

EVANGELII GAUDIUM AND PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

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Many things have amazed me since Roger Schroeder and I, borrowing from our Congregation's 2000 General Chapter, have begun to reflect on the spirituality and practice of Prophetic Dialogue to express the basic attitude and practice of mission. There seems to be a real resonance between the idea of prophetic dialogue and the spiritualities and practices of many Christian churches, for example, so that the idea has become a very ecumenical way of talking about mission.¹ To give another example, there seems to be a real parallel between the doing of contextual theology and the concrete ways that mission is carried out. Like contextual theology, the first thing that is necessary is a careful discernment of a situation so that particular practices of mission—either more dialogical or more prophetic—might be engaged in. And such practices of discernment necessarily demand a rich spirituality in which prayer and contemplation play an essential part.²

Perhaps most amazing, however, is the fact that Prophetic Dialogue is really not a new way of thinking about and practicing mission at all. What becomes clear upon reflection is that Prophetic Dialogue is a powerful new way to name how God does mission, and how mission has been done since Christianity's beginnings. Throughout history there can be discerned a pattern in the best of missionary thought and practice that is marked by the rhythm of Prophetic Dialogue, even though missionaries and missiologists have not used the term at all.³ We can see the rhythm of prophetic dialogue at work, for instance, in the ministry of Jesus, in the writings of St. Paul, in the work of apologists such as Justin Martyr and Origen, in great missionaries like Augustine of Canterbury, Cyril and Methodius, Matteo Ricci, and Charles de Foucauld., and in the work of great missiologists like David Bosch.

It is not surprising, therefore, to discern a pattern of Prophetic Dialogue in the practice and writings of Pope Francis, especially in his groundbreaking Apostolic Exhortation of November, 2013, *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)*.⁴ What I would like to develop in this presentation is how this Apostolic Exhortation gives expression to the idea of Prophetic Dialogue, even though, of course, it does not employ the term in any explicit sense. After a short reflection on the nature of Prophetic Dialogue, I will focus on the dialogical aspects of EG. Then I will reflect on the prophetic aspects

¹ See Stephen Bevans and Cathy Ross, ed., *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context, and Prophetic Dialogue* (London: SCM, 2015).

² See Stephen Bevans, "Contextual Theology and Prophetic Dialogue," in ed. Bevans and Ross, *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*, -----.

³ See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), -----.

⁴ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)* http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. Subsequent citations of EG will be in the text, with the paragraph number in parentheses.

of the Apostolic Exhortation, concluding by showing how this rhythm works together in the document to offer a profound understanding of Christian Mission.

Prophetic Dialogue

In *Constants in Context*, Roger Schroeder and I offered three basic approaches that have been operative in the thought about and practice of mission since the theological renewal articulated by the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s.⁵ Vatican II, of course, took place within the Catholic Church, but it marked a new era of openness among the Roman Church and many Protestant, Orthodox, and indeed Evangelical and Pentecostal communities as well, and so the three basic types of mission we outlined have their shapes among these Christians as well. A first type of mission is one that conceives of Christian missionary endeavors as fundamentally a participation in the very life of the Trinitarian God as such. God is imaged as a missionary God, overflowing with love, mercy and healing for the created world. A second type concentrates on Jesus' liberating vision of the Reign of God, the inauguration of which the church is called to work. Thirdly, mission is understood primarily in terms of the direct proclamation of Jesus the Christ as the unique savior of the world. Each of these approaches does not exclude the major emphasis of the others, and yet each has its own particular emphasis and implications for missionary work. Each one is a valid and valuable approach to understanding and carrying out the church's mission that has been entrusted to it by Jesus as expressed in the various "missionary mandates" (Matt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15-16; Lk 24:47-48; Jn Jn 20-21; Acts1:8).

But Roger and I proposed that the best way to think about and to practice mission today is to develop a way of speaking about mission that would include each of these contemporary approaches to mission in one single, dynamic concept that would serve to offer a creative synthesis or creative tension among them all. Inspired by David Bosch's phrase that mission—particularly as it is practiced in interreligious dialogue—should be carried out in "bold humility,"⁶ and by the Society of the Divine Word's formula at their 2000 General Chapter, we suggested the term "Prophetic Dialogue."⁷

As we described it at the end of our book *Prophetic Dialogue*, engaging in Prophetic Dialogue is very much like a dance to the "beautiful but complex rhythm of dialogue and prophecy, boldness and humility, learning and teaching, letting go and speaking out,"⁸ as it is called forth by the needs and events of human and cosmic history. Both aspects, both practices need to be operative at the same time, but which one will predominate, which kind of rhythm will invite the dance, will be invited in turn by the particular context in which the dance will be done. Some contexts—new situations for the minister or missionary, contexts of other

⁵ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), ----.

⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission:-----* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), ---.

⁷ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, ----.

⁸ Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, ---.

religions—will call for patient, careful dialogue. Other contexts—responses to invitations to proclaim the good news, situations of oppression or injustice—will invite a dance of prophetic speech and action. The movements of dialogue are mostly slow. They are about listening, openness, risk, teachableness, relationship, patience. The movements of prophecy emerge out of the same attitudes, and while sometimes quick are always deliberate. They are done in both wordless witness and articulate speech. They demonstrate the beauty and vitality of the gospel in the daily life of a community or in its countercultural lifestyle, and they express the gospel’s beautiful, powerful, and transforming message as exciting, urgent news, as a word of hope in seemingly hopeless situations, or as a liberating word in situations of injustice, dehumanization, ecological destruction, or violence. This dance of Prophetic Dialogue is clearly, wonderfully evident in Pope Francis’s engaging and powerful Apostolic Exhortation, as we will see in the next two sections of this reflection.

Evangelii Gaudium and the Rhythm of Dialogue

Evangelii Gaudium is a document that pulses with the spirit of dialogue, a word that appears some fifty-eight times in the text. Many people—Catholics and not—who have read the document have commented on its wonderful, open style. It is a document that communicates, a document, in the words of Australian missiologist Noel Connolly, “of a free man.”⁹ In this regard, it connects admirably with what American church historian John O’Malley speaks of as Vatican II’s distinct style. Like the documents of that Council, it is not a document that focuses on the juridical and hierarchical, but is dialogical and fraternal.¹⁰

For Francis, I believe, the root of his conviction about the importance of dialogue lies in his understanding of God as such, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. God is, above all, a God of mercy and tenderness. Early on in EG, Francis repeats an idea that he has repeated several times before, especially in his daily homilies. “God never tires of forgiving us,” Francis writes. God does this “with a tenderness that never disappoints” (2). Further on he quotes Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that “...it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree” (37).¹¹ And in paragraph 88 Francis writes that “the Son of God, becoming flesh, summons us to the revolution of tenderness.” Such a God is a God of dialogue, a God who understands, a God who listens with compassion and feels people’s pain. The dialogue to which the church is called is a dialogue practiced by God as such.

A first dialogical theme that runs through the document is the closeness that the church needs to have with the people among whom it lives. As an “evangelizing community,” the church “gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it

⁹ Noel Connolly, -----, *The Francis Effect* (Sydney: Catholic Mission, 2013), ----.

¹⁰ John J. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belnap Press at Harvard University, 2008), ---.

¹¹ The reference is to ST, II-II, q. 30, a. 4.

bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice” (24). Christian hearts, Francis insists, needs to be “filled with faces and names!” (274). A church close to the people will not always be a tidy, orderly church, but one that gets “its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (45). Francis makes it clear that he prefers “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” (49). Christians, as missionary disciples, must practice the “‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other” (169).

The church must work to cultivate a “culture of encounter” (220), to be “a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (114). The foundation for such a culture is listening. ““We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur” (171). Francis speaks eloquently of the church as a “mother with an open heart” (46), the house of the father of the prodigal son, who waits and keeps his door open so the son can readily come in. The church “is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.” (47) The confessional “should not become a torture chamber” (44). The Eucharist, the pope writes, is “not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak,” and baptism should be available for any and all who ask for it (47). This last instruction was particularly illustrated when the pope personally baptized a number of children, one of whom was the child of an as-yet-unmarried couple.

Ministry in the church, too, needs to be dialogical in spirit. The bishop, Francis says, may sometimes go ahead of his flock; but sometimes he needs to show his leadership by simply being with them. At these times, “he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and—above all—allowing the flock to strike out on new paths” (EG 31). And when the church teaches, “we need to remember that all religious teaching ultimately has to be reflected in the teacher’s way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love and witness” (EG 42). Indeed, the gospel “message has to be shared humbly as a testimony on the part of one who is always willing to learn, in the awareness that the message is so rich and so deep that it always exceeds our grasp” (EG 128).

Dialogue—listening closely, respecting culture, and people’s ordinary experiences—is essential for expressing the faith in ways that will make it a profoundly prophetic message. “We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous” (117). Because of this, we should see reality “with the eyes of faith, we cannot fail to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is sowing” (68). In the passage from which I just quoted, Francis seems to be talking about contemporary, secular culture. It seems reasonable, however, to see implications for *any* approach to a culture or context. In any case, in cultures already marked by Christianity, evangelizers need to encourage, foster, and reinforce the richness that already exists (69). “In the

Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face” (116). In other cultures, Francis says, new processes for evangelizing culture need to be developed, a process that will need “long-term planning” (69). Undoubtedly, such planning must involve the “sincere and patient dialogue” for which Vatican II’s *Ad Gentes* calls.¹²

Francis pays particular attention to popular culture, even speaking of it as a *locus theologicus*. (126). It is important, he says, to approach the faith of simple people of faith with deep respect. The attitude of dialogue is to be cultivated as missionary disciples minister among the poor and people of simple but deep faith.

Toward the end of the document Francis takes up the practices of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, and writes about the urgency and significance of each to the church’s mission. “The credibility of the Christian message would be much greater if Christians could overcome their divisions and the Church could realize ‘the fullness of catholicity ...’ (244). But the way to this unity-in-diversity can only be pursued through trusting one another, and that is a true art (244). In dialogue Christians recognize “How many important things unite us!” (246), and Christians can learn much from one another if they work at “reaping what the Holy Spirit has sown” among other Christians, and finding the gift that they are to us (246). “Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness” (246).

Interreligious dialogue must be carried out in a spirit of openness and truth, and because dialogue can be a way to create peace in the world, it “is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities” (250). Francis alludes to what other documents have called the “dialogue of life”¹³ when he refers to the fact that dialogue is “in the first place a conversation about human existence,” or, referring to what the Indian bishops say, being open to others, “sharing their joys and sorrows” (250). As each partner in the dialogue searches for truth, each “can be purified and enriched” (250). But Francis also points to the fact that the openness necessary for interreligious dialogue “involves remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one’s own identity” (251). And so authentic dialogue among religions moves toward prophecy as well. Dialogue and proclamation are here very clearly connected, and “far from being opposed, mutually support one another” (251). Such close connections move us to the third and final part in our reflections, which will focus on the prophetic dimensions of the Apostolic Exhortation.

Evangelii Gaudium and the Rhythm of Prophecy

¹² Vatican Council II, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (AG), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html, 2.

¹³ Pontifical Council for Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (DP), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, 42.

The words “prophecy,” “prophet,” and “prophetic” are rare—if used at all—in *Evangelii Gaudium*, but there is no doubt that it is a prophetic document, and that Christians are called to a prophetic witness of the gospel. As missionary disciples, all are called to participate in Christ’s three-fold ministry of priest, prophet, and servant leader, and prophecy in particular—in word and in deed—is central to the missionary task.

As I’ve said above, dialogue is closely linked to prophecy in the practice of interreligious dialogue. The openness and honesty of interreligious dialogue is not, Francis says, “a diplomatic openness which says ‘yes’ to everything in order to avoid problems” (251). Dialogue partners need to share the truth as they see it, and that involves a mutual prophesying to one another. This prophecy is not necessarily aimed at converting one another, but it does articulate one’s belief in a clear, loving, and direct way that “speaks forth” the truth as each understands it. This is a *sine qua non* of any kind of dialogical relationship.

Christians engage in prophecy when, as missionary disciples (24), they both witness and preach the message of the gospel. “This message,” however, “has to be shared humbly as a testimony on the part of one who is always willing to learn, in the awareness that the message is so rich and so deep that it always exceeds our grasp” (128). As we are engaged in the prophetic task of evangelization, “we are told to give reasons for our hope, but not as an enemy who critiques and condemns. We are told quite clearly ‘do so with gentleness and reverence’ (1Pt 3:15)” (271). Such prophetic activity is the task of everyone in the church, not just specialists. “In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work impelling us to evangelization” (119). In the very next paragraph, Francis writes: “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized” (120). This is why, early on in the document, Francis emphasizes the need for parishes to train their members to be evangelizers (28).

The content of the prophetic message is something profoundly important to Francis as well. It has to be above all a message of joy. In often-quoted words, Francis insists that Christians should not live as if there is Lent without Easter (6), and that evangelizers should never look like they’ve just come back from a funeral (10). Quoting Pope Benedict XVI’s opening homily at the Aparecida Conference in 2007, he calls the church to evangelize “by attraction” (14) by being people of joy, by radiating a sense of beauty, by issuing an invitation to a “delicious banquet” (14). The joy of the gospel is reflected in the beauty of the church’s liturgy, “which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewal and self-giving” (24).

Second, the content needs to be one that connects with people’s lives and experiences. “When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or inclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing

and at the same time most necessary” (35). If the church is to evangelize effectively, it should not speak more about law than grace, the church more than Christ, the pope more than the word of God. In addition, the church needs to “constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness” (41). In this way it can “communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which it can bring whenever perfection is not possible” (45). This way of inculturated evangelization is difficult and risky, but it is worth it, for simply repeating formulas that don’t connect with people’s lives is the “greatest danger” (41; see also 129). In sum, the content of evangelization to be really prophetic, needs to be “capable of shedding light on ... new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values” (74).

Francis devotes a significant section of the document to the homily, certainly one of the most important opportunities for those who are ordained to engage in prophetic ministry. The Christian community needs constantly to be evangelized, as the document insists several times (87, 164,), but the homily offers the possibility of offering a prophetic word of consolation, encouragement, challenge, or illumination to those who might be in the congregation who do not usually attend Eucharist. Significantly, of course, the prophetic action of the homily is grounded in dialogue—it must be prepared with “an ear to the people,” contemplating not only God’s Word, but also the people whom the minister serves and among whom the minister works (154). If such a dialogical stance is taken, there is a much better chance that the homily will not “respond to questions that nobody asks” (155). Francis calls on the ordained to spend a significant time for homily preparation, and says bluntly that claiming a lack of time for such work is no excuse. Indeed, he says, “a preacher who does not prepare is not ‘spiritual’; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received” (145).

Francis’s is also a prophetic voice against the forces of injustice that so pervade the world today. He speaks out against a “disposable culture” which is not simply about oppression or even marginalization, but about ignoring people altogether. The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but the outcast, the ‘leftovers’” (53). And so the pope says an emphatic “no to an economy of exclusion” (see 53), to “the idolatry of money” (see 55), to “a financial system which rules rather than serves” (see 57), to “the inequality which spawns violence” (see 59).

Chapter Four of the Apostolic Exhortation contains a particular focus on “the social dimension of Evangelization,” and here Francis speaks clearly of the need for the church to be “poor and for the poor” (198). The church, in all aspects of its life, needs to witness to the gospel by both a commitment to the poor and the simplicity of its life. He offers a real challenge to every Christian, emphasizing that no one has an excuse to avoid closeness to the poor—not academics, nor business or professional persons, nor women and men in the service of the church (201). In a strong paragraph he speaks plainly: “Any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticize

governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings, and empty talk” (207). Prophetic words indeed.

Even though Francis acknowledges that is a “noble vocation” (203), he makes the prophetic statement that “we can no longer trust in the unseen forces and invisible hand of the market” (204). What constitutes business’s nobility is its dedication to serving “the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all” (203). Francis is no simple socialist, and definitely not a communist. But he does offer a prophetic voice to the world of commerce and money, and calls both to conversion.

Conclusion

Evangelii Gaudium unfolds to the rhythm of dialogue and prophecy, often clearly distinguished, but often, as I’ve tried to point out above, closely connected with each other. We see this connection particularly in the discussion interreligious dialogue, in Francis’s treatment of the homily, and in his reflections of inculturation. In paragraph 208 we see this rhythm of prophecy and dialogue beautifully expressed, a wonderful example of how dialogue needs to temper prophecy, and how prophecy nonetheless needs to be uttered. Francis writes that if anyone is offended by his words about commitment to the poor and challenge to business people and politicians, he wants to assure them that he speaks “with affection and with the best of intentions, quite apart from any personal interest or political ideology.” He is not a “foe or opponent,” but one who must speak to those “in thrall to an individualistic, indifferent, and self-centered mentality to be freed from those unworthy chains ...”

Prophecy must be done in dialogue. Real openness and commitment to those among whom we serve can only lead to prophecy. One of the great contributions of *Evangelii Gaudium* is its conviction that both are possible and, indeed, necessary in the task of evangelization. Pope Francis’s example of openness allows him to speak both forcefully and credibly, and his words lead not to isolation but to continued respect, openness, and listening. *Evangelii Gaudium* is thus a prime example of how mission is carried out with the attitude and practice of Prophetic Dialogue.