THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF EVANGELIZATION:  
Theological Foundations of Evangelii Gaudium, Chapter IV  

By Stephen Bevans, SVD  

Introduction  

In the fourth chapter of his groundbreaking Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis focuses on what he calls “The Social Dimension of Evangelization.”† Francis is quick to point out that the exhortation itself is “not a social document” (EG 184). Nevertheless, he says, there is “a profound connection between evangelization and human advancement” (EG 178), and so any treatment of evangelization must include it as one of evangelization’s constitutive parts. Accordingly, Francis focuses on “two great issues” (EG 185) of our time: “the inclusion of the poor in society” and “peace and social dialogue” (EG 185).  

In my understanding, the succeeding lectures in this series here at the Urbaniana will deal with these and the other concrete social issues that are dealt with in the Apostolic Exhortation, especially those in Chapter 2. What I propose to reflect on in this present lecture are the theological foundations of evangelization’s social dimension. In other words, what might be the connection among Francis’ understanding of faith itself, of God, of Jesus, of the human person, and of the church over against his understanding of the necessary social dimension of the lives of “missionary disciples” (EG 24). As the First Vatican Council taught, one of the ways of understanding a particular doctrine is to understand its connections with other doctrines in the Christian tradition (DS 3016). Doctrines are not “laundry lists” of unconnected facts, but interconnected facets of the one Mystery of God’s self communication offered to us in Revelation. This lecture will explore this interconnection, with the aim of demonstrating the rich consistency of Pope Francis’s thought in the wonderful gift to the church that Evangelii Gaudium has proven to be.  

Theological Method  

Before we explore the actual connections between the various Christian doctrines and the social dimension of evangelization, however, it will be important to focus briefly on the basic theological method that Francis employs in the Apostolic Exhortation. It is this method in particular that allows him to make the connection between Christian theology and Christian social ethics so convincingly and powerfully. For Francis, every doctrine has a necessary practical and ethical...  

†Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. Citations of the document hereafter will be within the text and cited as “EG,” followed by the paragraph number.
connection. This is demanded by the very nature of faith itself, and the doctrines that express that faith.

Francis’ method in *Evangelii Gaudium* is the same method employed in the Latin American Bishop’s Fifth General Assembly at Aparecida, Brazil, the final document of which he had a major part as chair of the drafting committee. This is the method of “See, Judge, Act,” the method employed by the Latin American Bishops in their second and third assemblies in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico in 1979. This method was sidestepped in the bishops’ 1992 assembly in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic in 1992, but reprised again at Aparecida. As commentator José Marins has observed, the document of Aparecida represents a “return to inductive theology.”

What this means is that Francis is concerned in the Apostolic Exhortation to root his teaching on evangelization in the specific context of the world today. In Chapter 2, therefore, Francis sketches out several areas of concrete concern in which evangelization is to be carried out, and these are, by and large, social issues. As he writes in what could be a summary, the majority of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day, with dire consequences. The hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation, even in the so-called rich countries. The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident. It is a struggle to live and, often, to live with precious little dignity. This epochal change has been set in motion by the enormous qualitative, quantitative, rapid, and cumulative advances occurring in the sciences and in technology, and by their instant application in different areas of nature and life. We are in an age of knowledge and information, which has led to new and often anonymous kinds of power (EG 52).

Francis goes on in subsequent paragraphs to speak about the failure of “trickle-down economics” (EG 54), of how “the culture of prosperity deadens us” (EG 54), of inequality among peoples (EG 59), of consumerism (EG 60), of attacks on religious freedom (EG 61), and of the pervasiveness in some places of secularism and individualism (EG 64). Francis says much more in Chapter 2, but my point here is only to observe that Francis’ theological concern is social through and through. His understanding of faith, of God, of Jesus, of women and men, and of the church is all conditioned by his concern to address this social context with the riches of the Christian tradition. I hope to show this in the following sections.

The Nature of Faith

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For Francis, Christian faith is a faith that does justice. The content or intellectual dimension of faith (credere Deum) is certainly important, but a slavish repetition of orthodox phrases is much less so (see EG 41). The affective dimension (credere Deo) is also clearly stressed, as Francis calls women and men to a deep, personal relation with Christ (see, for example, EG 3, 7). But time and again Francis speaks of the moral or transformative aspect of faith (credere in Deum), that aspect of faith that changes Christians' behavior and propels them to the service of the poor and of justice.

This is true from the very beginning of a life of faith: “Accepting the first proclamation, which invites us to receive God’s love and to love him in return with the very love which is his gift, brings forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek, and protect the good of others” (EG 178). Quoting John Paul II’s Ecclesia in America, he writes that “Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life ‘related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good’” (EG 182). 4 In the introductory paragraphs of Chapter 4 on the Social Dimension of Evangelization, Francis speaks of this dynamic aspect of faith, that “always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it” (EG 183).

Specifically Christian faith leads to this kind of commitment: “True faith in the Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others” (EG 88). Francis says it very plainly: “We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them” (EG 48). One cannot have faith without social commitment. Living in a world of poverty, oppression, and exclusion will not allow it. The behavioral nature of faith is seen even more clearly in the way that Francis writes of the various concrete doctrines of faith, to which I now turn.

The Doctrines of God and Christology

The tender, merciful, loving God whom Francis describes so often and so beautifully in the Apostolic Exhortation (for example, EG 3, 11, 37, 274) is also the God whose “heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself ‘became poor’ (2Cor 8:9)” (EG 197). The God of Christian Revelation is a God “who calls for a committed response which is outside of the categories of the marketplace,” who “calls human beings to their full realization and to freedom from all forms of enslavement” (57).

God’s work of redemption involves a social dimension because “‘God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between men’” (EG 178). Some Christians, the pope says, only want a “spiritual

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Christ, without flesh and without the cross,” but the Gospel calls us to run the risk of encounters, and challenges us to face others’ “pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous action.” To believe in Christ is to be summoned to “the revolution of tenderness” (EG 88).

“Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is nothing else than the culmination of the way he lived his entire life.” If we accept Christ, we will be “moved by his example,” and will want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep; arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world” (EG 269). If we believe in Jesus we will not keep “the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length,” but, as Jesus wants and hopes, we will open up to human misery and “touch the suffering flesh of others.” And when we do so, “our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people” (EG 270).

Christian Anthropology

While Francis only hints at the social implications of the doctrines of God and Christ, the doctrine which perhaps most clearly implies the social dimension of the gospel is that of Christian Anthropology. But the connection among the doctrines is clear. Quoting form an Angelus discourse of John Paul II, for example, Francis writes that “To believe in a Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realizing that ‘he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity’” (EG 178).5 Francis waxes eloquently on the dignity of the human person, given as God’s gift in creation. He insists that “every person is worthy of our giving. Not for their physical appearance, their abilities, their language, their way of thinking, or for any satisfaction that we might receive, but rather because they are God’s handiwork, his creation.” Indeed, “every human being is the object of God’s infinite tenderness, and he himself is present in their lives.” And so “appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love.” (EG 274). This is why human beings can never be forgotten or overlooked, and why Francis condemns those things in contemporary culture and economic life that sees human beings as disposable units in a “throw away” culture. Human beings cannot they cannot be “consumer goods to be used and then discarded” (EG 53).

In one passage, Francis is speaking of the sanctity of unborn life and insists that “human beings are ends in themselves and never a means of resolving other problems. Once this conviction disappears, so do solid and lasting foundations for the defense of human rights, which would always be at the whims of the powers that be” (EG 213). Such a conviction conveys a truth beyond the Right to Life debate. The nature of the human person demands that evangelization include a social dimension.

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In a theme that is often repeated at various parts of the Apostolic Exhortation, Francis writes of the human person as essentially ordered to others. A major part of the message of evangelization, then, is that human beings are called by their very nature to service, and especially to service of the poor and marginalized of the world. It is precisely in going out of oneself, in other words, that one actually discovers the wholeness that is Christian salvation.

Early on in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Francis states this succinctly. “We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being” (EG 8). In paragraph 10, Francis quotes from the Latin American bishops’ Aparecida Document: “Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others.” He goes on to say that “here we find a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others” (EG 10). In some of the final paragraphs of the document, Francis comes back to this theme again: “We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving, and lock ourselves up in our own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide” (EG 272). Francis speaks about an “anthropocentric immanentism” (EG 94) that focuses only on oneself and not on Christ and others. This false turning in on ourselves results in indulging “in endless fantasies” and losing “contact with the real lives and difficulties of our people” (EG 96). We counter this tendency “by making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor” (EG 97).

A Christian anthropology moves toward an understanding of the church as a community that “goes forth” as a “community of missionary disciples” (EG 24). It is to ecclesiology, then, that we now turn.

Ecclesiology

Echoing Vatican II’s missionary decree, *Evangelii Gaudium* states that “By her very nature the Church is missionary; she abounds in effective charity and a compassion which understands, assists, and promotes” (EG 179). The church is not simply a community of disciples; it is a community of missionary disciples. “We no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (EG 120). As such, the church “gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself as necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (EG 24). “Wherever the need for the light and the life of the Risen Christ is greatest, it will want to be there” (EG 30). A community of missionary disciples “never closes itself off, never retreats into own security, never opts for rigidity

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6 Aparecida Document, 360.
and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (EG 45). All this is to say that the church goes first and foremost to the poor, who are the “privileged recipients of the gospel” (EG 48). 8 This means that the church will be a community that is often “bruised, hurting and dirty,” but Francis insists that he prefers that to a church that does all it can to keep safe and secure, focused on itself, and not on the hungry at the door, about whom “Jesus does not tire of saying ...‘Give them something to eat’” (EG 49).

A truly missionary church is one not concerned with itself, always going forth, always striving to be a “poor church and for the poor” (EG 198). Being missionary by its very nature means that it attends by its very nature to the social dimension of evangelization.

Conclusion

More could be said about some of the other doctrines in the Christian doctrinal system, but the doctrines I have reflected on here are enough, it seems to me, to indicate that Francis’s concern for the social dimension of evangelization is not an appendage to but an integral part of the Christian theological system. He speaks here and there of the Holy Spirit as seeking “to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds” (EG 178). He speaks of the leading of the Holy Spirit to a “loving attentiveness” that is the beginning of a concern that “entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith” (EG 199). Francis also writes, quoting John Paul II, of the importance of a spiritual life that rejects the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity, to say nothing of the implications of the incarnation” (EG 263). 9

In harmony with the doctrinal focus I have taken in this presentation, Francis here and there offers a broad scriptural foundation for his emphasis on evangelization’s social dimension (see EG 161, 180, 187). He notes that the whole history of salvation is “marked by the presence of the poor,” (EG 197), and writes that “from the heart of the Gospel we see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement, which must necessarily find expression and develop in every work of evangelization” (EG 178). Scripture definitely functions as the “soul” of Francis’s theologizing. 10

In my introduction I spoke about Evangelii Gaudium as a wonderful gift to the

8 Quoting Benedict XVI, Address to the Brazilian Bishops in the Cathedral of São Paulo, Brazil (May 11, 2007), 3. AAS 99 (2007), 428.
church. One aspect of this gift is the remarkable consistence of Pope Francis’s thought, connecting evangelization essentially with its social dimension, especially its care for the poor and its advocacy for human and ecological justice. In this way he has proved the wisdom articulated over forty years ago at the 1971 Synod on Justice in the World, that “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”11