

4. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., Theologian and Former Master of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), United Kingdom

Evangelii Gaudium

The Holy Spirit: protagonist of evangelisation: EG 34 – 39; 115 – 118

The Vatican November 28 2019

I am deeply honoured and grateful to have been asked to give this lecture. Above all this is because I have had to reread *Evangelii Gaudium*. I had forgotten what a joyful and creative document it is. In this conference we are to focus on its reception and what it still summons us to do. The whole document is a meditation on the Holy Spirit as the protagonist of evangelisation. I will begin by saying briefly why this bound to be alarming for us all: too much for some people. Then I will look more closely at the paragraphs about which I have been asked to speak: 34 to 39 and 115 to 118.

If the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of evangelisation, we must let ourselves be caught up in his ‘unruly freedom’ (22). We cannot be completely in control of our lives. Jesus tells Nicodemus: ‘The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ (John 3.8). This is at the core of the Pope’s spirituality. Francis writes: ‘There is no greater freedom than that of allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills.’ (280).

This is a direct challenge to the spirit of our society, which is ruled by what Francis calls, ‘the technocratic paradigm.’¹ Everything must be administered, measured, controlled. But discipleship is a risky business. You do not know where it will take you or what it will demand. We say in English: ‘If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.’

Our society is afraid of risk. Five hundred years ago, religious orders sent young people to preach the gospel in Asia, knowing that many would die of disease, be captured by pirates and if they arrived, be martyred. Would we dare to do that today? So some responses to *Evangelii Gaudium* spring from the disturbing challenge it offers. It is alarming to fall into the hands of

¹ Laudato Si, para 10 et passim

the living God (Hebrews 10.31) ! Herbert McCabe OP liked to say: ‘If you love, you will get hurt and maybe killed. But if you do not love, you are dead already.’

The adventure of faith is not our abandonment to a merely random fate. Francis uses the suggestive idea of ‘processes’ which give priority to time over space. ‘What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity’. The Holy Spirit is generative in our lives, unfolding them with a fecundity we cannot anticipate.

Let us look at the first group of paragraphs that the organisers have asked me to consider; 34 to 39 and see what sorts of processes are to be embraced. Here Pope Francis insists that our evangelisation must proclaim with utter clarity the essence of our faith. I quote: ‘Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured!’ (39). We must not let the nuances and subtleties of our moral theology, good as they are, obscure the fundamental message.

There is a hierarchy of truth. Secondary truth must not obscure the central message. In the social media, with its instantaneous broadcast of simplified slogans and sound bites, nuance is lost. Pope Paul VI wrote a sensitive, rich and humane encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. To his horror, it got reduced to a single headline: Pope bans pill!

This unambiguous focus on the God’s limitless love and mercy frightens some because it could be misunderstood. If we reach out to welcome the divorced and remarried, might this not be perceived as undermining the institution of marriage? If the Pope says of homosexuals, ‘Who am I to judge?’, might not people think that gay sex and even gay marriage is OK? Focusing on the absolute centrality of love might spread confusion about the Church’s moral teaching. Those who wish to be safe don’t like ‘perplexity’.

Yes, the Pope might be misunderstood, but so was Jesus. ‘The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ (Luke 15.2 If we let the Holy Spirit’s unruly freedom work in our lives, we shall be impelled to do things that shall be misunderstood. If we pray with people of other faiths, or reach out to the gay community, or embrace the poor, or seek a way forward for the divorced and remarried, we

shall be misunderstood. But if we do not take that risk, we shall never preach the gospel at all. Secondly, the media will certainly misunderstand the Pope but this does not mean that the people of God will. To assert that they think that this message of unconditional love and mercy is a license of unrestrained immorality is to have contempt for the baptised. It is an act of clerical snobbery.

Later in the exhortation we read: ‘The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God.’ (119) So, the Church should trust that the baptised will understand when we take the risk of proclaiming the central message, despite the misrepresentations of the media and the Pope’s critics.

Some have reacted with suspicion to the insistence that we proclaim the central message of the gospel because they think this a dangerous simplification. Is not our rich tradition of moral teaching more sophisticated? But we must distinguish between simplicity and superficiality. Pope Francis warns us against the superficiality of contemporary culture: ‘In the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances’. (62). Adolfo Nicholas, the former superior general of the Jesuits, regarded the greatest threat to the world as the ‘globalisation of superficiality.’ The social media with its instant likes and dislikes, offers a world which is unreal, remote from the complexity of being human.

In such a world, the gospel only has a chance of being heard if our proclamation is simple. This does not make it superficial. It points to the unspeakable mystery of divine love. It is the simplicity of God which is beyond all words. G. K. Chesterton records that a lady he knew ‘picked up a book of selections from St Thomas Aquinas, with a commentary; and began hopefully to read a section with the innocent heading, “The Simplicity of God”. She then laid the book down with a sigh and said: “Well, if that’s His simplicity, I wonder what His complexity is like.”²’ The divine simplicity is shown more in what we *do* than what we *say*. Chesterton wrote that ‘the things that [St Francis of Assisi] did were more imaginative than the things he said...From the moment when he rent his robes and flung them at his father’s feet to

² G.K. Chesterton *St Thomas Aquinas*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1943, p.x

the moment when he stretched himself in death on the bare earth in the pattern of the cross, his life was made up of these unconscious attitudes and unhesitating gestures³.’

Francis, like John Paul II before him, has a genius for gestures that *speak* of our salvation. From the moment that he knelt on the balcony and asked for the blessing of the crowd, to his washing of the foot of the Muslim girl on Maundy Thursday, to the hug he gave to the man covered with terrible tumours, his actions speak more than words. He quotes St Thomas Aquinas, ‘The foundation of the New Law is in the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is manifested in the faith which *works* through love’. (37). Simple acts incarnate profound truths.

Our faith is in the happening of God in our midst. Francis writes that ‘Christ’s resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force.’ (276). Our evangelisation is not the communication of information but a sort of sharing in that happening now. This is what Cornelius Ernst OP, called ‘the genetic moment’. ‘Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love.’ ‘Behold I make all things new’ (Revelation 21.5).

The happening of grace may be best shared through drama, the dramatic painting of artists like Caravaggio, or the recent play by a young French Dominican, Adrien Candiard OP, *Pierre et Mohamed*⁴, which explores the friendship between Blessed Pierre Claverie OP, one of the Algerian martyrs, and Mohamed Boukichi, his young Muslim driver who was also killed. It was played on the evening of the beatifications in Algeria, watched by Mohamed’s mother, who kissed the actor playing her son.

So if we surrender to the Holy Spirit, we shall be led out of our depth and impelled to say and do things that puzzle and provoke our contemporaries. Do we have the courage of Extinction Rebellion? What gestures can we enact that will touch the imagination of our contemporaries so that their hearts burn within them (Luke 24.32)? Jesus ate and drank with prostitutes and tax collectors; Pope Francis has held pizza parties for the poorest of the poor in the square of St Peter’s. What must we do, even at the risk of being misunderstood? Don’t let’s just write another document!

³ *St Francis of Assisi*, Hodder and Routledge, London 1939, p.106

⁴ TALLANDIER (16 janvier 2018)

The next set of paragraphs on which the organisers invited me to comment are 115 to 118. They focus on the evangelisation of culture. Culture ‘has to do with the lifestyle of a given society, the specific way in which its members relate to one another, to other creatures and to God. Understood in this way, culture embraces the totality of a people’s life.’ (115) Every culture is a way of being alive. How does the Holy Spirit engage with all the multiple ways in which people live?

I will focus briefly on three questions. How do our lives witness to the Holy Spirit? How is the gospel both enriched by and critical of every culture? And finally, how does the Church embrace the diversity of human lives and ways of thinking?

Every culture is a way of being alive. As such it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit who we confess in the Creed to be ‘the giver of life’. Elizabeth Johnson writes, ‘The Latin word translated as Giver of Life, *vivificantem*, shines a spotlight on the dynamism that is intended. The Spirit is the vivifier, the one who quickens, animates, stirs, enlivens, gives life even now while engendering the life of the world to come⁵’.

Here the gospel meets the thirst of many young people. They want to really live. In the war zones of the world, survival may be all that one can hope for, but if a basic security is achieved, the question becomes: How can I be fully alive? Searching on their iPhones for what is going on elsewhere, the quest is for the action, real life! The Beetle John Lennon wrote: ‘Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans.’⁶ He is not far from Saint John Henry Newman’s warning: ‘Fear not that thy life shall come to an end, but rather fear that it shall never have a beginning.’⁷

That is the fear of billions of young people. So evangelisation is our encounter with the one who said, ‘I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly’ (John 10.10). This contradicts what Francis calls ‘the tomb psychology’ which ‘slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum.’ (83). If we are alive in the Spirit, we shall attract all who hunger to live. What does this look like?

⁵ *Ask the Beasts*, p.128

⁶ A sentence first attributed to Allen Saunders.

⁷ Quoted by Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe, *Thinking through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018), p. 103.

Being alive for a Christian is paradoxical. We love life so much we are prepared to die. Martyrs witness to the ultimate plenitude of life, which is to become a gift. Xavier Beavois' film about the Tibherine monks of Algeria, *Des hommes et des dieux*, 'Of gods and men', electrified the imagination of millions of people. A small community of Trappists became caught up in the violence of Algeria in the 1990s. They stayed knowing that it would probably cost them their lives. They were beatified a year ago. As they face death, they became alive, each in his own unique way.

The Spirit, the giver of life, invites us to risk everything. Christianity is not a safe religion. It should have a health and safety warning. Daniel Berrigan SJ loved to say: 'If you want to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood.'⁸ Few of us will be called to die for our faith, but each of us witnesses to the Lord the giver of life by becoming a gift. Maybe by taking the risk of giving ourselves to another person for life in marriage, or joining a religious order, or daring to be a teacher in an inner city school. This is what Blessed Pierre Claverie OP called 'white martyrdom', becoming a gift in all that one does and is. As Pope Francis says, 'I am a mission on this earth.' (273).

The encounter of the gospel with other cultures involves a certain reciprocity. The truth of faith is to be proclaimed and also to be discovered. We bring the richness of our faith but discover that the Holy Spirit has already been at work before us, waiting to be named. A culture is a way of life, and all that truly lives is a fruit of the Spirit. We say in the Eucharistic prayer, 'you give life to *all things* and make them holy.'

First we must dare to preach. Francis quotes John Paul II: "there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord."⁹ (EG 110) The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. We dare to proclaim the truths of our faith, that a man who was divine was born of a virgin, and that he died but was raised to new life. Won't we just be laughed at? Sometimes Yes. But we dare to proclaim these teachings because we believe them to be true and human beings are made for the truth. In the Dominican Constitutions, it is said that human beings have a *propensio ad veritatem*, an inclination to the truth. We trust that they will resonate at some deep level in our hearer's minds, perhaps just a whisper. Human beings need the truth to live, as birds need air and fish, water.

⁸ Jim Forest, *At Play in the Lions' Den: A biography and Memoir of Daniel Berrigan*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2017, frontispiece

⁹ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [*Ecclesia in Asia*](#) (6 November 1999), 19: AAS 92 (2000), 478.

Edith Stein was raised in a family of observant Jews, but eventually she became an atheist and a philosopher. But she stayed up all night reading the autobiography of St Teresa of Avila. When she finished she said, “This is the truth. The human instinct for the truth recognised here that for which she searched.

A vast challenge for our evangelisation is to find ways of proclaiming the great teachings of the Church, above all the Creed, in ways that resonate in the hearts and minds of our hearers. They embody the truth for which we are made. They are deeply critical of the ways in which contemporary culture is deformed by what Francis calls ‘the technocratic paradigm.’ That is a topic we have not time to explore now.

But the preacher goes to search for the truth to other cultures. Whatever is creative, fresh and imaginative is, perhaps unknowingly, a fruit of the Holy Spirit who has gone before us. John Paul II again: ‘every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived. In this way, the Church takes up the values of different cultures and becomes *sponsa ornata monilibus suis*, “the bride bedecked with her jewels”’. (EG 116)

Anyone who has insight into the wonderful, messy, complex life of human beings is our ally, regardless of whether they believe or not. Everyone who understands the joy and suffering of falling in love, raising a family, making mistakes and trying to stand up again, has truth to share with us. So we need both the confidence to proclaim the truths of our faith, and the humility to learn what they mean from any wise person. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke described his role as ‘to be among what is human, to see everything and reject nothing.’¹⁰ Nothing human is alien to Christ. St Dominic wanted his brethren to be beggars, eager to accept the wisdom of anyone whom we meet. All truth is of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the Spirit is the one who brings harmony out of difference. EV 117: ‘The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is he who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony.’ Reconciled difference is fruitful. Difference engenders life. We are all the fruit of the difference between male and female. Without difference, there would be no life!

¹⁰ September 4th 1908, Briefe 1907 – 1914, p. 48 Quoted by Mark Patrick Hederman *Dancing with Dinosaurs: A spirituality for the Twenty-First Century*, The Columba Press, Dublin 2011 p. 84

But the global culture encourages a fear of difference. The algorithms of Google and Facebook steer us towards people who think like us. Jonathan Franzen, the American novelist, says, ‘nonconforming voices stay silent for fear of being flamed or trolled or unfriended. The result is a silo in which, whatever side you’re on, you feel absolutely right to hate what you hate.’¹¹

The fear of difference fuels populism and polarisation. Modernity is marked by the paradox that in a world of instant global communication there is an increasing tribalisation and polarisation. This has afflicted the Church too. Especially in the United States, sharp divisions are rising between people of opposed theological visions. There are even harsh criticisms of the Pope himself, which would have been unthinkable ten years ago. There are threats of schism. How are we to react?

First of all, this fear of difference is utterly alien to Catholicism. The delight in difference is in our very DNA. Four gospels in one New Testament, and a Bible embracing the Old and the New Testaments. Our Saviour embraces the unimaginable difference of God and human. This is the centre of our life giving faith, fertile with healing. To let our minds be seduced by the tribalism of our time would be a surrender of what is most Catholic. Let us not be afraid of those with other ways of seeing the Church.

Secondly, these conflicts are never just about ideas. Underlying them is always a rivalry for power. The book of Genesis is the story of successive rivalries. Adam and Eve’s perception of God as their rival; Cain’s murderous rivalry with Abel, then the mothers of Isaac and Ishamel, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. Our story begins with sibling rivalry, unmasked and overcome.

The Holy Spirit summons us beyond rivalry and power games. The Spirit’s power is the fecund embrace of difference. We surrender to the Spirit’s power in refusing to see others as our competitors. This is surely why the Pope refuses to fight his critics, for that would be to play the same power game. They are our brothers and sisters in the Lord. If we surrender to the Spirit’s power, who knows where we shall be led.

So, let us dare to embark on the risky adventure of faith. In this age of sound bites, we must proclaim the central message, of infinite love and forgiveness. This may be best expressed by what we do, startling gestures of love. We shall be misunderstood, but we must trust the people of God. They have received the Spirit.

¹¹ ‘Is it too late to save the world? *The Guardian* November 4th 2017

We proclaim the truths of our faith, confident that they are not alien to the human heart. But we also need to be open to anyone who understands the truth of human experience. Finally, the Spirit invites us to be free of all rivalry and power games. Where there is the encounter with difference, there is life.