

Always Alert to God's Signs

Evangelii Gaudium [EG] (*The Joy of the Gospel*) is Pope Francis' lengthy apostolic exhortation (2013). Francis, quoting Paul VI, exhorts all communities to an "ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times" (51). He also speaks of our attempt "to read the signs of the times;" (108) and to be "attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us read the signs of the times" (14). Francis situates EG within the imperative to discern God's signs.

This task of examining current realities in the light of Christian faith is "a grave responsibility" (51). Francis proposes using "an evangelical discernment" which is "the approach of a missionary disciple" who is guided by "the light and strength of the Holy Spirit" (50). Christian faith does demand "recognizing and discerning spirits" and ultimately "choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil" (51). This presentation examines how Francis can be seen employing a type of "signs of the times" methodology in EG. We also inquire how this inductive approach can assist us in exploring the mission of the USCMA.

A Vatican II Pope. Francis is the first pope in many decades who was not actually present during the deliberations of Vatican II. Remarkably, five popes did take an active role in the Council: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. However, as manifested in EG, Francis is clearly imbued with Council perspectives. He asserts that "it is important to draw out the pastoral consequences of the Council's teaching" (38). Francis is remarkably conversant with the popes, documents, and theological themes of Vatican II.

Historical Background of "Signs of the Times." The Second Vatican Council was convoked by Pope John XXIII (*Humannae Salutis*-1961). Here he first used the expression "signs of the times"; this marks the beginnings of a new direction in theological methodology; see also *Pacern in Terris*. This methodology views the "signs of the times" as a valid *locus theologicus*. Vatican II documents: *Gaudium et Spes* 4, [11, 42, 44], *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 14, *Unitatis Redintegratio* 4, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 43.

The Second Vatican Council created (in 1964) a special sub-commission [*de signis temporum*] to assist it with a descriptive definition and explanation of what was meant by the signs of the times. In the great signs of the times, one perceives God's action directing humanity toward the fulfillment of His designs. Thus, in these movements/aspirations-even in great secular movements in history-one can discern God's purposes being made manifest for humanity.

An insightful discourse on the signs of the times is found in the address of Paul VI at his general audience on April 16, 1969; here the pope provides abundant clarity of direction on the proper use of the signs of the times as a theological methodology and "the theological interpretation of contemporary history." Pope Francis would resonate with Paul VI's insights.

Terms and Method. The *biblical* expression "signs of the times" (Mt 16:2-4) originates in Jesus' reference to the messianic signs present in his life. The *theological* meaning of the signs of the times is somewhat different; the scriptural reference does not appear in the official text of *Gaudium et Spes* 4. These clarifications, while providing precision, in no way jeopardize the valid theological use of the signs of the times as a *locus theologicus*. What then is the correct procedure to follow in this form of theologizing (an approach that will be helpful in understanding *Evangelii Gaudium*)? The signs of the times must be seen as operating on a double plane: the *sociological* level and the *theological* level. A brief schema follows.

"Signs of the Times" Theological Method. **A.** On the SOCIOLOGICAL-HISTORICAL level one must: **1.** *investigate* empirical reality (data and its context); **2.** *thematize* empirical reality (the "human impact" of this reality or environment). **B.** On the PASTORAL-THEOLOGICAL-MISSIOLOGICAL level one must offer a "faith-evaluation" of the "signs" which necessarily incorporates the following: **1.** Word of God/Scripture; **2.** Christian faith and Tradition; **3.** *Sensus fidei* of the believing community; **4.** Guidance of the hierarchical magisterium; **5.** Reality of sin (personal and social) within the world; **6.** Centrality of Christ; **7.** Role of the Holy Spirit. NOTE: This first task (A) is seen as a "scrutiny of the signs of the times"; the second task (B) is the "interpretation in the light of the Gospel" (cf. GS 4). In light of the "signs" inductive approach to theological reflection, we now move more directly back to Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Francis' View of the Church's Task. In several places in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis expresses his insights on the imperatives facing the Church as it practices an "ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times" (51). He admits that the Church would not be "well served by a purely sociological analysis which would aim to embrace all of reality" (50) and that it is "not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality" (51). Yet, this does not mitigate against the "grave responsibility" (51) of the Church to be deeply engaged in understanding and serving contemporary society and humanity.

What Francis envisions is a genuine "evangelical discernment" which is "the approach of a missionary disciple" (50). "We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God's plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also-and this is decisive-choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil" (51). In this discernment process Francis notes: "I take for granted the different analyses which other documents of the universal magisterium have offered, as well as those proposed by the regional and national conferences of bishops" (51). Francis humbly admits: "It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory" (16).

The Pope is clearly aware of "today's vast and rapid cultural changes that demand we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness" (41). And here, once again, Pope Francis quotes the opening speech of John XXIII to the Second Vatican Council: "The deposit of faith is one thing ... the way it is expressed is another" (41). Francis goes on to assert that in "her ongoing discernment" of current signs and trends, the Church will realize that some customs and practices "may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them" (43).

Additional Perspectives. The vision of Pope Francis to discern concrete events of history and their impact on people leads him to many helpful insights. "When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity" (117); in fact, "the faith and life of the Church [can] be expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture" (118). Francis appreciates "the challenge of an inculturated preaching" (143) for an effective communication of the Gospel. Such "signs-sensitive" preaching actually becomes "an exercise in evangelical discernment" (154). Francis' vision is manifested in one of his lengthy quotes from Pope Paul VI: "We know that 'evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the increasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both social and personal'" (181). Francis notes: "I intend to concentrate on two great issues which strike me as fundamental at this time in history. I will treat them more fully, because I believe that they will shape the future of humanity. These issues are:

first, the inclusion of the poor in society, and second, peace and social dialogue" (185). To address these signs, Francis enunciates various principles which he believes are foundational for "building a people in peace, justice and fraternity" (221-237).

The foregoing citations from *Evangelii Gaudium* are an affirmation that Pope Francis is deeply involved in a "faith-reading" of the signs of the times (though his use of the "signs of the times" terminology only appears three times: 14, 51, 108). Francis is humble in his pastoral approach; "the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue" (241). He states his objective: "Starting from certain social issues of great importance for the future of humanity, I have tried to make explicit once again the inescapable social dimension of the Gospel message and to encourage all Christians to demonstrate it by their words, attitudes and deeds" (258). Francis invites all Christians to engage the ever-changing world as "Spirit-filled evangelizers" who are "full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction" (261).

A Brief List of Signs. As one navigates *Evangelii Gaudium*, the great panorama of subjects that Pope Francis treats emerges. More than just a catalogue of topics, these many areas may be considered "signs" which the Church must attentively address as she embarks upon "a new chapter of evangelization" (1). Permit a brief sampling of some areas noted by Francis: "health care, education and communications" (52), "a 'throw away' culture" (53), "an impersonal economy" (55), "widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion" (56), "inordinate consumption" (60), "attacks on religious freedom" (61), "human trafficking, the narcotics trade, the abuse and exploitation of minors, the abandonment of the elderly and the infirm" (75), "heightened individualism" (78), and many more.

Francis is not overwhelmed by current realities. He asserts: "The evils of our world-and those of the Church-must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervor. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow" (84). "Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment" (109).

Time and again, *Evangelii Gaudium* provides a profound faith-perspective which assists Christians in their reading of the "signs" and in living their commitment as missionary disciples. Francis boldly states: "In our time humanity is experiencing a turning-point in its history" (52). "Seeing reality with the eyes of faith, we cannot fail to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is sowing" (68). The Church is to recognize that "the changes taking place in these great spaces and the culture which they create are a privileged locus of the new evangelization" (73). "What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values" (74). The "new world" in which we live means that Christians must "realize that a uniform and rigid program of evangelization is not suited to this complex reality" (75).

Challenges not only exist in the external world; they are also present within the Church. Francis notes: "one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity, and a cooling of fervor. These are three evils which fuel one another" (78). "They end up stifling the joy of mission" (79). "It pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?" (100).

Creative Responses to Challenging Signs, To assist Christians in addressing profound challenges both within and outside the Church, Francis presents an innovative list of eight "no" statements and seven "yes" exhortations. First, employing a kind of *via negativa*, Francis alerts us to factors that could diminish the Church's effectivity in the world today. He bluntly says: "No to an economy of exclusion" (53-54); "No to the new idolatry of money" (55-56); "No to a financial system which rules rather than serves" (57-58); "No to the inequality which spawns violence" (59-60); "No to selfishness and spiritual sloth" (81-83); "No to sterile pessimism" (84-86); "No to spiritual worldliness" (93-97); and, "No to warring among ourselves" (98-101).

Francis also exhorts not to let ourselves be "robbed" of pivotal dimensions of the Christian life: "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!" (80); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!" (83); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!" (86); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!" (92); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel!" (97); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!" (101); and, "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor!" (109).

These "no" statements and "yes" exhortations clearly show that Pope Francis is neither naïve nor unrealistic. He is simply reflecting the realism needed to read the "signs" for a more effective missionary evangelization. He affirms that "in spite of everything, Saint Paul's exhortation is directed to each of us: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Rom 12:21). And again: 'Let us not grow weary in doing what is right' (Gal 6:9)" (101).

Joy, Pivotal Sign of Missionary Disciples. The obvious focus on joy in *Evangelii Gaudium* is seen in the sheer number of times that words such as joy, joyful, and joyfully are repeated (nearly 100 times). Pope Francis has mined the treasures found in the two interrelated apostolic exhortations written by Paul VI in 1975: *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelization in the Modern World) and *Gaudete in Domino* (On Christian Joy). Both popes constantly assert that if the Gospel is not heard from "joyful evangelizers," it will not be heard at all by contemporary humanity. The lack of joy and hope is an obstacle to effective evangelization. In the introduction of *Evangelii Gaudium* (10), Francis quotes extensively the sentiments of Paul VI who believed that joy would enable the world of our time "to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ" (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 80), (EG 10).

The success of missionary evangelization requires "renewed evangelizers." Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." Joy is convincing; joy evangelizes. All the daunting "signs of the times" and the complex dimensions of evangelization will not overwhelm those whose lives have been transformed by a joyful encounter with the Risen Lord. With heartfelt emotion, Pope Francis writes: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ. I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day" (3). "I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy" (1). Missionary disciples must listen frequently to the admonition of Saint Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near" (Phil 4:4). Be transformed by joy. Surrender to the "Lord of Joy" for he is: *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring!* Become a joyful herald of missionary evangelization!

>>> Orbis Books (Maryknoll, New York) by Kroeger: *Living Mission, Once Upon a Time in Asia, The Gift of Mission, and Walking with Pope Francis.* **jhkroeger@gmail.com**