

# Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel

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## SESSION 6

## Precious Allies in the Commitment to Defending Human Dignity, in Building Peaceful Coexistence Between Peoples and in Protecting Creation

### Introduction

Turn on the TV any night and we get our fill of the terrible things we human beings can inflict on each other. The list is seemingly endless: Somalia, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt, Nigeria, North Korea, Lebanon and so many others. Most churches pray each week for peace, naming these hell-holes in particular.

Francis asks: what is peace? And how might our prayers turn into fruitful action? He begins by saying that ‘peace cannot be understood as pacification or the mere absence of violence, resulting from the domination of one part of society over others. Nor does true peace act as a pretext for justifying a social structure which silences or appeases the poor, so that the more affluent can placidly support their lifestyle while others have to make do as they can. ... The dignity of the human person’ he writes, ‘and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges.’<sup>1</sup>

### Building a People in Peace, Justice and Fraternity

In the last session, I mentioned four principles, drawn from Catholic Social Teaching, which Francis says can ‘guide the development of life in society and the building of a people where differences are harmonised within a shared pursuit.’<sup>2</sup> The four principles are: 1. *Time is greater than space*; 2. *Unity prevails over conflict*; 3. *Realities are more important than ideas*; 4. *The whole is greater than the part*.

Given that the word *encounter* is one of Francis’ favourites, its twin, *dialogue* is another favourite. Francis writes, ‘For the Church today, three areas of dialogue stand out where she needs to be present in order to promote full human development and to pursue the common good: dialogue with States, dialogue with society and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church.’<sup>3</sup> Quoting Pope Benedict, Francis says ‘the Church speaks from the light which faith offers and it stimulates reason to broaden its perspectives.’<sup>4</sup> Yet, Francis doesn’t leave peace-making to the professionals, to someone else. He calls on ‘every baptised person to be a peacemaker and a credible witness to a reconciled life. In a culture which privileges *dialogue* as a form of *encounter*, it is time’, he writes, ‘to devise a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive and inclusive society.’<sup>5</sup> But, beware, he writes of plans that see ‘a few, enlightened or outspoken minorities who claim to speak for everyone!’<sup>6</sup>

Next, Francis speaks of the dialogue between theology and science. He begins: ‘The Church has no wish to hold back the marvellous progress of science. On the contrary, she rejoices and even delights in acknowledging the enormous potential that God has given to the human mind. Whenever the sciences arrive at a conclusion which reason cannot refute, faith does not contradict it. At times, some scientists have exceeded the limits of their scientific competence by making certain statements or

claims. But here the problem is not with reason itself, but with the promotion of a particular ideology which blocks the path to authentic, serene and productive dialogue.<sup>77</sup>

Next, Francis moves on to address, first ecumenical, then inter-religious dialogue. 'Commitment to ecumenism,' he writes, 'responds to the prayer of Jesus that "they may all be one". 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.'<sup>8</sup>

Yet, Francis points out, there is much counter-witness of division among Christians. He longs for a common search, where, if we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another. It's not just being *better informed* about others, but rather about reaping what the spirit has sown in them.<sup>9</sup> Francis notes in passing that the Roman Church may learn a great deal about Synods and governance from our Orthodox brothers and sisters.

Equally, there is much we can learn from Judaism, with whom we share 'an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looking, as we do, upon the people of the Covenant as one of the sacred roots of our own identity. With them, Christians believe in the one God who acts in history, and with them, we accept his revealed word.'<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Francis speaks of inter-religious dialogue, calling for 'an attitude of openness to truth and love, especially (given) the various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides.'<sup>11</sup> 'The dialogue is in the first place, a conversation about human existence, or simply, as the bishops of

India have put it, a matter of "being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows".<sup>12</sup> While Francis' words are simple, they are equally profound: 'True openness,' he goes on to say, '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 the other party" and "knowing that dialogue can enrich each side". What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness which says "yes" to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others.'<sup>13</sup> 'Non-Christians, by God's gracious initiative, when they are faithful to their own consciences, can live "justified by the grace of God" and thus be "associated [with] the paschal mystery".'<sup>14</sup> Francis also addresses 'those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God.' Francis refers to such people as 'precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.'<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

It's appropriate that this final session in the series, highlights *talking to people* with whom we share a common humanity, expressed as it is in disparate ways. Dialogue is the only bridge that anchors us to each other, that bridges our differences, showing them to be resources, bringing us together, rather than insoluble suspicions and fears that keep us at bay. Pope Francis began: 'The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.' He concludes by implying that a similar joy may fill the hearts and lives of those who encounter the Holy Spirit. Let me conclude with Francis' words: 'No single act of love for God will be

lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted. All of these encircle our world like a vital force. The Holy Spirit works as he wills, when he wills and where he wills; we entrust ourselves without pretending to see striking results. We know only that our commitment is necessary. Let us learn to rest in the tenderness of the arms of the Father. Let us keep marching forward; let us give him everything, allowing him to make our efforts bear fruit in his good time.’<sup>16</sup>

And with these stirring words, I conclude this series of reflections on *Evangelii Gaudium*. My hope is that these reflections will whet your appetite for reading the document in its entirety and for considering how you too might spread the Gospel in your particular setting.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis (2013) *Evangelii Gaudium* #218

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #221

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #238

<sup>4</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #238

<sup>5</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #239

<sup>6</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #239

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #243

<sup>8</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #244

<sup>9</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #246

<sup>10</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #247

<sup>11</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #249

<sup>12</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #250

<sup>13</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #251

<sup>14</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #254

<sup>15</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #257

<sup>16</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #279

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## Towards Missionary Discipleship

Below are some questions that may further assist your reflection, group discussion and plans for missionary discipleship. Some questions are suitable for individual reflection and group discussion; some for parish councils, committees or boards.

### Reflection and discernment ...

- ‘Dialogue is the only bridge that anchors us to each other, that bridges our differences ...’ Through my day what steps can I take to build ‘new bridges’. Who have I been avoiding because of our differences?
- What steps will I take this week to reap ‘what the Spirit has sown’ in others?

### Sharing and discussion ...

- Pope Francis calls on ‘every baptised person to be a peacemaker and a credible witness to a reconciled life’ (#239)? What does this mean? How do the two complement one another?

## Formation and mission ...

- Three areas of dialogue stand out for Pope Francis as priorities – states, society and other believers (#238). What faith formation or adult education is available to inform our community about these areas?
- The commitment to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue is also a priority. Over the next twelve months what are the parish goals in this area? What assistance is available from archdiocesan agencies, resources, other parishes and/or the deanery?
- As a Christian community how are we affirming ‘the dignity of human person’ (#210)?