

EVANGELII GAUDIUM:
THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL AS ITINERARY OF A PONTIFICATE

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Ten years have passed since the promulgation of *Evangelii Gaudium*. In retrospect and with gratitude, we now see how, in his first Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis laid out the foundations of his magisterial teaching. The light of faith leads to the joy of the Gospel, and from the joy of the Gospel, welcomed and lived, springs the awareness that we are called to recognise and live with one another as siblings.

The Aparecida *Final Document* constitutes a fundamental source and reference for *Evangelii Gaudium*. These roots are worth emphasising here we see how reflection that grew in the soil of a regional Church – in this case, that of the Latin American continent – can become a paradigm of understanding and a hermeneutical key to rethink the presence of the Church throughout the world.

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis as bishop of Rome synthesises and illustrates the fruit of the ecclesial debate that took place in Aparecida. Bringing the experiential treasure of the Latin American Church from the periphery to the centre, he imagines the path to be followed by the whole Catholic Church and states prophetically: "I dream of a missionary option capable of transforming everything" (cf. EG 27).

Little by little, we grasp the reach and scope that those words hint at: we are all “missionary evangelisers”, all siblings, all called to respond to the cry of the poor and of the earth.

Evangelii gaudium also foreshadows a varied programme: not only about relaunching an evangelisation drive *ad extra*, addressed to those now far away, non-Christians and those who have ceased practicing their faith; not only an evangelisation that, taking up the challenges of the present, restores the dignity of all the baptised faithful, calling especially the laity to take up responsibility for being witnesses of hope and instruments of charity in everyday life.

But also, an evangelisation that takes place *ad intra*, within the Church, as a choice to “walk together” as siblings. Here the diversity of charisms and ministries are an opportunity to rediscover the community of service that characterized the beginnings of Christianity: “See how the love one another.” At the same time, this diversity is dynamic, an energy that emerges from communion as unity in differences. Together, these two features are complementary and necessary to each other.

When we focus on the coherent development in the sequence that leads from *Evangelii Gaudium* to *Laudato si'* and then to *Fratelli tutti*, the theme of the missionary nature of the Church emerges as a guiding thread which also revives some of the insights of Vatican II. In fact, in their Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers wished to assert as a permanent duty of the Church to keep on discerning “in depth the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel” (GS 4).

The programme outlined in *Evangelii Gaudium* updates and clarifies this affirmation of the Council, showing how, in taking the path of missionary transformation, the Church today is given the opportunity to go beyond that series of dialectical oppositions (e.g., between doctrine and pastoral, universal and local, Church and world) that have often weakened its action and rendered its debate sterile.

It is through dialogue and encounter with history and with today's world, fragmented and battered as it is by “a third world war fought piecemeal”, that awareness in the Church is maturing its awareness that, in order to adhere and conform to Christ the Lord, it is called to set out again as the People of God, alongside the entire human family. In *Laudato si'* this is expressed as the need to take the path of conversion in four different directions: pastoral, synodal, social and ecological.

At the same time, in order for this “integral conversion” to take place without taking flight from reality – a constant concern in the Pope’s thinking – we must commit ourselves to living as friends, indeed as siblings.

This is where *Fratelli tutti* is headed: if there is no communion, if there is no friendship and fraternity, both in society and in the Church, then it will actually not be possible to achieve justice and peace or to strive successfully for the common good, for human advancement or to defend the rights and dignity of the human person. From communion flows synodality that, through participation, opens up to mission, identifying new and creative ways of inculturating the proclamation of the Gospel.

The articulation of this magisterium, which has emerged over the course of a decade, was in fact already implicitly expressed in the most iconic image of *Evangelii gaudium*: the polyhedron, “which reflects the convergence of all its parts” (EG 236), a space in which all are present: the young, the elderly, the poor, the immigrants...

The polyhedron thus becomes a metaphor for fraternity, in which the unique potential of each individual – with their culture, their history, their talents – contributes as a factor of renewal in pursuing the “dream” (FT 8) of a reconciled world, without war, without violence, in which caring for our common home is a source of healing and justice for all.

The Church draws the joy of the Gospel from the encounter with the Risen Lord who, passing through the humiliation of the Cross, takes upon himself the sin, weakness, miseries and poverty of the human race, so that all might share in his victory over death.

It is this joy, which fills our hearts every time we feel the living and true presence of Jesus where two or three are gathered in his name (cf. Mt 18:20), that drives this Church – which we confess as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” but (with Francis) also as “undivided and multifaceted”, “multicentred and synodal” – to put out into the deep (cf. Lk 5:1-11).

The joy of the Gospel is the hidden and penetrating force that gives our feet wings and urges the Church to cross the threshold of “stable” certainties and securities “achieved”, and so go beyond referring to its own self and move towards the margins, in order to look right at that suffering humanity often considered as mere “waste”; as inevitable and acceptable “collateral damage”; as “necessary sacrifice”; as an “offering” owed to the idols of consumption.

It is the joy of the Gospel that is the hallmark of holiness. Its highest expression consists precisely in perceiving and experiencing all the abundance and depth of God's love when we live in the joy of giving (cf. Cor 9:7). The joy of the Gospel, gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22), does not turn us into angels or celestial beings gazing up at the heavens. The joy of the Gospel humanises us, it roots us in the present, it grounds us on to earth, it instils in us the courage to recognise Christ in the face of our injured siblings lying by the roadside, and it has us embrace the painful circumstances of those mired in misery. Yes, this is *Evangelii gaudium*.