

Evangelii Gaudium – The Programme of a Pontificate

Pope Francis, through symbols and gestures as well as his cordial relation with the people, has won sympathy or support for himself and the Catholic Church. Impressionable was the fact that during his first outing as the pope, he did not put on the red papal stole. He continued living in a Vatican hotel instead of packing into the apostolic palace. On Holy Thursday he washed, in a prison, the foot of a Muslim woman. He expressed his solidarity with the boat-refugees of the Mediterranean sea during his visit to Lampedusa. His personal relation with people and his proclamation radiate love and compassion. Within the church, the pope has made a more transparent climate of dialogue possible and encouraged open discussions, like during the meeting of the College of Cardinals in February 2014.

At the time of his first major writing, the encyclical “Lumen Fidei”, which was to a large extent written by Pope Benedict XVI, he summarized the outcomes of the bishops’ synod of October 2012 on “the new evangelisation for the transmission of Christian faith”, a task left him by his predecessor, in a major document, that is, in an apostolic letter which to some extent discloses the agenda of his pontificate. For him, the joy of the gospel (going by the translation of *Evangelii Gaudium*) should be allowed to shine through all Christians. The document as a whole designated, through his personal style in which the Pope puts forth his wishes and experiences, his appealing attitude and plain language which combats pessimism (also in the Church) and canvasses for an optimistic attitude (Cf. No. 82f.).

In doing so, Francis makes clear what John Paul II enunciated for the Social Teaching of the Church, that the whole Church has to be characterized by “continuity and renewal.”¹ His continuity to his predecessor is to be seen in the fact that he specifies the false developments of the modern world, in the sense of a cultural criticism², especially in the western industrialized societies which are marked by individualism, thoughtless consumerist behaviour, superficial utilitarian thinking and a materialistic culture (Cf. No. 2). The Pope keeps explicitly to the decisions made by his predecessors when he rules out for example the priesthood of women (No. 104). However, the Pope makes it known that he is also aware that questions of gender justice belong to the central challenges of the present day and the Church has not yet been able to give any satisfactory answer to them. Abortion (No. 213f.) is outright rejected. In a similar manner he connects the spiritual part of the document (Cf. No. 284-288) to Marian piety which also shaped his predecessors.

The objective of the document is a missionary Church which proclaims continuously the gospel message everywhere. The Pope wants a Church in which not only bishops, priests, deacons and religious are committed to the gospel but all the baptised and confirmed. It is because Jesus said that he came specially to “bring good news to the poor” (Lk. 4:18) that this aspect plays an essential role in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

The document shows three central aspects which afterwards are to be elaborated on. First are the reforms within the Church which are expected to make the Church a stronger evangelizing Church. Second are the social ethical considerations for just society and thirdly the relationship to other confessions and religious communities.

1. Towards the Reformation of the Church

The central objective of the Pope is a resolute missionary pastoral care (Cf. No. 15) that is ready to proclaim the gospel in all places. To do that, many new orientations are needed so that a pilgrim Church as a community of “missionary disciples” (No. 24) may arise. This demands a decentralized search for creativity in the Church.

The relationship between academic theology and Church office was in the past, especially in the German-speaking nations, not free from tension. Pope Francis emphasizes the positive meaning of theology and stresses the necessity of reception of other sciences. “The Church, in her commitment to evangelization, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences” (No. 132). The theologians should not be contented with a purely “academic theology” (ibid.).

The Pope bewails that often few lay people are found (Cf. No. 81), who voluntarily take up a task in the Church. The lay people should embark on their mission proceeding from baptism and confirmation and not be discouraged by their non-involvement in decision taken in the Church by the hierarchy (Cf. No. 102). The commitment of the laity should not be confined within the Church, but has to make impact in the society, in the economy and in politics. Each Christian has to be a “missionary disciple” (No. 120).

For the Catholic Church, the proper selection of ordained ministers is very central. Thus, he indicated that there must be a careful selection of candidates for the priesthood. There should not be false motivation to the priesthood, like the “pursuit of forms of power, human glory or economic well-being” (No. 107). The Pope gives the priests some tips on how they should exercise their office. In the process, he disapproves of “exaggerated clericalism” (No. 102). The Pope criticizes a narcissistic authoritarian elite consciousness in some sections of the clergy (No. 94).

Being a priest does not mean to rule, but to serve the community entrusted to him, most especially to administer sacraments. He demands that priests recall time and again their main task of evangelisation and so go out to the poor and not draw back. Furthermore, he places value on a good sermon (No. 135-159), which the priest should take enough time to prepare. At the same time the sermon has to be short and should rather involve love and justice instead of inculcation norms (Cf. No. 38). The Pope wants “a poor Church for the poor” (No. 198). The affection to the poor should mainly be a spiritual affection (Cf. No. 200) and not only a material one. Therefore the priests as well as others should not shy away from dirtying themselves (Cf. No. 49). In the proclamation, it is to be made very clear that compassion (Cf. No. 37) is the central primary virtue.

The office of the bishop plays a central role in the Catholic Church. The Pope warns the bishops not to surround themselves with sycophants and yes-men, but to allow themselves to be advised by all. Also, the bishop must not necessarily go ahead of the local church because “the flock possesses itself the intuition to find new ways” (No. 31).

Through the nature of the letter itself in which the Pope continuously cited the decisions of various Bishops’ conferences, he strengthens the role played by the local churches. The

German Bishops' Conference was however not cited. Does this lie in the fact that her documents were not translated into Italian or Spanish? Or do the German bishops speak less prophetically as this Pope Francis himself does in this document especially in his economic criticism? Obviously the Pope cites his predecessor Paul VI who in "Octogesima adveniens" 1971 (No. 4) made it very clear that the Pope is not in the position to make concrete statements affecting all the local churches but that personal initiative is required here and the local churches must deal with respective social and pastoral conditions of their countries (Cf. No. 184). It boils down here to a healing "decentralization" of the Church (No. 16).

With respect to the status of the Bishops' conferences, it was till now theologically contested whether they are rather organizational associations and as the case may be are merely responsible for those questions which arise from the specific State – Church relationships in each country, or whether they are accorded their individual theological (dogmatic, moral-theological) teaching authority. Pope Francis expressly grants the Bishops' conferences a certain teaching authority (No. 32). With it, a Pope from the "South" wishes to overcome the previously Euro-centeredness of the church. His reform concept has significance for his own office, the curia and the cooperation of Rome and the local churches. "An excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach," (No. 32).

In that way, he points out that one could learn something from the synodality of orthodoxy for the Catholic Church. Apparently he stresses this because he wishes to enhance the instrument of the synod of bishops within the Catholic Church. In the pre-conclave discussions of the Cardinals, a stronger participation of the local churches in the governance of the universal Church played a central role. However, it remained open whether the presidents of the bishops' conferences should regularly come together in Rome, or the synod of bishops strengthened or the college of Cardinals be assigned a greater role. Similarly, the curia should rather carry out in Rome, function of service for the universal Church. Such a new understanding of his office and of the curia that assists him plays a vital role. His impulse has already practical implications in the way he set up an advisory body of eight Cardinals from the universal Church and carried out an encompassing inquiry for the preparation of the synod of Bishops.

The Pope points particularly to the fact that the Gospel which must be preached to the whole cannot be a European form of Christianity but that the Christian faith takes up in each particular culture the cultural dress (Cf. No. 117). Different forms of popular piety are also an expression of each culture that is found in the Church. With it, the Church as a worldwide organisation with 1.2 billion members can find unity and diversity which can also provide a model to others in the globalized world.

It is surprising with regard to the statements on the Church that the Pope points, in fact, to different charisms, but mentions in passing the Religious only in No. 169. Although as a Jesuit he is a member of a religious order, one surprisingly does not find broad statements on the religious and clerical orders and congregations, their role in the new evangelisation and mission. Thus he places no extra emphasis than the Second Vatican Council where the Bishops repressed strongly the role of religious orders in the Church or rather subordinated

them to the hierarchy of the Bishops. Kaufmann³ sees the religious orders as “losers” of the Second Vatican Council.

In Germany, the Church is most especially through the Caritas socially committed and turned to the poor population group. Their concerns are also taken up in socio-structural questions. However, it has to be asked whether the “spiritual affection to the poor” which was called for by the Pope would be realised by communities which are, as a general rule, dominated by members of the middle class.⁴ Moreover, one keeps wondering what the Pope’s call for a “poor Church for the poor” for the use of current revenue and the utilization of the assets of the Church in Germany means.

2. The Preferential Option for the Poor as Foundation of Social Ethics

The Pope points out expressly that his Exhortation is not a “document on social questions” (No. 184), but the handling of social problems specifies first the place in which the new evangelization must take place. The link between new evangelisation and social ethics becomes clear in the fact that religion is not a private affair and the mission of the Church does not alone consist in preparing the people for eternal life. The proclamation of the “kingdom of God” and the commandment of love for ones neighbour commit the Christians to “change the world” (No. 183) in order to make it fairer. The Church does not however claim “monopoly on the interpretation of social realities or the proposal of solutions to contemporary problems” (No. 184). “In her dialogue with the State and with society, the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue,” (No. 241). The source of the Church’s analysis of the society is the basic principles of “the Church’s social teaching (human dignity, common good, subsidiarity, solidarity)” (No. 220).

In the secular Press, the statements of the Pope on economy especially the assertion “this economy kills” (No. 53) received great attention. In the business Press,⁵ economic ignorance and wrong judgement were ascribed to the Pope. In this issue, an adequate categorization of his speech was lacking.⁶ On the one hand it is essentially one of the characteristics of his argument.⁷ What he expressly emphasized here (No. 215 and 281) has to do with a prophetic saying as it is known from the Old Testament. The biblically based prophetic way of speech is quite different from a factual or even economic manner of speaking. It met, in Germany, with astonishment because prophetic speech is not consistent with the manner of Church- speaking in Germany. While here the values, rules and institutions of communal living (e.g. in the economic and social system) are strongly shaped by Christianity, the point the Church in Germany normally makes in her statements is about a gradual improvement (like increase of Hartz IV rates or child/family allowance) and not just about basically criticizing the economic and social system. Thus it boils down to a false interpretation,⁸ that the Pope is fundamentally criticizing capitalism and therefore not after possible and necessary improvement of the economic system.⁹

One must keep in mind the perspective of the Pope who – coming from one of the countries of the South namely Argentina, which is not one of the poorest countries but one of the countries with glaring social disparities – deals with the problem. He considers the economic and social situation from the vantage point of the poor, that is to say, of people who are

hungry, starving, living on garbage dumps and get what they eat from the refuse bin of other people. It is on this that his criticism on an economy that kills (Cf. No. 53) rests. He has before his eyes societies in which there is a socially diffused ruthlessness, where people are not only exploited but where others are excluded from sharing in social life through work as lawful subjects, citizens of the State and consumers.

As against the headlines of the Media that the Pope “scorns the rich”¹⁰ the Pope emphatically rebuts it. “The Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor” (No. 58). He only doubts the current economic ideas that through common economic growth a “trickle down-effect” (Cf. No. 54) would be created in which the gains of growth would benefit also the poorer population groups. Nevertheless, poverty reduction is a condition for economic growth. It must however be combined with fair distribution (Cf. No. 204). With growth, care must be taken to see that it does not rest on a reckless dealing with nature (Cf. No. 215).

As a matter of fact, this “trickle down-effect” is observable neither in USA where in the last 30 years the economic growth is concentrated in the upper 10%, most notably the richest 1% of the population¹¹, nor in many developing and transitional countries in which there are disparities between “poor” and “rich”, nor in the process of globalization between the industrialized and developing nations. Notwithstanding all the efforts towards a recovering development, the gap between the 1 billion poorest people in the world and the wealthiest nations has widened. The remark by the critics of the Pope¹² that the number of absolute poor has dropped, considering the increasing world population, does not conflict with a growing inequality (rise of relative poverty) due to the fact that the gap between poor and rich is still possible with the reduction of absolute poverty and even faster income growth. The critics of the Pope¹³ do not go into the drifting apart of income and wealth distribution which is almost observable in all the countries, nor do they ask if a more evenly income distribution would be possible without the reduction of economic growth incentives. The conditions of bigger social inequality give rise also to violence proceeding from poverty and despair (Cf. No. 59). In addition, existential insecurity is very much widespread. High rate of crimes in the countries with gross social disparities underscores this. Thus, the number of prisoners in USA per 100,000 people is about eight times higher than in Germany.

The Pope makes it clear that there is a close relationship between just social conditions and a real social peace. Social peace in the society should not be realised through violent repression of protests carried out by the poor (Cf. No. 218). Here the experience of Latin American society is clearly evident.

The economic and social action of Christians must aim at the “the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor” (No. 188). Although the Pope used in many places an individual ethical semantics, he makes it clear that for him it is systematically about a structural, and with that, original social ethical problem.

He underscores the Church’s teaching on property that there exists a primacy of care of common property and social obligations over the rights of private owners. It is out of place to stop carrying out ones social obligation by using human rights as a justification (Cf. No. 190).

The goal is a society where the people through justly remunerated work are really able to satisfy basic needs of food, education, medical treatment etc. (Cf. No. 192). The problems of poverty are to be resolved from the root by attacking the structural “causes of unequal distribution of incomes (No. 202). A special care for the homeless, drug addicts, refugees, indigenes and old as well as isolated people is required (Cf. No. 210). Victims of human trafficking and women who suffer violence were explicitly mentioned.

For the immigrants, the Pope calls for a generous opening of the boundaries which inaugurate new cultural synthesis. The fear against loss of personal identity should not take the upper hand (Cf. No. 210). It is to be asked here, whether the Pope is not too optimistic and so loses sight of the social tensions and problems of a higher immigration particularly now that societies display little inequality and greater solidarity through a restrictive foreign policy (Denmark).

The Pope is not simply an exponent of a concept of social market economy as is found in Germany. This is therefore the case because he sees in the western industrialised countries consumerism at work (Cf. No. 60). An external sign of such consumerism is that about 1/3 of the food items in Germany is thrown away. Such a waste applies also to the upper class in developing countries where people are at the same time starving.

A further major criticism of the Pope concerns the dominance of finance industry, which already has for a long time left behind a serving role towards the real economy or sector. Money has become a god (Cf. No. 55). He criticizes harshly the “absolute autonomy of the marketplace and the financial speculation” (No. 56 and No. 202). The greed for money, possession and power leads also to corruption and evasion of tax. Money should serve and not rule. That in the face of ever exposed scandals of financial industry and payment of fines amounting to multi-billion dollars by the world’s big banks, the freedom of the market place¹⁴ in particular is at the present still pledged, is surprising.

That it is not about Pope’s¹⁵ fundamental criticism of capitalism becomes clear when he emphasizes that the activity of a business man is a noble work if his activity is based on right values and serves the common good (Cf. No. 203). The Pope prefers politicians “who have the interests of the society, the people and the life of the poor at heart” (No. 206). This includes also a better coordination in the world’s economy. How it could be possible “by full consideration of the sovereignty of the nations” (No. 206) is unfortunately not enunciated. Probably, enhanced “global governance” would require a partial renouncement of sovereignty on the part of nation States.

It was observed in the German forum¹⁶ that the Pope does not know any concept of “social market economy” and on that count makes an unrealistic critique of market economy. This viewpoint does not include the discussion whether and to what extent in Germany, not only in theory but in reality, it is actually about a social market economy in the sense of the motto of Ludwig Erhard “prosperity for all”. Within Germany a tough long-time unemployment is hardly to be overlooked just like a relatively big low-wage sector. In a similar way the income distribution continues to differ. When there was still social market economy in Germany, the gap between the normal worker and the managing director was 1:30 or 1:40 (Deutsche Bank

executive board speaker, Hermann-Josef Abs in 1960s), not like in the present age (after the 2000) with the Volkswagen or Deutsche Bank 1:300 (chairmen of the board of directors Ackermann, Winterkorn). Whereas 50% of the Germany population owns 1% of the assets, the remaining 50% possesses 99%, particularly the richest 10%. In education system there are certain barriers which lead to different opportunities (e.g. for the children from migrant groups). Moreover, there emerges an increasing poverty among the elderly. That is why provisions like minimum wage are being debated or discussed. It is insufficient when reference is made to the fact that for the welfare State as well as for the social commitment of the Church (charity) money has first to be made.¹⁷ The principle of the Pope aims at a just social order that prevents the people (e.g. through long-time unemployment) from becoming object of social welfare or private aid. Furthermore, since 2008 a sufficient enclosure of “financial capitalism” has not yet succeeded that will bring about the primacy of policy over the economy.¹⁸

In the context of globalisation, the Pope turns against a “westernization” of all the countries on earth through the values and products as well as lifestyle spread by the help of modern communication media. The nations outside Europe and North America should be able to preserve their culture (No. 62).

3. Dialogue with the Society and the Religious Communities

For the Pope, the relationship to other Christian denominations and other religious communities as well as to nonbelievers plays an important role. This has first of all a social ethical dimension, for understanding is at the service of peace (No. 218).

In doing so, he makes known his readiness to engage in a dialogue on an equal platform and to learn something from others when he stresses the principle of synodality of orthodoxy (Cf. No. 246). This is because the Spirit also operates in other Christian denominations. The split of Christianity reduces the credibility of her witness in her missionary work in many parts of the world.

In relation to Judaism, the Pope makes it clear that there are great similarities because Christians and Jews believe in one God. But the Christians could not give up proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (Cf. No. 249).

To safeguard peace, the inter-religious dialogue is a “necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities” (No. 250). Dialogue serves the understanding of the other and the commitment to justice. The Pope calls on Christians to hold on to their identity in dialogue, not to get involved in syncretism and, in an overreaching diplomacy, not to say yes to everything. A special mention was made, among other world religions, of Islam because in many countries Christians and Muslims are living together. To begin with, the Pope emphasized the common abrahamic roots. The Pope demands from Christians, respect and regard for the Muslim immigrants in the Christian dominated countries and expects the reverse in Islamic countries. “I ask and I humbly entreat those countries to grant Christians freedom to worship and to practice their faith, in light of the freedom which followers of Islam enjoy in Western countries! Faced with disconcerting

episodes of violent fundamentalism, our respect for true followers of Islam should lead us to avoid hateful generalisations, for authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence” (No. 253). Here, in relation to some States with majority of Muslim population, a warning should have been sounded as regards the same citizen rights. On the contrary, against secular currents, the right to freedom of religion as a fundamental human right (Cf. No. 255) was called for.

4. Conclusion

The basic concern of Pope Francis is to overcome apparently certain lethargy of the Church so that she can again live up to her real mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all the nations especially to the poor. For him, the proclamation of the Gospel and commitment to social justice go hand in hand. He turns against a widespread resignation in the Church and wants to give new courage for missionary commitment and action for more social justice. To this end, he aims at a reformation of the Church that will encourage the clergy and the faithful as well.

Notes

- 1) Cf. John Paul II., *Sollicitudo rei socialis* 1987, no. 3.
- 2) Karlies Abmeier, *Kapitalismuskritik, Kulturkritik und Reformen in der Kirche*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *Analysen & Argumente* 138, January 2014.
- 3) Cf. Franz Xaver Kaufmann, *Kirchenkrise, Wie überlebt das Christentum?* Freiburg 2011, p. 174.
- 4) Cf. Abmeier, *ibid.* p. 8.
- 5) Cf. Christoph Schäfer, *Was der Papst verschweigt*, in: *FAZ* v. 29.11.13; Rainer Hank, *Die Kirche verachtet die Reichen*, in: *FAZ* am Sonntag v. 1.12.13; Robert Grözinger, *Wie der Papst in Wirtschaftsfragen irrt*, in: *FAZ* v. 30.12.13; Josef Joffe, *Heillose Kapitalismuskritik*, in: *Die Zeit* v. 19.12.13, p. 31; Marc Beise, *Der Papst irrt*, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* v. 30.11.13. Against that, Heribert Prantl, *Kapitalismus tötet*, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* v. 07.12.13.
- 6) Cf. Ingo Pies, „Diese Wirtschaft tötet.“ – Business ethical response to some central statements of the Apostolic Letter “*Evangelii Gaudium*” of Pope Francis, Discussion papers no. 2013-38, Chair of Business Ethics, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.
- 7) Cf. Also Joachim Wiemeyer, *Papst Franziskus und die Wirtschaft. Anmerkungen zum apostolischen Schreiben „Evangelii Gaudium“*, in: *Amos International* v. 8. Issue 1, pp. 50-53.
- 8) E.g. from Joffe, *ibid.*
- 9) The Cardinals Reinhard Marx, *Wider die Dämonen des Kapitalismus*, in: *FAZ* am Sonntag v. 15.12.13, Rainer Maria Woelki, *Tötet dieses System*, as well as Karl Lehmann, *Tötet dieses System*, both in: *Christ und Welt* v. 5.12.13 are defending the pope.
- 10) Cf. Hank, *ibid.*
- 11) This was not dealt with by Pies, *ibid.*
- 12) Cf. Schäfer, *ibid.*

- 13) Cf. Jungbluth, *ibid.*
- 14) Cf. Grözinger, *ibid.*
- 15) Also the evaluation by Ingo Pies, *ibid.*
- 16) Cf. Karin Abmeier, *ibid.* p. 9.
- 17) Abmeier, *ibid.* p. 6.
- 18) Cf. Joachim Wiemeyer, Das Verhältnis von Wirtschaft und Politik in der Finanzkrise, in: M. Dabrowski, J. Wolf, K. Abmeier (eds.), *Überwindung der EU-Schuldenkrise zwischen Solidarität und Subsidiarität*, Paderborn 2013, pp. 129-153.

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