably comprehensive; its coverage of pivotal topics is broad and extensive; its pastoral vision is sensitive and practical; its evangelical insights have lasting value; its appeal reaches the hearts and minds of Catholics today. Therefore, any commentary on the original document pales in comparison to an actual meditative reading of its contents. One may employ a simple comparison: while Scripture commentaries provide helpful insights into the meaning of the text, there is no substitute for reading the original Word of God itself!

The words addressed to Saint Augustine echo the sentiments of this writer: *Tolle, lege!* Take and read! This author can definitely assure that the reader will be personally enriched by the depths of unique insights found in *Evangelii Gaudium. Tolle, lege!*

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