

ADVENT 2014

"Becoming a Radiant Witness"



Published by Catholic Women of the Diocese of Birmingham

CWDB is an Apostolate of the Diocese of Birmingham, Alabama



Advent 2014

It has been more than a year since I approached Sister Marie Leonard, Director of the Office of Lay Ministry, about organizing a diocesan group of women who would not only unite the women of the diocese, but also be a group I could call upon when needed.

A number of women, who are already involved in women's groups around the diocese, and Sister Marie, met to ascertain this vision. A Coordination Team formed and developed a mission statement with goals based on the vision. I am happy to say that I have approved this new apostolate, the Catholic Women of the Diocese of Birmingham in Birmingham, Alabama, (CWDB).

The mission of CWDB is to foster in women a greater desire to know, love and serve Jesus Christ and His Church by promoting spiritual growth, educational opportunities, apostolic projects, and social events in a community founded on love for each other and being faithful to the Magisterium of the Church.

All women of the diocese are welcome to join the Catholic Women of the Diocese of Birmingham (CWDB). There are no commissions or permanent committees other than the Coordination Team. At this time, it is not an affiliate of a national organization. This group does not replace nor interfere with any other women's groups in the diocese. There are no membership dues.

As part of the Coordination Team's responsibility to implement the stated goals of the Mission Statement, Mrs. Terry Thompson, a member of the Coordination Team and Deacon Daniel J. Laurita from St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Madison, Alabama, encourage CWDB to use the *Advent Study Guide and Reflection Booklet*. The booklet, written by Terry and Deacon Dan, is based on the First Exhortation of the Holy Father, *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*

I am proud and happy to say that CWDB has published this guide to promote spiritual growth during the Season of Advent. I encourage you to get your free copy. It is available for individual use and/or group study in booklet form or on-line from the CWDB. <http://www.bhmcatholicwomen.com>

Devotedly Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Robert J. Baker, S. T. D.
Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama

Joy of the Gospel

An Advent Study Guide



Introduction

Since the publication of the Holy Father's Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, much is written about it, much has been presumed about it and, equally, much has been misunderstood about it. As suggested by the name, the principal theme involves the need for a joyful proclamation of the Gospel to the entire world. The following words taken from the Exhortation: "With Christ, joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation, I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come."

Archbishop Rino Fisichella presented the document at a Vatican press conference and summarized its main message this way:

If we were to sum up Pope Francis's Evangelii Gaudium in a few words, we could say that it is an Apostolic Exhortation written around the theme of Christian joy in order that the Church may rediscover the original source of evangelization in the contemporary world.

Pope Francis offers this document to the Church as a map and guide to her pastoral mission in the near future.

It is an invitation to recover a prophetic and positive vision of reality without ignoring the current challenges.

Pope Francis instills courage and urges us to look ahead and despite the present crisis, make the cross and the resurrection of Christ once again our 'the victory banner'.

These few words of the good archbishop, in fact, synthesize the 51,000 words of the Exhortation. It is the size of a large novel. Moreover, would probably take the average reader five hours to complete.

An apostolic exhortation is one of many ways in which the Church expresses its Magisterium. Most contemporary Catholics are familiar with an encyclical, which is a formal papal letter that circulates among the bishops of the Church for the edification of the faithful. It is an expression of the teaching authority of the Pope. This document, however, is an apostolic exhortation. While an apostolic exhortation is higher in authority than many other papal writings, it does not define Church doctrine and is not a legislative text. Ordinary exhortations are not magisterial.

To exhort means to rally or to encourage. When we were students, we were encouraged by our teachers. As parents, we often found ourselves encouraging our children. For example, take the time you taught your child to ride a bicycle. You ran alongside of them. When they finally got the rhythm, you ran close by encouraging them to keep pedaling so that they would stay erect and master the art of riding a bicycle to reach a destination. In much the

same way, this exhortation is an encouragement for each of us to keep pedaling on the Christian journey endeavoring always to reach the destination of being one with Christ and his Church.

The intent of this four-week Advent guide is to offer points of contact between the written word of the Exhortation and the lives of the active believer. The guide, published by the Catholic Women of the Diocese of Birmingham, Alabama, (CWDB) is for individual and/or group use.

Each week we will look at the Sunday readings, seeking a connection found in the Exhortation. Then, on the days of the week during the Advent season, we will focus our attention on the details that emanate from the reading.

- **Week One** will be a prayer-centered self-examination of our understanding of the Gospel. An unexamined life can be a useless life.
- **Weeks Two and Three** will be an examination of our own lives and communities. We will ask where we stand and where our portion of society stands in light of the Papal assessment found in the Introduction to the Exhortation.
- **Week Four**, the final week of Advent, will necessitate an in-depth reading of the document and composition of a plan of action that will challenge us.

May the richness of the *Joy of the Gospel, EG*, combined with the beauty of the Advent Scriptures, help prepare our hearts to receive the Christ Child with love, peace, and joy. In solidarity with the Holy Father, let us turn to Mary, “*mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones*”¹ to pray for us.

Mother of the Living Gospel - A Prayer of Pope Francis

Mary, Virgin, and Mother

You who, moved by the Holy Spirit welcomed the word of life

in the depths of your humble faith:

as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,

help us to say our own “yes”

to the urgent call, as pressing as ever,

to proclaim the good news of Jesus

Filled with Christ’s presence,

you brought joy to John the Baptist,

making him exult in the womb of his mother.

Brimming over with joy,

you sang of the great things done by God.

Standing at the foot of the cross with

unyielding faith,

you received the joyful comfort of the resurrection,

and joined the disciples in awaiting the Spirit
so that the evangelizing Church might be born.

Obtain for us now a new ardour born of the resurrection,
that we may bring to all the Gospel of Life
which triumphs over death.

Give us a holy courage to seek new paths,
that the gift of unfading beauty
may reach every man and woman.

Virgin of listening and contemplation,
Mother of love, Bride of the eternal wedding feast,
pray for the Church, whose pure icon you are,
that she may never be closed in on herself or lose her passion for establishing God's kingdom.



Star of the new evangelization,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth,
illuminating even the fringes of our world.
Mother of the living Gospel,
wellspring of happiness for God's little ones,
pray for us.

Amen. Alleluia

¹ Mother of the Living Gospel - A Prayer of Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, EG

Advent 2014



First Sunday of Advent	Sunday, November 30, 2014
Feast of St. Nicolas	Saturday, December 6, 2014
Second Sunday of Advent	Sunday, December 7, 2014
Immaculate Conception <i>(Holyday of Obligation)</i>	Monday, December 8, 2014
Our Lady of Guadalupe	Friday, December 12, 2014
Feast of St. Lucy	Saturday, December 13, 2014
Third Sunday of Advent <i>(Gaudete Sunday)</i>	Sunday, December 14, 2014
Fourth Sunday of Advent	Sunday, December 21, 2014
Christmas Eve	Wednesday, December 24, 2014
Christmas <i>(Holyday of Obligation)</i>	Thursday, December 25, 2014

Prepare your heart this Advent by reading daily and reflecting on small sections of the Holy Father's First Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, "Joy of the Gospel."



To read *Evangelii Gaudium* in its entirety, go to:

www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/index.htm



First Sunday of Advent

Reading 1: Is 63:16B-17 **Psalm** 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19 **Reading 2:** 1 Cor 1:3-9 **Gospel:** Mk 13:33-37

Be Watchful! Be Alert!

The key to the readings this Sunday is the theme of watchfulness as depicted in Mark's gospel. "Be watchful! Be Alert!" Jesus proclaims. Then he speaks about the man who leaves his home to travel abroad and leaves his servants "each with his own work." The principal work of the believer is to spread of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

What, then, is the content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? There are many places to for an answer. Perhaps the best place for us is in the words of the prayer provided for us at the end of Francis' Exhortation. Directed to Mary, the "mother of the living gospel" we invoke her to "help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice, and love of the poor." Are these not the contents of the Gospel? Therefore, take time this week to dwell on this content.

Today, we focus on our call to be a radiant witness. These two words together describe a mode of witnessing. One way to witness is to give a mere description of the facts. Another way to witness is to give an interpretation of facts. Which is your predominant mode of witnessing?

In light of the Gospel, do you just retell the story, or do you retell the story in connection to your life?

On this Sunday, recall a particular gospel passage. How does that gospel passage relate to your life? Write your thoughts down on paper.

Reflect or meditate on your thoughts. If you are in a group setting, invite each member to share his/her comments.

The Word of the Day

Monday Week 1 - Communion

We are all part of the family of God. It is as this family that we gather weekly for the celebration of Sunday Mass. As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. Because we believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, we are united. We are in communion.

How do you prepare to receive the gift of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion?

During this first week of Advent, spend an hour in prayerful adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. If you feel the need, go to confession this week.

Tuesday Week 1 - Service

The Holy Father reminds us in his Exhortation that we do not walk alone on our journey of faith and that the goal of our journey is to be of service to others. Service to a just cause rewards us with more real happiness and satisfaction more than any other venture of life. When you are helping others or volunteering in your parish or local community, your actions are an example of how to evangelize.

How will you bear radiant witness in service to others this week? Is there someone that you know that is in need? Have you hesitated to step out in love? Consult with a parish or community leader to find out if there is an immediate need that you can fill.

Wednesday Week 1 - Ardent

An ardent person is someone displaying strong enthusiasm or devotion. Is this an accurate description of you as a participant at Sunday Mass? How would a visitor describe your participation in the celebration? Do you join in the prayers of the community? Do you sit silently in your private world of prayer? Do you join in the singing? Do you wait for it to be over because you think that you do not sing well? God does not call the qualified...he qualifies the called. Do not be embarrassed to be passionate about God. How ardent is your flame? Is it bright enough to invite others to bask in its glow?

Thursday Week 1 - Generous Faith

Our life is an abundant life, a gift from God. Sister Bridget Haase, OSU, says, "All we need to do to cultivate this awareness is through three basic practices: Living in the Moment, Trusting in Divine Care and Experiencing God's Presence."

1. *Living in the Moment* - generous faith allows our spirit to be free to experience what we have received. List the blessings of each day. Develop an attitude of gratitude.
2. *Trusting in Divine Care* - a person with generous faith sits by the ocean with a dying person searching for seashells. Visit a homebound person. Sit with them and listen to their story.
3. *Experiencing God's Presence* - generous faith allows us to see the unique images of God to in the ordinary moments of life. Try to see God in someone that never seems to have time for you.

Friday Week 1 - Justice

Justice, as a virtue, is the constant and permanent determination to give everyone his or her rightful due. The individual right of each person is recognized under all circumstances. The rights in question are whatever belongs to a person as an individual who is distinct from the one who practices justice. Justice, then, as compared with charity, consists in the distinction between a person and his or her neighbor. Charity regards the neighbor as another self. Justice is concerned with what is legal and lawful.

In his poem, *Mother of the Living Gospel*, the Holy Father implores Mary to help us recognize the need for justice. Why is it important for a society to treat its members justly?

Saturday Week 1 - Love of the Poor

Some ways to determine the goodness of a parish community are how it cares for its sick members, how its grieving members are consoled, and what it does for the poor. Jesus was poor. He told us that the poor would always be with us. Bill Huebsch says, in a Group Reading Guide for the *Joy of the Gospel, EG*, "We are concerned for the poor because we believe in Christ, who was poor himself...The cry for justice that rises from the poor cannot be ignored by us... Jesus himself told us, 'You give them something to eat' (Mark 6:37)."²

Do you empathize with those who suffer? Have you ever been without food? Have you ever been so low on cash that you had to choose between keeping a roof over your head and keeping the utilities on in your home? Do you feel called to help others? How do you respond to the call to care for the poor?

² *The Joy of the Gospel, EG, a Group Reading Guide* by Bill Huebsch, page 87, Twenty-Third Publications, 2014.



Second Sunday of Advent

Reading 1: Is 40:1-5, 9-11

Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14

Reading 2: 2 Pt 3:8-14

Gospel Mk 1:1-8

“Prepare the Way of the Lord”

This year, as in all years, we meet the Preparer, John the Baptist. John comes on the scene exhorting his listeners to “prepare the way of the Lord.” The prophet uses many verbal phrases such as *comfort my people, speak tenderly, go up, cry out, and lead with care*. Verbs are words of action. They are the part of the sentence that gives the object an activity to accomplish. Each of us is the object of these phrases. Therefore, we must ask ourselves, directly, the following:

When was the last time you comforted someone?

When did you last hold your tongue and speak tenderly rather than harshly?

When was the last time you got up and left your zone of comfort?

When was the last time you actually spoke out against an injustice?

For each of these questions communicate to the group or to yourself your failures and successes.

Assess yourself today and throughout the coming week as we examine the ‘why’ behind our actions.

The Exhortation contributes some insight in its introduction. In effect, the Pope offers insight into what has made the path crooked.

He begins by saying “the greater danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent, yet covetous, heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasure and a blunted conscience” (§2)

On this Second Sunday of Advent, ask yourselves, or share with others, how has “consumerism” overtaken me? One silly measurement...is your Christmas tree up already. Did your Christmas season actually start on “Black Friday”? Now is your time to admit that you fell into the trap of consumerism.

The Word of the Day

Monday Week 2 - Desolation

Desolation oftentimes describes a landscape. We use desolation, for example, to describe the desert. From a distance, deserts appear to be empty spaces, devoid of greenery, and barren of any visible forms of life. Desolation, also describes a human condition. Webster’s Dictionary informs us that the root of the word is Latin, *de – out of* and *solus - alone*. To the Holy Father, the outcome of the circumstances of the present day result in us being alone or experiencing loneliness. How ironic it is that in a world connected by technology more than at any other time in history all of humanity is experiencing profound loneliness.

Identify the loneliness you have felt or are feeling. What are its sources? What can you do to overcome it? Can you identify someone in your life who suffers under loneliness? If so, what can you do to alleviate it?

Tuesday Week 2 -Anguish

We have heard of “road rage,” “workplace violence,” and “family violence.” These are all manifestations of pent-up anguish, an unresolved anger.

The psychotherapeutic world tells us that the first step to overcoming our anger is to identify its source and to let it go. On a relatively recent TV comedy, a woman visited a therapist to help her overcome the anger she had towards her husband. The therapist had her strike a pillow calling out her husband’s name to assist her in the venting of her anger. It seemed like a fun exercise. Try it. Hold a pillow in your arms and strike it, calling out the source of your anger. Did it help?

Anguish and anger, however, are not only the stuff of psychological dysfunction. More importantly, anger and anguish have a moral attribute. In fact, anger is one of the Seven Capital Sins of traditional moral theology. Through the ages, poets and painters have illustrated anger and the other six of these sins, pride, envy, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust in their major works. Chaucer speaks about it in his Canterbury tales, Dante places it on one of the terraces of his purgatory, and Giotto painted it on the walls of a Chapel in Padua.

Try using the internet to Google one of the works of Chaucer, Dante, and Giotto. Which image in these works best describes your sense of anger or anguish?

Wednesday Week 2 - Complacent

Complacency is an attitude that is marked by self-satisfaction or smugness. A complacent person sees no reason to expend any more energy. He or she is the one who cannot motivate themselves beyond their present place of comfort. All of us have been guilty of being complacent. Think of your senior year of high school. Soon after the second semester started, we began to suffer from “senioritis.” We gave the impression that we knew it all. In a sense, we threw in the towel. Did anything shake you out of your complacent “senioritis”? Share your story.

Francis understands the danger of complacency. Paradoxically, it drives our inertia. The complacency of an individual magnifies when that complacency becomes the trademark of a human society.

Complacent societies are societies that are near death. In essence, they have pulled the plug on life. Their mantra “we have always done it this way” makes them easy to identify. Can you identify complacent societies? What were the results of its complacency?

Are there any areas of complacency in your personal life?

Thursday Week 2 - Covetous

I heard the word covet for the first time in the Ten Commandments in religious education classes. It was also the first time I heard Sister Joseph Mary use a “bad word.” She said, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s ass!” This caused the whole class to giggle. Students repeated it incessantly in the schoolyard.

To covet is to have an intense desire for something. In itself, desire can be a good. Desire can be a motivator out of complacency. Desire for a better life can lead one to pursue an education. Desire for a new car can motivate one to save their money.

However, the Holy Father is not concerned with these good desires. He is concerned with the intense desire to obtain for yourself something that is beyond your reach that leads to unjust acts. More specifically, his concern is about the covetous behaviors of human communities. Our Catechism gives us some interesting examples of individual coveting that is undesirable. Citing the biblical book of Sirach we are reminded, “He who loves money never has enough money.” (CCC 2536) Other examples are “merchants who desire scarcity...so they can sell more dearly and buy more cheaply”; physicians who wish to treat more patients and make more money”; “lawyers who are eager for important cases and trials...so they can make more money” While these examples may seem far-fetched, they are very real.

Without hitching yourself to one political bandwagon or another, can you cite examples of societal covetousness? Give some examples of a misplaced desire that causes another to suffer unjustly.

Friday Week 2 - Frivolous Pursuit of Pleasure

Some of you may have heard of the *pleasure principle*. It was a theorem developed by Sigmund Freud. Freud proposes that man's response to the world comes from seeking the pleasurable and avoiding that which is not pleasurable. In a sense, it explains the success of human existence. It is, of course, more pleasurable to eat the beast than to have the beast eat you!

Pleasure is good according to the ancient philosophers known as the Epicureans. Ancient Stoics told us to avoid extreme pleasure. Of course, the middle ground is neither the complete ascetic avoidance of pleasure, nor the unbridled pursuit of pleasure. The *via media* is the sensible moderation of pleasure, or the acceptance of delayed satisfaction. The Catholic Church has never been opposed to pleasure. Think of the adage, "Wherever the Catholic Sun doth shine there is surely laughter and good red wine." Therefore, pleasure seeking is not the problem, but frivolous pleasure seeking is the problem... Something frivolous is something that is silly or pointless. Therefore, to focus on frivolous pleasures means that you are focusing on that which is silly or unimportant.

Identify a pleasure you seek that is frivolous. How much time do you spend watching television? How much time do you spend on social media? What pleasure did you earnestly seek in the past that has little or no impact on your life today? What pleasure do you seek today, more than likely, that will not matter in the future?

Saturday Week 2 - Blunted Conscience

Conscience is a great Catholic word. Our Church, in fact, speaks of conscience as "man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There, he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16). Much like the two crickets that sat on Pinocchio's shoulders, conscience gives humankind the opportunity to choose to do good or to do evil. One can access their conscience by the use of the faculty of reason rather than the faculty of passion. It is a choice that is made freely because "he cannot be forced to act contrary to his conscience nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters" (*Dignitatis Humane* 3§2).

Forming a proper conscience requires teaching. Forming a proper conscience requires telling and instructing. In essence, this means to align your conscience with the mind of the Church and of the content of the Gospel. Alignment is the matter of relying on the wisdom of the past as the source of a true conscience.

Negative obstacles can blunt a well-formed conscience. The blunting force is, more likely than not, the society in which we live. "In olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked upon as something shocking, now, anything goes, anything goes," says the lyricist.

Everyone has either relatives or themselves who often tell of the good old days. For reflection, think of an activity you engage in today. What kind of response would someone from the good old days have? Share that with a friend or the group. Do you find yourself today being less sensitive to violence, bad language, and sexual or societal misbehaviors?



Third Sunday of Advent

Reading 1: Is 61:1-2A, 10-11 **Psalm** Lk 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54 **Reading 2:** 1 Thes 5:16-24 **Gospel** Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

“I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘make straight the way of the Lord”

We continue our relationship with John the Baptist in this Sunday’s Gospel. In today’s pericope, a number of questions confront John. First, “who are you?” Then, “what are you?” The third question is “what do you have to say for yourself?” Finally, “why do you do what you do?”

John’s response shows he was acutely aware of himself. To the first, he says, “I am not the Christ.” To the second and third he admits to not being Elijah, or a prophet, but he does confess that his is “the voice crying out in the desert make straight the way of the Lord.” Finally, he knew what he was doing, he was baptizing, but his action was merely a prefiguring of the reality to come then, yet, an unrecognized one.

Ask yourself the primordial, existential questions ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘why’ about your relationship with God.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, the Holy Father offers some tools to answer these fundamental questions for ourselves in which he identifies certain groups of people. Let us deal with the first:

“There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.” Is this you? Do the great difficulties of life easily over power you, or maybe even the not-so-great difficulties? Name some of those difficulties, either major or minor. Were you able to overcome them? How did you do it? If they are still burdensome, then ask yourself why- why do you let fester that which faith and a relationship with Christ can alleviate? Citing his predecessor Francis reminds us “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

“Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” When you say these words in the midst of the liturgy, do you stop at your unworthiness or do you accept the healing presence of the Eucharistic Christ? Do you allow Him to transform you? An agnostic psychotherapist was once asked “Why do people come to your for treatment? His astute, but Christian response was “their inability to forgive or their inability to be forgiven.” Are you a forgiving person?

During the week before us, try to put yourselves in the groups of people Francis has identified. We do so first, to evaluate ourselves as evangelizers and second to evaluate whom it is we are evangelizing. Reflect upon how we can break out of any category that inhibits us and how we can help others to break out of their inhibiting category.

The Word of the Day

Monday Week 3 - Procrastinate

“Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met.” *Joy of the Gospel, EG - Paragraph 7*

The procrastinator is in this category. One who puts off until tomorrow what he or she could accomplish today is a procrastinator. Are you in this category? At one time or another, all of us are guilty of belonging to this category! For example, on the mundane level, we need to lose weight, but say I will begin my diet when I return from vacation. On a more serious note, though, I had an aunt who hid having a lump in her breast because she was afraid of what the doctor would tell her. Her procrastination led to her death. We can procrastinate out of fear, ignorance, or sheer laziness. The last reason, laziness, is the capital sin of sloth in the physical sense or acedias in the spiritual sense.

What have you put off doing physically? Name a project you wanted to accomplish and identify the real reason you have yet to begin. Are you afraid to start because you fear failing? Alternatively, is the reason ignorance? What must you do to begin?

Is there a relationship that you have avoided because of a past hurt? Is there a goal you have, but have failed to take the first step to accomplish it?

Count the conditions you have placed on your advancement. Now, count the opportunities you could have had if you removed those conditions. How would your life be different today?

Tuesday - Week 3 - Dejection

“Dejected, discourage, impatient or anxious” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* – Paragraph 10

To be dejected is to be sad and depressed, dispirited and downcast. It is to be disallowed an opportunity. Many of us have been dejected either by another person or by our circumstances. I wanted to go to a fancy military boarding school for high school. My parents could not afford it. I felt dejected. I honestly felt denied the opportunity. For a while, my sense of dejection was apparent in my attitude. Have you ever felt dejected? When did it happen? Where did it happen? How did happen? Did it involve another person?

When we lack courage or confidence, we become discouraged. The unkind actions and/or words by other people more often than not are the cause of discouragement. At other times, we allow ourselves to be discouraged because of an inner fear or phobia. Can you identify a sense of discouragement in your life? Did it come from another person who insisted that you could not do something or achieve a goal? Alternatively, did your discouragement come from an internal fear? Have you overcome that fear?

If we allow ourselves to feel dejected, discouraged, and impatient, eventually we will suffer from anxiety. A sense of uneasiness about the present or the future will overtake us. If it occurs profoundly enough you will become paralyzed, inactive, and unresponsive. How do you rate yourself on a continuum of this category of people? Who do you know is part of this category? Perform a simple act of kindness toward them.

Wednesday - Week 3 - Participation

“Those members of the faithful who preserve a deep and sincere faith, expressing it in different ways, but seldom take part in worship” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* – Paragraph 14

Today, we begin to look at those to whom we direct our joyful evangelizing. This first category of Pope Francis’ is well known to us. I am certain there are among your family and friends those who make excuses for not belonging to the worshipping family. I am certain of this. I have four brothers and only two of us remain part of a worshipping community. When I extend an invitation to each of the non-participating brothers, they respond with “I am a spiritual person not a religious person”! “I believe in God but not in organized religion.” These are the spiritual “Lone Rangers” of our lives. Their reasons for absenting themselves from the faith community are myriad. Step outside your comfort zone and engage in conversation with someone who does not attend a church. Ask them ‘why’ they have a privatized attitude. What did you hear? Where did their excuses come from?

Was it the perceived hypocrisy of others?

Was it the “poor homilies”?

Was it the church’s stance on social issues?

Did someone, especially someone who “represents the Church” act in an inhospitable way?

Were you part of the problem?

Thursday - Week 3 - Baptism

“The baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* – Paragraph 14

The profound nature of anyone’s Baptism is under-appreciated, especially for Catholics baptized as infants. They received their Baptism in a passive way through the faith of their parents. Perhaps some *Cradle Catholics* do not appreciate their baptisms because their parents saw it as a mere social nicety. The catechism speaks about this “*vitae spiritualis ianua*” - this doorway to the spiritual life that forgives sin, changes us existentially, incorporates us into the Body of Christ, and binds us to one another in communion, just to name a few effects. Being among the baptized, we are part of, not only the “mystical body of Christ,” but as active members of His human Church. Our call or mission is to present the Gospel.

In Baptism, we receive essential missionary work. This missionary work is the responsibility for all the baptized. We were anointed with the Chrism of Salvation to be “priest, prophet, and King” as Christ was anointed to be “Priest, Prophet, and King.” In admitting to ourselves that we are not Christ, we cannot accomplish what Christ did. However, we can fulfill the responsibilities of our Baptism.

To be priest means to offer our “time talent and treasures” for the sake of the Kingdom. To be prophetic means not predicting the future but reminding ourselves and others of the *emmet and hesed* - Hebrew for his faithfulness and everlasting love - of God.. To be kingly means we take on the responsibilities of the Kingdom. Have you succeeded in doing this? If not, where have you failed? Whom can you motivate not only “with words, but with deeds”? What deeds can you affect?

Friday - Week 3 - Relationship

“Those who do not know Jesus or who have rejected him” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* – Paragraph 14

It is hard to imagine anyone who has not heard of Jesus or claim to know him. After all, Jesus has been on the cover of Time magazine many times. However, what does it mean to know? Knowledge is factual. I know I have neighbors that live on either side of me; this is a fact. Knowledge is also relational. I know Jim, John, and their three sons, my right-side neighbors. We have shared a meal and a drink. My sons played with their sons. On the other hand, I have rarely seen my left-side neighbor. I cannot even recall his name. We have never shared a meal or drink. Which neighbor do I know?

One could say the same about the knowledge that others have of Jesus. They know that he was a historical person. They know that many people claim to know him. However, they have never spent time in a relationship with him. A relationship with Jesus begins, as all relationships do, with an introduction. We can introduce our self to Jesus, or another person could introduce us.

If you know someone who does not know Jesus, how can you introduce him or her to each other?

This category also includes those who may have once had a relationship which now it has fallen apart. In order to mend broken relationships one must first identify the element that led to the breakdown. We have all had broken relationships. Begin by identifying the root cause of that break. If it involved another person, go to the person and try to mend it, if possible. Now, identify sometime in your life or someone in your life who has been disappointed by Jesus, or, to whom the Church has disappointed. Offer compassion and conciliation not merely in words but in deeds

Saturday - Week 3 - Renewal

“A giving person, a renewed person” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* – Paragraph 8

In the past week, we identified where the good is directed. On this final day of the week, we look to *ourselves* as the *active agent* of the new evangelization.

Pope Francis makes use of a number of giants of the faith who realized that the Gospel is not a static entity, but is, rather, a dynamic reality. The Exhortation reminds us first “to return to the source and to recover the freshness of the Gospel” (Article 11). The source, however, is not just the written word; it is the person of Jesus. Evangelization begins with the renewal of our own relationship with the source. From this, “new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open, more eloquent words with new meaning for today’s world” are used. Think of a person or a place you experienced in the past. How would you describe him, her, or it today?

The Holy Father reminds us that the new evangelization requires generosity on our part but it is not about “a heroic individual undertaking.” It is about being a cooperator with Jesus, who is the “first and greatest evangelizer.” Are you ready and willing to give of yourself generously?

Renewal does not mean forgetting what has gone before us. Francis says the joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance.” Remembering the past can bring both smiles and tears. The smiles are pleasant, but the tears are transformative. Call to mind a moment or a person who brought a smile to either your face or tears to your eyes. Are you willing to share that moment with another? Are you capable of allowing yourself to become a “wounded healer”? If so, then you are prepared to be an *Evangelizer*.





Fourth Sunday of Advent

Reading 1: 2 Sm 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A,16 **Psalm** 89:2-3,4-5,27-29 **Reading 2:** Rom 16:25-27 **Gospel** Lk 1:26-38

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”

On this final Sunday of Advent, we encounter Mary. Three weeks ago, we used a prayer penned by the Pope to begin our reflection. Today, Mary herself provides us with insight, especially as we step out to engage in this new evangelization. Mary hears the announcement that she will conceive a child, the Son of God. Mary stands at the threshold of bringing into the world a new beginning for all humanity. If evangelization is indeed the presentation and proclamation of the presence of Christ in the world, it was Mary who first to evangelized. While she did not speak lofty words, while she did not write pithy stories, she did accept with humility the task set before her.

Did she have trepidation? Indeed, yes. That is why the angel told her “do not be afraid.”

Did she have questions about her ability? Yes. That is why she said to the angel “how can this be?”

Did she wonder how she would carry out her role? Yes, but the angel said to her “the holy spirit will come upon you.”

As we confront the Holy Father’s Exhortation, we will have trepidation, doubt, and questions. We will wonder how to carry out our role.

This week will be the most difficult. You are being asked to experience *metanoia*. It will not be easy to submit yourself to a *metanoia* – a change. You will step into unfamiliar areas. You probably have never thought of them. In the past, it was someone else’s job. It was someone else’s mission. Now, it is your mission. The Holy Father introduces five themes or spheres in which our new evangelization should affect. These five areas are the chapter titles of the Exhortation:

1. The Churches Missionary Transformation
2. Amid the Crisis of Communal Commitment
3. The Proclamation of the Gospel
4. The Social Dimension of Evangelization
5. Spirit-Filled Evangelizers

In the coming days of this last week of the Advent Season, we will look briefly to each chapter “to help give shape to a definite style of evangelization” which Francis asks us “to adopt in every activity which you undertake...amid our daily efforts...”

The Word of the Day

Monday - Week 4 - Transformation

“Missionary Transformation” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* - Chapter One

The Holy Father has given us five points to ponder and reference in the first chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*.

- **Point I** - Under the subtitle “A Church which goes forth” he challenges “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone...”

Where are you most comfortable? Where are you least comfortable? What must you do to step out of one into the other? To this, Pope Francis says ‘an evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in peoples’ daily lives...an evangelizing community is also supportive ...it is patient...it is filled with joy’. Which of these attributes describes you or your community?

- **Point 2** - The Church’s pastoral activity must lead to conversion, not only of others but also of itself. *Ecclesia semper reformanda* or the Church always reforms itself, is an adage to take to heart so that we do not allow ourselves to be stuck in the past as if it was the most glorious point in history. Attention to change in the various institutions of the Church ought to lead us away from that poisonous statement “we have always done it this way.”

-

Give examples of changes you have resisted in the past.

- **Point 3** - The evangelizing mission of the church involves communication. The instant communication of world today “the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced...”

Has the media ineffectively communicated the message of the Gospel this week? Have you distorted the gospel due to a lack of understanding of the” hierarchy of truths”? What can you do to correct it?

- **Point 4** - Evangelization takes place with an awareness of the human condition. The Pope warns us to be aware that the object of evangelization is the human person-the human person with all of his/her faults, failures, and foibles. The human person who sometimes lacks the ability to comprehend because of “limits of language and of circumstances.” No one is born a saint-sanctity must be achieved. Not everyone will be a theologian. “A missionary heart ...never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness.”

An adage from canon law is that no one can be obliged to do the impossible. Have you obliged another or yourself to do the impossible?

- **Point 5** - The subtitle proclaims the Church must be “a mother with an open heart,” but the content of this section does not mention mother, but father. The call for the Church is to be the house of the Father with doors always open. With this metaphor, Francis warns us “frequently we act as arbitrators of grace rather than its facilitator”. The Church is not a tollhouse. It is the house of the Father where there is a place for everyone with all his or her problems.

Is the poor or any other group or person unwelcome in Church ministry?

Tuesday - Week 4 - Commitment

“Crisis of communal commitment” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* - Chapter Two

Thomas Jefferson, speaking about the first Amendment, said, “you can believe in one god, no god or many gods just as long as your religion does not break my bones or reach into my pocketbook”. Jefferson, a past president of the United States of America, was speaking about religious freedom. In this chapter, the Holy Father speaks about religious responsibility. He evaluates the “contemporary reality” and issues a number of suggestions that involve negation so that the worldwide community of humanity may benefit.

Suggestion 1 - No to an economy of exclusion “ - the culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if re-market offers us something new ... lives stunted for a lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle”.

Suggestion 2 - No to the new idolatry of money-“the current financial crisis ...originated in a profound human crisis-the denial of the primacy of the human person”-power, profit, and possessions prioritized over persons.

Suggestion 3 - No to a financial system that rules rather than serves-, “I exhort you to generous solidarity and a return of economics and finances to an ethical approach which favors human beings.”

Suggestion 4 - No to the inequality that spawns violence- “every action has its consequences, an evil embedded in the structures of society has a constant potential for disintegration and death”

Suggestion 5 - No to selfishness and spiritual sloth - “pastoral acedias’ can be caused by a number of things...unrealistic projects, lack of patience, vain dreams of success, loss of contact with real people, desire to dominate the rhythm of life”

Suggestion 6 - No to a sterile pessimism, “defeatism...disillusioned...desertification”

Suggestion 7 - No to spiritual worldliness - “Gnosticism- purely subjective faith-Promethean neo plagiarism- self-absorption, intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style that leads to narcissism and authoritarian elitism”

Suggestion 8 - No to warring among ourselves- at least let us say to the Lord: Lord I am angry with this person or with that person, I pray to you for him or for her” To pray for a person with whom I am irritated is a beautiful step forward taken in love and an act of evangelization”.

There is cause for great concern when religious freedom is at stake. Have you ever been concerned with religious responsibility?

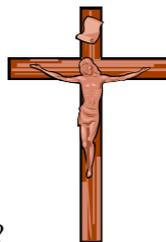
Wednesday - Week 4 - Evangelization

“The proclamation of the Gospel” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* - Chapter Three

We begin today with a syllogism. Evangelization is the task of the Church. The people of God make up the Church. Baptism makes you a member of the Church; therefore, your task is to evangelize. Following this logic should lead us away from our dependency on professional evangelizers or the experts. When we foist on the ordained or the consecrated all of the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel, we are failing to take on the responsibility given to us at our baptism. Again, we have to be careful not to use our dysfunctional sense of unworthiness as an excuse for not bringing the Good News to others. “Our falling short of perfection should be no excuse; on the contrary, mission is a constant stimulus not to remain mired in mediocrity but to continue growing.”

To proclaim the Gospel does not require theological degrees as reminded by the Holy Father. The practice of popular piety is a manifestation of our ability to *credere in Deum* – to exhibit a belief in God. Pope Francis said, to the learned, “I think of the steadfast faith of those mothers tending their sick children who, although perhaps barely familiar with the articles of the creed, cling to a rosary; or of all the hope poured into a candle lighted in humble home with a prayer for help from Mary or in the gaze of tender love directed to Christ crucified”.

The proclamation of the Gospel begins with person-to-person contact “which is the informal preaching which takes place in the middle of a conversation.” Conversation, personal witness, or gesture are all means of proclamation and oftentimes have more benefit than “fixed formulations.” This chapter calls us to give of our time to others. It also identifies the idea of accompaniment, “In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people, lives shamelessly given over to curiosity...the Church must initiate everyone- priests, consecrated religious and laity into this art of accompaniment.” The adage “make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ” comes from the Cursillo movement, best describes the process.



Whom will you bring to Christ?

Thursday - Week 4 - Evangelization

“The Social Dimension of Evangelization” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* - Chapter Four

How does one define society? One dictionary definition is that it is a group of people forming community. A second definition is that it is “all people collectively.” Therefore, we can define society as being the countable groups we associate with (nuclear family, extended family, community, work associates, friends we party with, etc.). On the other end is the uncountable, the rest of humanity with whom we do not have an intimate connection. The Holy Father specifies that the Gospel be about “the Kingdom of God present in our world.” Again, he uses the Greek word *kerygma* (proclamation) and says “it has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in a community and engagement with others” which “has immediate moral implications”.

Among the moral implications cited is “recognition of the dignity of all man (kind), desire to seek and protect the good of others.” Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? The Pope says that ‘reading the Scripture makes it clear that the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. It is about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven that is present all around us. Therefore, as we walk through the kingdom we must be aware of others who travel in the same place in time.

Take time to acquaint yourself with the social teachings of the Church. The teachings tell us to listen and heed to the cry of the poor. We are not to be unruly activists. However, must have an attentiveness, which considers the other “in a certain sense as one with us.” In His Exhortation, the Pope asks us to resolve the structural causes of poverty, not just by welfare projects that are “merely temporary responses.” In his words of “political discourse,” he asks how you react to the “distribution of goods.” Do you trust in the unseen forces of the invisible hand of the market?

Charity is the principle of not only micro relations but also has a global nature. In a free and just world, there is no place for slavery or injustice, especially for the less fortunate. Concern for the vulnerable leads us to ask the question of not only where your brother is, but also who is your vulnerable brother? What answer would you add to these: the unborn, the trafficked, the undocumented, and the exploited?

Can you add more?

Friday - Week 4 - Peace

“Common good and peace in society” *Joy of the Gospel, EG* - Chapter Four, Part 3

Parts Three and Four of the fourth chapter call us to look at peace radically. Francis first defines what peace is not. According to the Holy Father, it is not merely any of the following: pacification; mere absence of violence, an appeasement of the poor, or simply the absence of war based on a precarious balance of power. However, Francis writes that peace is “fashioned by efforts toward the establishment of the ordered universe, perfect justice among men, part of an integral development without which it is doomed and responsible citizenship.”

Four Pillars can accomplish peace, according to the Pope.

Pillar 1 - Time is greater than space: under this principle, our attention is not on trying to accomplish immediate success in an individual moment. Rather, we are to approach peace with tenacity and be concerned about initiating the process of people building. How is this different from saving the people?

Pillar 2 - Unity prevails over conflict: There are three approaches to conflict. The first two are fruitless. These are to look and go on our way as if nothing has happened or to embrace it in a way that makes us prisoners. This approach locks in conflict. The third, a productive way, is to confront conflict seeking a resolution. Resolution means there must be an appreciation of diversity and that we must not be satisfied with a “negotiated settlement. We must strive to understand that peace begins with individual reconciliation.

Pillar 3 - Realities are more important than ideas: This we are told “calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality.” Among these masks, are “angelic forms of purity, dictatorship of relativism, empty rhetoric, a historical fundamentalism, and ethical systems bereft of kindness, or intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom. Are any of these masks part of your life? This principle calls us to put words into action, to perform works of justice and charity, which are fruitful. Not to do so is to “build on sand, to remain in the realm of pure ideas and to end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centeredness and Gnosticism”

Pillar 4 - The whole is greater than the part. This is the final principle. Under this principle, we imagine polyhedron, which “reflects the convergence of all parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” The Holy Father writes not to understand society as a homogenization of people, but as the convergence of people maintaining their individuality and yet pursuing the common good. Does this concept conflict with the all-American image with the heightened elevation of autonomy”?

Saturday - Week 4 - Communication

“The social dialogue as a contribution to peace” *Joy of the Gospel, EG - Chapter Four, Part 4*

Simply put, evangelization is the communication of the Gospel. Communication means dialogue. The Church recognizes three dialogues that must take place with the goal of promoting full human development and pursuit of the common good. These three include dialogue with state, dialogue with society, including dialogue with cultures and the sciences, and finally, a dialogue with other believers.

With the state, the Church “supports those programs which best respond to the dignity of the human person and the common good ...based on fundamental values of human life which finds their expression in political activity”. Are you involved with the politics of your community or do you rely on the “plans drawn up by a few for the few or an enlightened or outspoken minority which claims to speak for everyone”?

The dialogue with culture does not ask us to reject science but, rather, to attend to scientific advance by “shedding on them the light of faith and natural law so that they remain respectful of the centrality of the human person at every stage of life.” Science is not faith and faith is not science.

Are you ecumenical? Are you aware of the other forms of Catholicism? Our Latin Rite is only one of 22 rites of Catholicism. Are you more attentive to what divides us or what unites us with other ecclesial communities? On the other hand, are you aware of what makes you Catholic? As we read in the Exhortation, are you steadfast in your deep convictions, clear and joyful in your identity while at the same time “open to those of the other side”?

Does Islam frighten you? Have you sought to understand or befriend a member of this community? Do you accept a healthy pluralism of religions? Do you accept that?

The reasons to evangelize are abundant. We all have the tools to evangelize. We simply have to pray and work hard. On the other hand, to use the Benedictine adage “*prayer is work and work is prayer.*”



Closing Thoughts

On the Sunday after Christmas, we notice that the Church celebrates the “feast of the Holy family.” The readings on this day are paradoxical. On one hand, the Gospel tells the story of the flight of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Egypt. They are fleeing from a place of violence; they are pursuing a life of peace.

The second reading asks us to recognize that we are God’s chosen ones. It asks us to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience to bear with one another.

It is ironic that the Holy Father often refers to these very same attributes in his First Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, and “*The Joy of the Gospel*.” Using this letter from Paul to the Colossians, (Col 3:12-21 or Col 3:12-17) reflect on which of the attributes you need to more profoundly develop in your life. How will the development of these attributes equip you to be an evangelizer with Joy?

Francis asks us to reflect on the life of the Holy Mother. He exhorts or encourages us to implore her maternal intercession. Read and contemplate on the prayer he penned, *Mother of the Living Gospel - A Prayer for Peace*.

Remember that Mary’s resounding response to her role is “yes, be it done unto me.” Let her “yes” be your yes.

Is evangelization difficult- yes! Is evangelization possible- yes!

Is evangelization necessary- yes! Can you evangelize- yes!

Will you?



And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. Jn 9:1, 14



Christmas Spirit³

I am the Christmas spirit!

I enter the home of poverty, causing pale-faced children
to open their eyes wide in pleased wonder.

I cause the miser's clutched hand to relax,
and thus paint a bright spot on his soul.

I cause the aged to renew their youth and to laugh in the old, glad way.

I keep romance alive in the heart of childhood,
and brighten sleep with dreams woven in magic.

I cause eager feet to climb dark stairways with filled baskets,
leaving behind hearts amazed at the goodness of the world.

I cause the prodigal to pause a moment on his wild, wasteful way,
and send to anxious love some little token that releases glad tears -
tears which wash away the hard line of sorrow.

I enter dark prison cells, reminding scarred manhood of what might have been,
and pointing forward to good days yet to be.

I come softly into the still, white home of pain, and lips that are too weak to speak
just tremble in silent, eloquent gratitude.

In a thousand ways, I cause the weary world to look up into the face of God,
and for a little moment forget the things that are small and wretched.

I am the Christmas spirit!

~E. C. Baird

³From *Leaves of Gold*, The Coslett Publishing Co. Revised Edition Sixth Printing 1957, copyright 1938 by Evan S. Coslett.

An Advent Reflection and Study Guide

By Deacon Daniel J. Laurita, MA, MCL, JCL

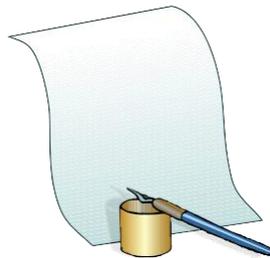
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Mrs. Terry Thompson

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BECOMING A RADIANT WITNESS

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