

Catholic Review Column: The Joy of the Gospel, Part 2 of 9

One year ago Pope Francis was elected. Almost from the start, it was clear his papacy would be transformative. But what sort of change does the pope have in mind? Is it merely a change in style? Or is it a change in various church teachings? In the first full chapter of his exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis offers us important clues to the real change he has in mind.

“I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ ” he writes, “that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”

These powerful words, I submit, are at the heart of Pope Francis’ leadership of the church. Everything about the church – its laity, religious and clergy; its parishes, small faith groups and dioceses; its resources and energies; its pastoral approaches and styles of teaching and preaching – are to be newly infused with the truth, love and joy of knowing Jesus Christ and with renewed dedication to the mission of bringing the Gospel to men and women everywhere and in every condition of life.

In the opening paragraphs of this first full chapter of his exhortation, Pope Francis takes us back to Abraham. Once Abraham encountered God and believed, God told him to “go forth.” As Jesus was forming his disciples, he sent them out. And after his death and resurrection, he told them to go forth and proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In God’s plan, believing and going forth go together. Once the joy of the Gospel and the living presence of Christ fills each of us and our communities of faith, then the Holy Spirit moves us to “go forth from our comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel.’ ”

If the Holy Spirit is at work in us, bearing witness to Jesus before the world is not a grim task but rather the source of joy. Everywhere we go we sow the seeds of truth and love, knowing that God will give the growth in ways we may not expect. Further, we don’t go forth as lone rangers. Jesus sent out his disciples two by two. We go

forth as those who are joined to Christ and to one another in love. How secure and happy we should be, for it is God who loved us first and who supports us every step of the way.

And as the Gospel penetrates every aspect of our lives, we find the strength, courage and wisdom to bring it to people everywhere. We get involved in the lives of others. We find opportunities to build bridges between the Gospel and the rough and tumble of daily life. We wade into a world where the wheat and weeds are growing together. But far from getting discouraged, we continue, insistently and joyfully, to plant and nurture the seed of God's word. We seek not to win an argument but to be God's instruments in helping those around us to flourish with that newness of life which comes from living with Christ. The strength to be wise sowers of the Word and joyous witnesses to his truth and love comes from the church's liturgy and leads us back there with every great commitment and joy.

And here's the difference: Sometimes life in the church can be like running on a treadmill. We're in motion and the exercise is good for us. But we're not going anywhere; we're staying put. Pope Francis is telling us not to run in place but to run beyond the walls of our homes and churches as joyful messengers of the Gospel. He's telling us, in a word, not just to maintain the church but to be a church on a mission. He's confirming that we must go "from maintenance to mission."

Next time we'll see how this applies to parishes and to dioceses, including and especially our own. In the meantime, please join me in praying to the Holy Spirit for the grace to believe and to go forth courageously and joyfully.