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"Francis Gives Us a Joyful Mission"

An article on "Evangelii Gaudium" by Bishop Javier Echevarría that was published in the "Catholic Herald" (London, UK) on 7 March 2014, as part of a series commemorating the first anniversary of Pope Francis' election.

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“We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in

order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?”

These words by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 8) evoke our divinization, the raising-up of our nature that is granted to us as a gift by God. In Christ we discover who we are as human beings, and the greatness of our vocation (see *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). Our encounter with Jesus gives rise to a desire to share our joy with others (see EG no. 3). Pope Francis is inviting us “to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (EG no. 20).

The “going forth” to which the Pope is inviting us has traditionally been called “apostolate” and

“evangelization” in the Church. This apostolate is characterized by, among other things, absolute respect for freedom, and is totally different from the negative meaning that the word “proselytism” has acquired, chiefly in the twentieth century. This is what the Pope says at no. 15 of *Evangelii Gaudium*: “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.” Christ’s teaching clearly excludes any approach that does not respect other people’s freedom and personal dignity. God wants to be loved truly, and that implies a free choice. Every vocation is a love story and a meeting of two freedoms: God’s call and the human person’s response.

The key that defines a genuinely Christian attitude is Love. The words used by Pope Francis show this clearly: “I invite” (EG nos. 3, 33 and 108), “let me say this” (EG no. 3); he talks about a “brimming heart” (EG

no. 5) and encourages us to enter into “this great stream of joy” that is the Christian community; he urges people not to place unnecessary conditions on the reception of Baptism or the Sacrament of Confirmation.

“Entering.” Jesus Christ rebuked the scribes and Pharisees: “you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in” (Matt 23:13). Allowing people to enter, letting them in, inviting them to enter: the force that attracts people is, as St Josemaría said, “abundance of light,” human friendliness, prayer and personal sacrifice, Christ’s presence in Christians. “True love means going out of oneself, giving oneself” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 43). This is the real meaning of Christian apostolate, and the original meaning of the word proselytism as traditionally understood in the Church, stemming from a Hebrew

form rendered into Greek.

Lacordaire expressed it in a lapidary phrase: “Just as there is no Christian without love, so there is no Christian without proselytism.”

Person-to-person apostolate means spending time on our neighbour, and its strength is nothing other than prayer, charity-filled patience, understanding, friendship, and love for freedom. It means coming out of ourselves to be concerned about others and share with them the truest and most beautiful thing we have: our Christian vocation. Christ’s command “Follow me,” far from exerting force, respects each individual’s freedom. This is shown eloquently – and sadly – in the dialogue of Jesus with the rich young man. And today? Pope Francis says: “At a time when we most need a missionary dynamism which will bring salt and light to the world, many lay people fear that they may

be asked to undertake some apostolic work and they seek to avoid any responsibility that may take away from their free time” (EG no. 81).

The light of the Gospel is “luminous and attractive” (EG no. 100), because it is the law of love that invites us to do good (EG nos. 100-101). On seeing Christians’ good works, our neighbour is led to give glory to God (see Mt 5:16) – to realize and praise God’s boundless love; it is a divine light, not a merely human one. In this sense, apostolate – a holy zeal for souls – consists of bearing witness to the light, as St John says (John 1:7). It means spreading an abundance of light, without the slightest hint of imposing things upon people but with the utmost respect. And this is so because God only wants love, and so he acts gently – gently and strongly (see Wisdom 8:1). In his *Message for the 20th World Day of Prayer for Vocations* (2 February

1983), Blessed John Paul II said, “We should have no fear in proposing the Lord’s call directly to a young or less young person. It is an act of esteem and confidence. It can be a moment of light and grace.” Timidity in this regard could betray a lack of faith and of humility, and is overcome with the light of Christ that each Christian is called to pass on to others.

What light? Pope Benedict XVI said at the end of his first encyclical: “Love is the light – and in the end, the only light – that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 39). In perfect continuity with this message, Pope Francis says in his

first encyclical that “The movement of love between Father, Son and Spirit runs through our history, and Christ draws us to himself in order to save us (see John 12:32)” (*Lumen Fidei*, no. 59).

The polar opposite of the false type of proselytism that does not respect the human person, is apostolate conceived of as attraction. In other words, bringing people, transparently and respectfully, to face the possibility of generous self-dedication, which is exactly what the Pope describes. This apostolate includes witness that is fully aware of the other person’s freedom and dignity, and enables the Christian heart to share in the divine and human love of Jesus. And when it does, that heart is filled with an uncontainable desire to pass on the joy of the Gospel to others.

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