

EVANGELIUM GAUDIUM AND GOSPEL SHARING



Evangelization – a spontaneous, joyful action

Holy Father Pope Francis begins his encyclical by stating that evangelization is a task filled with joy and done with great joy (1). It originates in a joyful encounter with the Lord Jesus (3, 7). It is this encounter with Jesus which liberates us from narrow self-absorption in life and opens us to enriching friendship with God and man making us fully human and fills us with joy to proclaim Jesus in loving service (8). For God repeated acts of forgiving us our sins out of his mercy is always acts of joy and filled with tenderness (3). God never gets tired of forgiving us. It is this awareness that God is in so deep love with us, making him to forgive us with such tender love, which makes us to proclaim his mercy with such joy. The cross always reminds us to rejoice in the Lord (5). Holy Father gives us several examples from the NT where proclamation of the gospel led to rejoicing (Hail Mary ... rejoice!, Lk.1:28; .. my joy has been fulfilled, Jn. 3:29, Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, Lk.10:21; .. that my joy may be in you ... Jn.15:11; your sorrow will turn into joy, Jn. 16:20). The evangelizer is not one who is dejected with life, discouraged and anxious, but one who is aglow with the experience of the joy of Christ who liberates (10).

Jesus Christ is the first and greatest evangelizer and all evangelizing activity comes from him and only through his inspiration. In every instance and in every true evangelizer, the evangelizing activity begins with divine initiative, for he has loved us first (1 Jn. 4:19) (12). Anyone who begins evangelizing activity centred on himself, will fail and will not find joy in it. We need to discern if

those who feel tired, bored or frightened about the challenge of evangelizing really have encountered Jesus and if the evangelizing action is initiated in them by that Christ-encounter.

We have also a parallel here with Gospel Sharing. There are a lot of people who enjoy doing Gospel Sharing and there are others who are bored with it. Thousands of people all over the world have encountered the Lord through Gospel Sharing. Two years ago this story came out from West Bengal. A poor Catholic lady told her Hindu friend in the neighbourhood about her Gospel Sharing experience. It generated a desire in the Hindu lady to attend the Gospel Sharing meeting. In that meeting the sharing of the people touched her so much that she asked for a Bible. She came to the next meeting with her bible and asked permission from the Gospel Sharing group to share like the others. She did share and was filled with such joy that she actively got involved in all the SCC activities. Some months later, when the SCC had to elect a leader, they elected the Hindu lady as their leader. Or to share another story, in 2011 I was invited to the parish in Floricent at the outskirts of St. Louis, USA, to introduce Gospel Sharing to the parishioners. People were invited, but only 9 of them came for the Saturday evening session. The following morning I presided over the main Mass at 8:30 am and preached the homily on the importance sitting around the Word of God as a way to discern God's will for us. For the final session after the Mass only 7 were there. But that small group formed an SCC in their neighbourhood and continue doing Gospel Sharing and they have decided to offer all the sick and shut-in persons lift whenever they want to go out – for shopping, to doctor or to church. These are two stories among thousands of others where Gospel Sharing led to joy in the whole SCC, which makes them to respond in much freedom, love and joy. For those sitting in the GS group, this joyful sharing is spontaneous and inspired by the living Word.

It is the Gospel which gives meaning, beauty and attractiveness to our communication. It should be based on the heart of Christ's message, not on secondary aspects. (34). Pastoral ministry is not imposition of multitude of doctrines, but focus on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand and most appealing and most necessary (35). We must simplify the message, without losing its depth in truth (35). The integrity of the gospel message must not be deformed (39). In this sense it is most justified to insist on making SCCs centred on and rooted in the Word. The evangelizing activity flows from the Christ-encounter – a distinct encounter to each of the persons sitting there and yet leading to union of hearts and souls among them. It is a distinct encounter because each person is touched in a very personal way in his/her life and sharing it leads to deeper communion of hearts.

When we read and meditate on the Word of God, the central message is the immense love God is offering us which one shares humbly as his testimony and he is open to learn from others. (128). This is exactly what we do at the 5th step of Gospel Sharing. The preaching of gospel to a culture creates a new synthesis (129) which can give new joy and meaning to people's lives.

“Yet if he does not take time to hear God's word with an open heart, if he does not allow it to touch his life, to challenge him, to impel him, and if he does not devote time to pray with that word, then he will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow impostor. But by acknowledging his poverty and desiring to grow in his commitment, he will always be able to abandon himself to Christ, saying in the words of Peter: “I have no silver and gold, but what I have I give you” (Acts 3:6). The Lord wants to make use of us as living, free and creative beings who let his word enter their own hearts before then passing it on to others. Christ's message must truly penetrate and possess the preacher, not just intellectually but in his entire being.” (151) We see this happening in SCCs.

The 6th step of Gospel Sharing is deeply reflected in the following text : *“Clearly, whenever the New Testament authors want to present the heart of the Christian moral message, they present the essential requirement of love for one’s neighbour: “The one who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the whole law... therefore love of neighbour is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom13:8, 10).”* (161) Biblical exhortations are not about mere conceptual explanations, but *“they summon us so forcefully to brotherly love, to humble and generous service, to justice and mercy towards the poor”*. (194) God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself “became poor” (2 Cor 8:9). *“The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor.”* (197) *“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. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.”* (198)

When SCCS meet regularly and open themselves to the living Word, they are spontaneously moved in love to serve the poor in their neighbourhood.

Evangelization – a call to communion and a Community Task

“Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but 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)

This is precisely what SCCs try to do – to bring the Church to the peripheries as bishop Bosco Penha of Bombay says often too, the Word to nearer home and take up the task of evangelizing our neighbourhoods. The Word, as the Pope says, has unruly freedom and surpasses our calculations and ways of thinking (22).

“An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (1 Jn. 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take initiative to go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy” (24).

Thanks be to God; SCCs bring back to our huge anonymous parishes that much desired sense of community, which helps in discerning the will of God together. When they continuously gather around the Word, they have the unique chance as a community to seek the will of God for them in their daily life situation and respond with joy. Indeed, it is the Lord who initiates this joy in them.

“Many try to escape from others and take refuge in the comfort of their privacy or in a small circle of close friends, renouncing the realism of the social aspects of the gospel. For just as some people want a purely spiritually Christ, without flesh and without the cross, they also want their interpersonal relationship provided by sophisticated equipment, by screens and systems which can be turned on and off on command. Meanwhile the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of face –to – face encounter with other, with their physically presence which challenges us , with their pain and

with their pleas, with their joy which infects in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with other.” (88)

*“Here and now, especially “little flock” (Luke 12: 32), the Lord’s disciples are called to live as a community which is the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5: 13-16). **We are called to bear witness to a constantly new way of living together in fidelity to the gospel (bold mine).** Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community.” (92) We promote SCCs as the New Way of Being church together rooted in the Word.*

“I especially ask every Christian in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and an attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another and how you encourage and accompany one another: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciple, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13 :35). (98)

SCCs is the best place and means to build up genuine fraternal communion and care for one another made visible.

Evangelization Demands Structural Renewal

A diocese is a concrete manifestation of the one, holy Catholic and apostolic Church of Christ and it is truly present and operative there and it is the joy of that local church to bring Christ to every strata and socio-cultural settings of society there. (30). We consider that SCCs help the diocese to achieve this vision in a very concrete and localized way involving the people of the area. Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Christ lovingly urges the Church to reform her, purify her continually as she goes forward in her pilgrim journey (26). The institutions of the Church should not be a hindrance to this process, but itself must be renewed in this process (26).

“Parish is a communion of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty comes to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.”(28)

Referring to parish as communion of communities makes SCCs a basic platform for the task of evangelization and brings church nearer to home and makes them springs of renewal and review. Holy Father mentions here SCCs among other structures as enriching and bringing new fervour in evangelization (29).

“Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: 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. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so

many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us false security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "give them something to eat" (Mk. 6:37) (no.49).

Anyone involved in SCCs will be enthralled by this beautiful statement of Holy Father since he/she can identify with that "going out" in joy to the discomfiting call of God to serve with love those people in need in their neighbourhoods.

Pope speaks of the ineffectiveness of excessive centralization; it can only complicate and hinder church's missionary spirit and power (32). He invites all to be bold and creative in searching for ways to evangelize; but he warns us that if the community is not involved in this search the efforts may not yield much result. It is important not to walk alone but to trust and rely on one another in this quest(33). St. John Paul II in ***Redemptoris Missio*** affirms that SCCs decentralize the parish and makes them vibrant in parish life and activities (RM 51).

We Need New Leadership Style

No. 44 stresses on the importance of pastoral leaders accompanying the people at every stage. We lay great emphasis in our leadership training on this aspect.

Today's advanced means of human communication make living together, encountering and supporting one another hugely easy. If we take this root encountering Christ leads to new relationships with all the people and greater evangelization possibilities (87).

"Today more than ever we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes which call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit, so that they can protect the sheep from wolves who would scatter the flock. We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives." (171)

Each SCC animator, especially the parish priests, needs to reflect on this. Respectful and compassionate listening is central to becoming authentic community builders.

Hence there is a need for "a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery".[134] Reaching a level of maturity where individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience. (171) Gospel Sharing is a wonderful pedagogy which helps everyone, even very ordinary poor people, to experience God unfolding the mysteries of the Kingdom already present in their midst.

“One who accompanies others has to realize that each person’s situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without. The Gospel tells us to correct others and to help them to grow on the basis of a recognition of the objective evil of their actions (cf. Mt 18:15), but without making judgments about their responsibility and culpability” (cf. Mt 7:1;Lk 6:37).(172)

Special Invitation to Laity

The lay people who are the vast majority of the people of God are not aware of their mission grounded in their baptism and confirmation in many places due to lack of formation and due to excessive clericalism which keeps them away from discussions making.(102)

Church has a pilgrim people are called to embrace the task of evangelization which transcend any institutional expression. (111)

Jesus did not tell the apostle to form an exclusive and elite group. He said : “ Go and make disciple of all nation” (Mt 28: 19), “ There is neither Jew nor Greek..... for you are all in one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

As part of his mysterious love for humanity God Furnishes the totally of the faithful with an *instinct of faith - sensus fidei* - which helps them to discern what is truly of God, (119)

Every Christian is invited to encounter Christ in his life and is necessarily a missionary disciple, like the Samaritan woman who became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus (Jn 4 :39) . (120)

Maturing as evangelizer constantly demand ongoing training leading to deepening of love and a clearer witness to the Gospel.(121)

In the SCCs we have thousands of lay people responding freely and lovingly to call of God to become a communion in the Lord and participate actively and joyfully in the task of evangelizing people.

In conclusion, I want recommend to all SCCs to study ***Evangelii Gaudium*** and draw inspiration from our Holy Father Pope Francis to experience the joy of evangelizing together.

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