

# Catholic Review Column: The Joy of the Gospel, Part 6 of 9

In our daily work, we all face temptations. Sometimes it's the temptation to get ahead at any cost. At other times, there are temptations to take short cuts. Then there is the temptation to give in to discouragement when things don't go as they should.

In the second part of his exhortation, "Evangelii Gaudium" (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis speaks of similar challenges, obstacles and temptations all of us must face in living and bearing witness to the Gospel. Without attempting to list and analyze all such problems, he wants us to be aware that evangelizing is a challenging mission. It requires the help of the Holy Spirit to understand the problems we face and to address those problems by a renewed communal commitment to the mission Christ entrusted to us all.

Some of these challenges are economic. Pope Francis speaks of the growing gap between the rich and poor, a gap which is painfully evident in many parts of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. He speaks of the inequalities that result when market forces are allowed to operate in such a way that many are excluded from the possibility of attaining a better life. He warns us that when we become overly concerned about our financial well-being we may forget the poor. Money may become one's idol, one's substitute for God and for the Gospel. So too the continuous exclusion of people from economic advancement often spawns discord and even violence. We don't evangelize in a vacuum but rather in the real world. And we can't hope to do so without internalizing the Beatitudes, even in a world where profit often counts more than the good of people.

The pope mentions cultural challenges. He mentions how the prevailing culture often discards fundamental human virtues and values. Relativism reigns. The unique features of ethnic cultures tend to be swept away by the new ways in which we communicate. In many places there is religious persecution, and even in Western democracies religious freedom is threatened. The pope points out that marriage is now understood merely as an emotional bond and he speaks of the harm that comes

to children when the family structure is weakened.

Reading this catalogue of challenges calls to mind many conversations I've had with parents who are struggling to pass on the faith. In spite of their best efforts, parents grieve when their sons and daughters cease to practice the faith. Young people who remain close to the faith experience many challenges from their peers and from popular culture. Pope Francis isn't merely giving us a list of intellectual errors ("isms"); he's pointing to real life problems we face in spreading the Gospel.

In the face of these and other challenges, the pope advises his co-workers in the church not to circle the wagons. Endlessly mulling over our problems is not the way forward. Rather, we have to face our own temptations, beginning with the fact that we are part of the prevailing culture that is impeding the spread of the Gospel. For example, our protests against secularism and relativism ring hollow if it appears to everyone around us that we find our real security and joy in possessions, status, power and leisure activities.

How easily we can give in to what the pope calls "spiritual worldliness." With the outward trappings of religion intact, underneath we can actually be self-absorbed and wrongly judgmental of others. In the same breath, Pope Francis warns us against burnout that is caused by endless activity without prayer and growth in holiness. He warns us against becoming so caught up in the pragmatic business of religion that we forget about the mission with which we've been entrusted. He urges us not to become cynical and pessimistic "sourpusses!"

But in the place of pessimism, the pope does not prescribe naïve optimism but the indomitable joy and hope of the Gospel. How important that we rebuild the unity of the church around the essential truth of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. How essential that we continue to form a vibrant relationship of faith, love and missionary zeal among clergy and laity. How important that we encourage vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life while calling forth the gifts of the laity. As the pope puts it, "We are all in the same boat and headed to the same port! Let us ask for the grace to rejoice in the gifts of each, which belong to all."

In the short space of a column, it isn't possible for me to capture all that Pope Francis says in this chapter. But I hope you will read that chapter carefully as we

enter deeply into our 225th anniversary year and gear up to embrace anew the mission of spreading the Gospel in this archdiocese and beyond.