



The Joy of the Gospel – Chapter 1

(Frank Berna, Highland Reach, October 2014)

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 center 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 a false sense of 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).

These words from the concluding paragraph of Chapter One provide a challenging and exciting portrayal of Pope Francis' vision for the Church today. It is the Church of a "Mother with an Open Heart"; the house of the Father with doors always wide open.

Throughout the chapter the reader can find various connections to the "Five Attitudes" given by Fr. Parent and foundational to the spirituality of Voluntas Dei. And so, we begin with prayer:

Lord Jesus, give me the grace to think of you every hour, just for today
So that I may live in your presence.

Lord Jesus, empty my heart of all sadness, hate and spite, just for today
So that I may love without criticizing, and serve without complaining.

Lord Jesus, help me to follow your footsteps, just for today,
So that following your example and Mary's
I may be, every day of my life, an element of peace. Amen.

Fr. Louis-Marie Parent, O.M.I.

I. You Are Revolutionary!

To get a better appreciation of the connection Pope Francis sees between the "new evangelization" and Voluntas Dei, one can turn to his address to Italian Secular Institutes last May. Setting aside his prepared text, he spoke from the heart. The Pope remarked:



You live everyday life in the world, but at the same time custody this contemplative dimension; contemplation of the Lord and the world; the reality and beauty of the world; the great sins of society, its deviations, all of these things...

That is why your vocation is fascinating because it takes place right there where the salvation of man and woman is played out... Don't be tempted to think... but what can I do? Remember the Lord spoke to us about the grain of wheat... Your life is like the grain... where ever you are, do everything you can for the Kingdom to come... Be revolutionary!

In an article in the National Catholic Reporter Robert McClory raised the question, “Can the old-movement spirit power the new Francis movement?” (March 12, 2014). The author suggests that Francis’ “lively Gospel Christianity” echoes the spirit of lay movements popular in the United States and Europe almost sixty years ago – the same time as Fr. Parent proposed Voluntas Dei. McClory identifies three such movements – the Young Christian Workers, the Young Christian Students, and the Christian Family Movement.

These three movements owe their existence to the late Cardinal Joseph Cardijn. As a young priest he was assigned to work with a young women’s group in the parish. Many of the women were factory workers like the young people he saw going to factories and mines during his childhood. The rough life of the workers – the long hours, low wages, child labor – disturbed Cardijn, particularly as he knew the workers saw the church to be on the side of the owners; on the side of the wealthy. Wanting to abate the growing influence of the Communist party, Cardijn borrowed their concept of small cells or teams of people and taught them the method to see, judge, and act. Meetings followed a simple plan – identify a problem; examine the problem in light of the Church’s social teaching; reflect on the problem in light of Scripture; form a plan of action to resolve the problem.

Cardijn held a vision of ministry of “like to like” with the young Christian workers bringing the gospel into the factories and mines by word, and through the witness of their own lives. The vision included the perspective of the Church being really present in the everyday life and genuine concerns of ordinary people. Similar movements, not directly related to Cardijn, included the Priest Worker Movement and the lay spirituality of Madeleine Delbr el, the author of *We the Ordinary People of the Streets*. One of her pieces is entitled “Missionaries Without a Boat.”

While all of these movements declined sharply in the latter part of the 20th Century, and the Priest Worker Movement was officially suppressed in 1958, remnants of each remain. And, McClory identifies various reasons for the decline of the movements as well as the ongoing exodus from the Church. At the same time, McClory contends Pope Francis preaches what these movements once proclaimed: “The message of Jesus is a joy-filled summons that demands action in this world, toward the stranger, the outcast, the poor, the depressed. And people are listening.” He looks for “innovative ‘movements’ that could harness the power of Francis, the generator.”



Discussion:

1. In what areas of life today does the institutional Church seem disconnected from the lives and concerns of ordinary people?
2. To what extent does your experience of your local church reflect the image of a “Mother with an open heart”? “The house of the Father with doors always wide open?”
3. How our Secular Institute contribute to fostering the revolutionary vision of Church proposed by Pope Francis?

II. Highlights from the Text

Below are some highlights from the chapter that I found particularly interesting. And, I make a few quick connections to the “Five Attitudes” of our spirituality. Teams may wish to take one section at a time and allow members to comment on ideas they found interesting or challenging, as well as to make connections to our spirituality and the practice of the “three five’s.” The connections below come only from *In the Footsteps of Jesus*, so a lot more individual and personal connections can be made. And, some questions are included as another option.

A. The Church that Goes Forth

The Second Vatican Council located the source of all Christian holiness in the waters of Baptism. All human beings are called to holiness – each in their own particular way of life – and all are called to give witness to the Gospel. Pope Francis recognizes this call as the very foundation for his exhortation. “All of us are called to take part in this new missionary “going forth.” He wants the church to “reach all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel” (#20). As noted in his closing paragraph given at the start of the lesson, he prefers a church that moves outside of itself, a church with little concern for its self-preservation.

As the title of the work indicates, a Gospel life is a joy-filled life. The joy of the Gospel sends the Church forth in a missionary spirit. And, joy serves as a sound measure of the believer’s embrace of the Gospel. Here the Pope also seems to recognize that joy, and the Gospel itself, can get a bit messy. He proposes that the “Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking” (#22).

Drawing on the parable of the sower and the seed, the Pope writes, “the sower when he sees the weeds does not grumble or overreact.” And so, the believer must “let the word take flesh in a particular situation no matter how imperfect” (#24). Once more the Holy Father emphasizes the theme of great mercy at the heart of the Gospel.



This acceptance of “unruliness” as well as patience with wheat and weeds brings to mind the absence of criticism and complaint. Rather than overreacting to the appearance of weeds, one can focus on the growth of the wheat. As Fr. Parent notes, “The habit of avoiding complaint favors a spirituality which invites us to live in the light of the Lord and to benefit from his warm, paternal presence” (In the Footsteps, p.71).

Question: How does our Voluntas spirituality help us to “go out” to others in our work place? Neighborhood? Family?

B. Pastoral Activity and Conversion

Pope Francis recognizes that the Church is often too distant from people’s lives. And, he knows well that many people live apart from the Church. He believes that an embrace of a “Missionary Option” has the capacity to transform the Church in powerful ways. The priority of evangelization moves the Church beyond self-preservation.

The Holy Father emphasizes the place of the local parish for the life of faith. He proposes that basic communities, small groups, and various movements can contribute to life in the parish. With this he also offers two challenging perspectives. First his perspective presupposes that the parishes are really “in contact with the lives and homes of its people,” and that they not be the “useless structure of a chosen few” (#28-29)

The conversion proposed in the exhortation consists of a conversion to listening. And, as he proposes this for other bishops, so Pope Francis holds himself accountable to also listen (#31-32). When writing about “absence of complaint,” Fr. Parent sees the objective of this practice as “welcoming events.” He offers that God speaks to us through events not unlike how God speaks to us through the Bible. Fr. Parent writes, “Those who endeavor to avoid complaint develop a gentleness of heart. They benefit from a grace that we can call the courtesy of the Holy Spirit which infuses into the hearts of those who love a gentle way of thinking, acting and reacting (In the Footsteps, p. 87). This virtue builds on the preceding one, the absence of criticism. Appreciating “the profound richness of our being... leads us to others and helps us to discover the best that is in each of them; this helps to produce in us a quality of intimacy with God” (In the Footsteps, p.55).

Question: The Holy Father proposes both a personal and an institutional conversion. What practical things do we find helpful for developing the “courtesy of the Holy Spirit” proposed by Fr. Parent?



C. From the Heart of the Gospel

“The Joy of the Gospel” emphasizes that the new evangelization demands that the Church concentrate on the essential, “what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing, and at the same time, most necessary” (#35). The most necessary, the text proposes, is that people experience the profound mercy of God, and in that experience find a meaning and direction for living.

While often the “hierarchy of truths” (some beliefs are more important than others) is applied to doctrine and intellectual claims, Pope Francis reminds the reader of a hierarchy in the moral life. In line with the theme of God’s mercy, the moral life must hold as a priority “faith working through love” (#36-37; Gal 5:6). He goes on to note that imbalance “happens when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God’s word” (#38). The moral hierarchy demands a recognition, “Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others, and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others” (#39)

One can return to the “absence of criticism” which leads us to discover what is best in others. One can also connect to the “practice of the presence of God.” With this attitude Fr. Parent encourages us to be mindful of the qualities with which God has graced our lives – a way in which God saves us. “it is our being as it has come from the hands of our Creator that attracts and calls forth his goodness and mercy” (In the Footsteps, p. 26). And the recognition of the presence of God allows the member of Voluntas Dei to live the charism “to be sowers and builders of peace’ (In the Footsteps, p. 30).

Question: Identify some concrete ways in which the practice of the presence of God leads one to be a builder of peace. How does the believer move forward from concern for self to seeking the good of others?

D. Mission Within Human Limits

One of the images that the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church uses to describe the Church is “the People of God.” The document emphasizes that this People of God live as pilgrims in this world. The pilgrimage recognizes human growth – individually and collectively as culture.

Pope Francis applauds the work of scientists and others who advance human understanding and knowledge. He likewise values differences in philosophical and theological perspectives, and the ongoing investigations of great thinkers. The Pope holds great confidence in the “reconciling work of the Spirit in respect and love that can help the Church to grow.” He quotes Pope St. John XXIII “The deposit of faith is one thing... the way it is expressed is another” (#40).

What he writes of culture and Church practice, the Holy Father also applies to individuals. The Church, this People of God, must accompany others with “mercy and patience” (#44). Human beings experience stages of development and experience individual growth. The believer, however, needs to



see “God’s saving love mysteriously at work in each person above and beyond their faults and failings” (#44).

The attitude of “being of service” consists of much more than simply doing good deeds for others. Fr. Parent proposes that the members of Voluntas Dei become “beings of service,” that is “an intelligent person who willingly and freely stands on the side of God, who strives to be a docile instrument of his will, as soon as this will is known” (In the Footsteps, p. 97). Recognizing the presence of God in one’s life, and graced with the particular qualities of our personality, “Beings of service are never inert, never on strike. They feel responsible, alive and endowed with abilities that enable them to help others” (In the Footsteps, p. 110).

The fifth attitude, “sowers of peace”, aligns well with a recognition of human and cultural development. “Sowers of peace concentrate above all on the positive aspects of others, seeking patiently to detect their qualities, gifts, talents, aptitudes, attractions and energies. Their hearts radiate enough tenderness to love others, to excuse them, to pardon them when necessary and to serve them with simplicity and humility” (In the Footsteps, p. 114).

Question: Pope Francis repeatedly speaks of God as merciful. The Gospel is a Gospel of great joy because it is a Gospel of mercy. As beings of service “stand on the side of God,” how important do you find Mercy as a virtue in our Voluntas spirituality?

E. A Mother with an Open Heart

Fr. Parent writes, “To succeed in the first four steps which are attitudes of the heart makes us sowers of peace, specialists in the love of our neighbor, adults in faith, imitators of Christ and Mary – his mother and ours” (In the Footsteps, p. 134). The spirituality of Voluntas Dei can contribute to building the “house of the Father” which offers “a place for everyone with all their problems.” In this house the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist will not be a “prize for the perfect.” In the most ancient of traditions, the Eucharist will be a “powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” (#47).

Under the umbrella of being of service, Fr. Parent describes the diverse, and rather amazing crowd, with whom Jesus mixed – the intellectuals: Nichodemus, Simon the Leper, Joseph of Arimathea; the questionable: the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, Judas who turned traitor; the friends: Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus; the disciples: Peter, Tomas, and James, the “son of thunder” (In the Footsteps, pp. 110-111). Following the example of Jesus, the Church would seem to want to draw a similar crowd. What a joy-filled gathering that would be!



Concluding Prayer:

Lord, to love you by living in your presence,
this is what you ask of me.

Lord, to love you by respecting my neighbor,
by finding your presence in them,
by avoiding criticism,
that is what you desire of me.

Lord, to love you by discovering you in my work,
in events, in objects,
by being caught up in the wonder of you,
this is what you desire of me.

Lord, to love you by serving others,
by being your docile instrument,
by surrendering myself totally to you,
this is your plan for me.

Lord, to savor peace,
to be animated by your serenity,
to taste your joy deep within me,
to sense you in my whole being:
this is what I receive from you. Amen