

and economical context. Hence, the context can remove any kind of social agency from the individual by disempowering him or her. Nonetheless, the poor still retain some capacity to fight. Marginalized groups invent strategies in order to survive in a hostile environment. ♦

## Bibliography

ELA, Jean-Marc,  
 Afrique l'irruption des pauvres:  
 Société contre Ingérence, Pouvoir et  
 Argent, Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1994.  
 FRANCIS (POPE),  
 Apostolic Exhortation »On the Procla-  
 mation of the Gospel in Today's World«,  
*Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013.  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html)  
 [accessed March 21, 2014].

# *Evangelii gaudium* – Reflections from Asia

by Felix Wilfred

**T**he fresh air Pope Francis has brought into the Church blows also through his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, a follow-up to the Synod of Bishops held in October 2012. Used to reading the heavy and circuitous pontifical documents, I could not but be struck by Pope Francis' simple and direct language – a reflection of his own person and style. For a number of reasons, *Evangelii gaudium* is finding grand welcome among Asians, sign of which is that within two weeks 25 000

translated copies of this document were sold out in South Korea. Also non-Christian South Koreans read it as a means of getting to know more about the Church and the pope as they look forward to his visit in the country in August, 2014.<sup>1</sup> Critically thinking Christians in India who rarely bothered about papal document in the past are quoting from *Evangelii gaudium*. The resonance among Asians is due to the spirit of this document, its style and orientation, and the way it addresses questions and issues that are vital for the life and mission of the Asian Churches. The document seems to embody some of the key-themes that will characterize the pontificate of Pope Francis, and it augurs well for the Asian Churches.

I have hardly found documents of bishops' conferences being quoted in papal writings, and was overjoyed to see a statement of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India cited when the pope speaks of inter-religious dialogue; Brazilian Bishops' conference when he speaks of poor and poverty; and the Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, when speaking of environmental issues. There are references also to the U.S. and other bishops' conferences. In this way, it seems to me that Pope Francis is giving concrete expression to the truth that the universal Church is made up of local Churches whose voices need to be listened to. He is probably bringing to a close the discussion on the relationship of the local church and the universal Church in the interpretation of Vatican II which has been for some years now a hot point of debate. It would seem that the pope is questioning the claim that »the universal Church is ontologically and temporally prior to the local church«. <sup>2</sup> The position of Pope Francis seems to be that both local Church and universal Church exist simultaneously and there is no question of speaking about priority. In this way, pope stems the trend of bringing back the Roman centralism quite contrary to the spirit and teachings of Vatican II. Confirmation of this is the fact that he presented himself right from the time of his

election as the Bishop of Rome. The pope is leading us back to the experience of the early Church and its communion of Churches.

There is also a subtext to the document. The pope wants to liberate the Church from its self-absorption and self-referential narcissism on which he has often commented quite sharply. It is at the root of the exaggerated importance given to the defense of orthodoxy even when that goes against human dignity and basic human rights. Pope Francis wants the Church to take its gaze from its institutions, structures, maintenance and bureaucracy, and direct it to the larger world and its issues. No wonder that the manner he communicates makes Christian faith not so much a matter of doctrinal purity, but a crucial and challenging issue of right praxis in the midst of conflicts, contradictions and ambiguities that real life and human history present. »I prefer a Church«, says the pope, »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 on to its own security. ...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...« (no. 49). This shift from self to the world, from doctrine to praxis, creates the right environment and mood to speak of evangelization.

The reliving and re-formulation of God's love and solidarity with the poor by the Church was epitomized in the axiom »option for the poor«. It found ardent elaboration in the Latin American assemblies of Medellín and Puebla. Option for the poor was an inspiration for the involvement of Christians all over the world for the cause of justice and defense of human rights. It meant also a challenge to powers that oppressed the poor and marginalized them. But option for the poor, due to various developments in the Church, was circumvented in the past decades and its force was tempered especially by the anti-liberation trend that

was gaining momentum among many right wing catholic groups and movements. Such a development was a threat to the thinking of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) which had declared already in its very first general assembly in Taipei (1974) the importance of dialogue with the poor, along with dialogue with cultures and religions. Fortunately, we hear a forceful reaffirmation of the option for the poor in the words of Pope Francis. »I want a Church which is poor and for the poor« (no. 198). He could not be more clear than this. He goes even further to consider the poor not simply object of evangelization, but as those who could evangelize us (*ibid.*).

The pope's position is extremely clear and emphatic also when he relates the poor and the Gospel. One could hear the echo of Jesus' beatitudes when Francis tells us, »The new evangelization is to acknowledge the saving power in their [the poor] lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voices to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them«. For me, this is one of most inspiring and challenging passages of *Evangelii gaudium*. Asian Christians when they hear these words cannot but be inspired for the work of evangelization.

Pope Francis introduces a caveat, namely the option for the poor is not to be identified with a series of activities in their favour. He sees the poor through the theological lens as the addressee and beneficiaries of the Kingdom of God. The poor have their own dignity and

1 Pope Benedict could not make any visit to Asia during his pontificate when he made 24 journeys outside Italy, including two to Latin America and two to Africa. Hence a new papal visit to Asia has evoked much attention in the continent.

2 This is what the Congregation for Doctrine of Faith said in its document in 1992: *Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*. Text in: *Origins* 22 (June 25, 1992) 108-12, p. 109.

they are to be loved and appreciated »in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living« (no. 199). We serve the poor not simply because they are indigent, but because »he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances« (ibid.). Here is precisely the difference, according to the pope, between authentic understandings of the option for the poor and all kinds of ideologies that take advantage of a rhetoric on the poor to serve their own interests.

Asia has become an open field for the free play of market and liberal economy. It has spawned numerous forms of inequality. A point of great strength in this document is its clear stand on economy and its trenchantly critical denunciation of the capitalist system fuelled by the spirit of competition which continues to create inequalities of all kinds. The document uses strongest words to censure this system. Pope says that the capitalist economic system is murderous. »Just as the commandment ›Thou shall not kill‹ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ›thou shalt not‹ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?« (No. 53). The pope is also critical of the »trickle-down« theory that assumes that increase of wealth will slowly come to benefit the poor and bring about justice. The pope knows from his own down to earth experience in Latin America that our world is full of inequalities of traditional and modern extraction. The current economic system reinforces those inequalities and makes them most oppressive; it is a damnation to the poor and offers them no hope. No wonder that such plain speaking by the pope has provoked negative criticism from libertarian Catholics, especially in the U.S (Samuel Gregg, Marian Tupy, Robert Sirico and others) who try to reconcile the social teachings of the Church with the free market and its philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

It is only normal that, given the style of exercising his papal ministry, pope Francis gives due importance to dialogue. In fact, he sees life and Christian existence as a journey and pilgrimage - imageries so close to Asian way of life and thought. It is a journey in which Church keeps dialoguing with many partners. He identifies three major areas of dialogue for the Church – dialogue with the state, with the society and with peoples of other religious traditions. All these three forms are of extremely important for the Asian Churches. For example, the conflict and struggles the Churches undergo, the situation of being a minority and the question of religious freedom make dialogue with the state and political forces of paramount importance in Asian countries. The document speaks of social dialogue necessary today for building peace, and about ecumenical dialogue among Christians.

Obviously, dialogue with peoples of other faiths assumes great importance in Asia in the context of its rich religious pluralism. Hence there is a lot of expectation from the document. But then many Asians would feel a certain disappointment about the paragraphs dealing with inter-religious dialogue. The pope turns concrete only when speaking of Islam and refers to the faith-convictions of its adherents. We do not find such concreteness towards other religions. Surprisingly there is even no mention of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, or of primeval religious traditions. The pope expresses the importance of inter-religious dialogue but the treatment of the question lacks depth. Pope probably reflects the Western general mood of interest for Islam because of the social and political questions it presents, especially with its increasing presence in the traditional Christian countries. There is also probably a dearth of interest in other world-religions in the context of the Roman curia, may be due to lack of sufficient knowledge about them. They remain somewhat exotic for many Westerners and far removed from their day to day religious experience. Moreover, coming from

the Latin American continent, the pope is not sufficiently exposed to the experiences of other religious traditions. All other religions, except Islam, become simply »non-Christian religions« without forms and names.

Further, the interreligious dialogue is seen more from a pragmatic point of peace and harmony. We would expect greater theological depth here relating these religious traditions to God and God's revelation and economy of salvation. The question is not really gone into. In no. 254 we hear only a faint echo of more robust recognition of this in some of the earlier Roman documents such as *Redemptoris Missio* in which Pope John Paul II spoke of the presence and activity of the spirit not only in individuals but also in »society and history, peoples, cultures and religions [...]. Indeed, the spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history.«<sup>4</sup> In short, while what Pope Francis has to say about the poor and poverty finds immediate resonance with Asian Christians, they would find the scant treatment of what for them is of an equally important concern, namely interreligious dialogue, as a serious limitation of this document.

To conclude, on the whole, the tenor of this document dealing with the issue of evangelization is something very encouraging, and the way it addresses issues directly without too much doctrinaire preoccupations makes it an inspiration for the Asian peoples as well as for global Christianity. The optimism and hope the document exudes are very welcome in Asia and is bound to touch the hearts and minds of Asian Christians. Asian theologians would find vindicated their position on evangelization.

Unfortunately, for too long, even in this post-colonial period, under different pontificates Asians were given an understanding of mission which was conditioned by the colonial times as for example when mission was viewed as an activity of the Church among the people who live in the under-

developed countries and once colonized by the European powers. For the first time we hear an unambiguous and non-territorial understanding of mission. Evangelization in the way *Evangelii Gaudium* presents has no centre and no periphery. Its centre is everywhere and its periphery is nowhere. In other words, it is a mission from anywhere to everywhere and in every continent and indeed by the entire people of God wherever they be. Reading the document, there is a sense of relief that Asians are not tied to a narrow and territorially defined Roman conception of mission with which they could not reconcile themselves. Even *Ecclesia in Asia* for example gave the impression of a mission being imposed on the Asians, and they were told what they should do. It stated, »just as with the first millennium the cross was planted on the soil of Europe and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent«<sup>5</sup> Here Asia is viewed simply as a field of Christian harvest, totally de-historicized and de-contextualized. No wonder this statement became object of controversy among nationalists and peoples of other religious traditions in Asia who suspected about still lingering Christian ambitions of religious domination.<sup>6</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* appears to be a document on evangelization that allows Asians themselves to be active agents contextually involved in the work of evangelization which is focused on the Good News to the poor. Such an approach to evangelization brings joy to Asians as it lets them appropriate faith and communicate it in the Asian way and get rooted in the soil. ♦

3 See for example the critique of Samuel GEIGG in: *National Review online*, Nov. 26, 2013

4 *Redemptoris missio*, no. 28.

5 *Ecclesia in Asia* no. 1.

6 Cf. ARUN SHOURIE, *Harvesting our Souls. Missionaries, Their Design, Their Claims*, Delhi 2006.