

My own dear son

Matthew 3:13-17

January 12, 2014

This is my own dear son ...

God loved the world so much that he gave ...
that he gave the world his own dear son.

This is my own dear son ...

That's what we remember, that's what we proclaim, during these seasons of Christmas and now Epiphany, that God gave to us his own dear son. It's about intimacy. It's about proximity. It's about being able to reach out and touch, or, more to the point, it's about God's own dear son reaching out and touching us.

Jesus was born. The Word became a human being and lived among us. God's word, the Word, is there, right there. The light, God's light, shines in the darkness.

It's a new day! God is showing us a new way! It's not the way of rules or law, about doing the right things. It's not the way of knowledge, about knowing the right things. It's not the way of spiritual enlightenment, about somehow, through meditation or discipline or self-awareness, somehow discovering the truth.

It's the way of relationship, the way of intimacy: "This is my own dear son!" We are not out of touch with God. We are not left stumbling around in the dark. There is light, and that light is Jesus!

And so ...

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

These are not my words. This is not my invitation. But I could have said it. I want to say it! "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ!"

The invitation comes from Francis, from Pope Francis, at the beginning of the third paragraph of his two hundred eighty-eight paragraph apostolic exhortation entitled *Evangelii Gaudium*, published two months ago on

November 24. This is the first formal written document to come from the new pope, who since being elected last March, just ten months ago, has caused quite a stir.

He has surprised people with his humility: choosing to live in a simple apartment instead of the papal palace; cooking his own meals; using public transportation; refusing to ascend to an elevated platform when he was presented as pope, but remaining instead on the same level with the other cardinals.

He has surprised people with his accessibility: letting a young boy who had come to him as he was addressing a large crowd remain with him and sit in his chair and cling to his leg; mingling at night with homeless men and women in the city of Rome dressed as a regular priest; kissing the forehead of a man horribly disfigured by a genetic skin disease.

He has startled people with his openness, making statements that open a door to compassion, in place of mere judgment. In one interview, Francis said, "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?"

And he listens. He has circulated a survey to priests and laypeople around the globe to enable him to hear what they have to say about the difficult issues facing families today.

From the start, Francis' papacy has been remarkably different from almost any before him, but it would be a mistake to call him revolutionary. No, he is not trying to foment any kind of revolution in the church, but simply, much like his namesake, Francis of Assisi, simply taking the gospel seriously, taking the gospel at face value, trying his best to follow Jesus. He aspires, first of all and above all, not to be a good churchman, or a capable administrator, or a inspiring preacher, or a transformative leader, but to be a simple follower of Jesus. And he wants the church, he wants all Christians, to do the same.

That's why so much of the indignant reaction to *Evangelii Gaudium* -- and there has been some indignant reaction -- misses the point. This came from Rush Limbaugh:

I was doing show prep last night, usual routine, and I ran across this -- I don't even know what it's called, the latest papal offering, statement from Pope Francis. Now, I'm not Catholic. Up until this, I have to tell you, I was admiring the man. I thought he was going a little overboard on the common-man touch, and I thought there might have been a little bit of PR involved there. But nevertheless I was willing to cut him some slack. I

mean, if he wants to portray himself as still from the streets where he came from and is not anything special, not aristocratic. If he wants to eschew the physical trappings of the Vatican, okay, cool, fine. But this that I came across last night totally befuddled me. If it weren't for capitalism, I don't know where the Catholic Church would be.

And Limbaugh quotes a news report:

"Pope Francis attacked unfettered capitalism as 'a new tyranny' and beseeched global leaders to fight poverty and growing inequality, in a document on Tuesday setting out a platform for his papacy and calling for a renewal of the Catholic Church. ... In it, Francis went further than previous comments criticizing the global economic system, attacking the 'idolatry of money.'"

And then Limbaugh continues his commentary:

I gotta be very careful. I have been numerous times to the Vatican. It wouldn't exist without tons of money. But regardless, what this is, somebody has either written this for him or gotten to him. This is just pure Marxism coming out of the mouth of the pope ...

Ken Langone, billionaire founder of Home Depot, told CNBC that a potential major donor to a cathedral restoration project in New York City "is concerned about statements from the pope criticizing market economies as 'exclusionary,' urging the rich to give more to the poor and criticizing a 'culture of prosperity' that leads some to become 'incapable of feeling compassion for the poor.'"

Langone said:

This is one more hurdle I hope we don't have to deal with. You want to be careful about generalities. Rich people in one country don't act the same as rich people in another country ... You get more with honey than with vinegar ...

They both miss the point. Francis is not taking sides in any kind of social debate. He is not promoting any particular ideology or political cause. He is not being political, but theological. He is not a Marxist, but a Christian, calling the church to follow Jesus. As one reporter put it:

The idea that possessing significant wealth inherently makes it harder to behave morally is a bedrock part of Christian ethical thought. [It was Jesus who said,] "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

I would suggest that Rush Limbaugh and Ken Langone actually read the document. And I would suggest each of you actually read the document, because it is well worth reading. And I would suggest that everybody who does read it pay close attention to the title which encapsulates the focus and heart of the whole piece. It is entitled *Evangelii Gaudium*: “the gospel of joy.”

It's about joy! The end result of a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ is joy! This is Francis' deep desire, his reason for writing, his agenda for the church. He wants the men and women and children of Christ's church to be filled with joy and to carry that joy into the world!

May the world of our time, he writes, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled 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.

Francis is concerned that our joy may be stifled, and that our mission to bring good news may fail. He writes:

The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless ...

The great danger is that our souls will be filled with resentment and anger and apathy because we spend our lives in pursuit of things that cannot give joy.

The great danger is that our hearts will have no room for others, in particular for the poor, that human beings will grow more and more isolated and apart from each other and set against each other.

The great danger is that love will be lost.

This is the context for Francis' critique of the modern market economy. The context is joy, renewing joy in those who have not and renewing joy in those who have. He quotes Pope Paul VI saying “technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy.”

He continues:

I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to. I also think of the real joy shown by others who, even amid pressing professional obligations, were able to preserve, in detachment and simplicity, a heart full of faith. In their own way, all these instances of joy flow from the infinite love of God, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ ...

Joy flows from the love of God. Joy comes from the relationship that grows out of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. And joy leads by its very nature to compassion. It wants to be shared. Francis repeats this statement from a conference of Latin American and Caribbean bishops:

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 ...

Joy is Francis' agenda. And joy is Jesus' agenda. "Remain in me," Jesus said, "so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Jesus did not come to make your life miserable or to deprive you of life's simple pleasures. Yes, following Jesus may make your life more difficult -- the gate is narrow and the way is hard -- but it is the hard way, the narrow gate, that leads to joy.

That's the way into which Francis invites us. We will be considering *Evangelii Gaudium*, the gospel of joy, during the next seven Sundays of the season of Epiphany, listening to Francis' words, along with the words of the Old Testament prophets and the words of the gospel of Matthew. We will listen to what Francis writes to the church, not to become his disciples, but to heed his invitation to follow the One to whom he points: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ."

Let them come to the Lord! Bring them all to the Lord!