

SOME ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EVANGELII GAUDIUM

The recent apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) will have enormous ecumenical implications.

On the surface, only three paragraphs (244-246) are devoted to ecumenical dialogue per se. In practice, the whole exhortation speaks powerfully to all the churches on key issues of Christian mission and evangelism that they all face. Not merely does Pope Francis say that he invites ‘all Christians everywhere to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ’, but he does so in terms that will be understandable and acceptable to Orthodox and Protestants as well as to Roman Catholics¹.

There are three respects in which *Evangelii Gaudium* promises much for the ecumenical future. The first is that it resonates so profoundly in many places with the key emphases of the major Protestant traditions, in particular with those of my own, Methodist, tradition. The emphasis on mission as a responsibility for all Christians and not just their ministers, the stress on mission to the poor, and, above all, the emphasis on the joy of the gospel will help all Protestants, and Methodists in particular, to recognise the present Pontiff as a great evangelist with a truly pastoral heart in his concern of all who are most marginalized and who most desperately need the Gospel. They will particularly welcome the statement that ‘mission is at once a passion for Jesus and for his people’².

Never before have I read a document from the Roman magisterium, either papal or conciliar, which has so illuminated my own particular tradition and contributed insights that need to be noted and assimilated by it today. I say this without prejudice to the very real debt I continue to owe to *Gaudium et Spes* and the *Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican II. One cannot speak more highly of a teaching document from another church. *Evangelii Gaudium* is part of that embellishment of the koinonia to which John Paul II referred in *Ut Unum Sint*, which has been granted to us by the Holy Spirit in His working *within our separated traditions*, a grace given *despite* the serious sin of schism³.

The apostolic exhortation begins on a note of sheer joy. Para 4 gives an exuberant catena of scriptural quotations. The Pope in particular cites Zephaniah 3:17 ‘The Lord, your God is in your midst...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival’. He stresses the joy of Christian life, ‘the joy we experience daily...as a response to the loving initiative of God our Father’. He speaks towards the end of the exhortation of the joy of Spirit filled evangelizers, who communicate their deep personal experience of God’s love to others⁴. As I read his description, I am reminded of the fervour and joy of the first Methodist preachers and the way it was encapsulated in Charles Wesley’s hymns. I think in particular of one vivid verse.

Not from a stock of ours but thine,
Jesus, thy flock we feed,
Thy unexhausted grace divine
Supplies their every need:

¹ Some more radical Protestants may feel reservations over the moving marian conclusion to the exhortation, but they should have few other reservations with the main document.

² *Evangelium Gaudium*, (hereafter EG) para 268.

³ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), para 85.

⁴ EG, chapter 5. ‘Spirit Filled Evangelisers’.

But if we trust thy providence,
Thy power and will to save,
We have the treasure to dispense,
And shall for ever have⁵.

It is in the spirit of this verse that Francis says that people receive joy from those ministers who have first received it themselves.

Finally, under this heading, I would draw attention to the way in which Francis' stress on the welcoming and embracing love of God corresponds to the Wesleyan stress on the kindness of God. Whereas as in some Christian traditions, law and grace have often been seen as in tension, within the Wesleyan tradition God's commands have always been seen as having an ultimately benevolent and gracious purpose which is entirely for our benefit, both personally and communally. In one of his most brilliant short hymns Charles Wesley speaks thus of the reception of God's word and law.

Lord, with open heart and ear,
We would thy law receive,
All thy *gracious* sayings hear,
And savingly believe:
All thy *kind* commands obey,
The *pattern trace which thou hast given*,
Walk in thee, the truth, the way,
The Life and heaven of heavens⁶. (my italics)

The second point to stress about the ecumenical potential of *Evangelii Gaudium* concerns 'the fraternal dialogue' on the nature and exercise of the petrine ministry to which the late John Paul II invited the leaders and theologians of the other communions⁷. The third relates to the Christian understanding and practice of social justice and the search for the common good in the contemporary world. The *entire* text is worthy of close and prayerful study.

In the late 1990's, the doyen of Methodist ecumenists, Geoffrey Wainwright suggested that a way forward in exploration of the petrine ministry might be for the Pontiff, in collaboration with representatives of the other Christian communions, to identify and publicise the core essentials of the Christian faith as a way of rallying the Christians of the world to renewed faith and mission⁸. According to Wainwright, 'the very *exercise* of elaborating a statement of faith might-by the process of its launching, its execution, its resultant form, its publication and its reception-illuminate the question of 'a ministry that presides in love.'

I do not know whether, when he prepared the exhortation, Francis was aware of Prof. Wainwright's suggestion. However, I think that what he has offered us goes a long way towards being the sort of response envisaged. True, the exact details of the kerygma are not enunciated one by one, but the teaching on Christian practice, discipleship and mission is clearly based upon them, as the Pontiff makes clear in para 178 in one of the most beautiful statements in the *entire* text.

⁵ *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists. With a new Supplement* (1876), no 874. Unfortunately, this beautiful verse was omitted from later editions of the book.

⁶ *Ibid*, no 886.

⁷ *Ut Unum Sint*, op cit, para 96.

⁸ Puglisi, J (ed). *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church* (1999), p. 82

‘To believe in a Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realising that “he thereby confers on them an infinite dignity.” To believe that the Son of God assumed our human flesh means that each person has been taken up into the heart of God. To believe that Jesus shed his blood for us removes any doubt about the boundless love that ennoble every human being.’

In any case, the concentration on the practicalities of Christian discipleship and mission will have a much wider appeal than a more purely doctrinal exposition. It will reach many humble lay folk who would not feel able to cope with theology in the technical sense. It would perhaps, however, be a good thing if local bishops’ conferences issued appropriate summaries of the text. Its very length may perhaps be a bit daunting to some of the many who certainly need to hear and heed its core message.

Overall, this text makes a global ministry of leadership in proclamation meaningful to the whole of the Christian world. Its benevolent tone and its stress on the joy of Christian faith and life help to commend it as the work of the bishop of the Church that ‘presides in love’ as Ignatius of Antioch put it so long ago

All Christians acknowledge the authority of Luke’s account of the early Church in Acts. In it, Peter is portrayed as taking the lead in proclamation on the day of Pentecost and subsequently, is testified to in Acts 9:32 as exercising a ministry of encouragement to all the churches then existing, a ministry which a much earlier Methodist ecclesiologist calls his ‘itinerant superintendency.’⁹

Francis’ recent letter resonates with the understanding of Peter’s leadership as shown in the early chapters of Acts. Needless to say, that does not resolve all the complex questions about the subsequent evolution of the petrine ministry and the extent to which that evolution has been faithful to, or perhaps has illegitimately exceeded, the New Testament paradigm. In particular, it does not resolve all the issues around the definitions of Vatican I and the more recent exercise of the ministry. Orthodox and Protestants will, however, be glad to note the current emphasis on decentralisation and perhaps also the strong stress on the authority of particular national bishops’ conferences. This last is reinforced throughout the report in terms of the nineteen quotations that the Pope makes from their teaching across the continents.

Francis also makes it quite clear that he wants to reaffirm the role, including the authentic teaching role, of episcopal conferences. He does this in a manner which is in some degree of tension with *Apostolos Suos* of 1998¹⁰. He is anxious to stress that the local bishops are the people who are responsible for discernment on local issues. He states,

‘Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question that affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issues that arises on their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote decentralisation’. He further adds that episcopal conferences are an important manifestation of the collegial spirit

⁹ Gregory, B. *The Holy Catholic Church* (1873), p. 43. It is to be noted that at this stage, the Church was still confined to Palestine.

¹⁰ *The Tablet* 30.11.2013.

for which Vatican II called, regretting also that ‘a judicial status for them, including genuine doctrinal authority has not yet been sufficiently elaborated’¹¹.

Orthodox and Protestants will also be glad to note the stress on the laity, particularly the assertion that they should not be excluded from decision making¹². All the Orthodox and Protestant churches give the laity some say in decision making locally and the Anglican and Protestant churches generally do so at regional/diocesan and national levels. Francis’ remarks will be seen as encouraging for future closer convergence in ecclesial cultures of government and decision making.

I have already referred to the way in which the exhortation resonates with so many concerns and emphases common to the whole of Christendom. Throughout it also the fervent and joyous personality of the Pontiff shines, perhaps to an unprecedented extent in a formal papal document¹³. When Francis was elected Pope, a Latin American ecumenical colleague, a bishop of the strongly evangelical Anglican Church of the Southern Cone, said that the new Pontiff was ‘Christ centred and Spirit filled’, a description that would be amply justified by the tone and content of this document. Para 264 states

‘The primary reason for evangelising is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us on to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?... How good it is to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in his presence... The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us’.

With such teaching potentially resonating with the whole of Christendom, one wonders whether there may not be a future for what one might call, by analogy with another proposal, a differentiated participation in the petrine ministry, that is to say, one in which other communions look to the Bishop of Rome to speak on their behalf on issues confronting the whole oikoumene in its world mission¹⁴. It would not involve other communions in accepting his *immediate* jurisdiction over them but it would involve their openness to his teaching and guiding role in the universal mission. ARCIC has already suggested the possibility of an Anglican acknowledgment of the petrine ministry in advance of the restoration of full communion¹⁵.

Significantly, Francis invites *all Christians everywhere* (my italics) to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ¹⁶. In this inclusive address, he offers all Christians a message which is simultaneously both the very personal testimony of an individual fellow believer and the authoritative teaching of a senior minister of Christ, called to a uniquely global ministry.

¹¹ EG. para 32.

¹² EG. para 102. Francis deplores excessive clericalism that keeps them (i.e. the laity) from decision making. Stressed also in *The Tablet*, 30.11.13.

¹³ an example of this can be seen in para 4, where Francis says that he finds it thrilling to read Zephaniah 3:17 (as cited above)

¹⁴ The analogy I am making is with a suggestion by Harding Meyer that churches might share in a *differentiated participation* in the historic episcopate, in which they would possess it in common whilst having different ways of understanding its nature and function.

¹⁵ *The Gift of Authority* (1999) para 60.

¹⁶ para 3.

One is reminded of Augustine's description of his role as both simple believer and bishop, 'With you I am a Christian, for you I am a bishop.'

A few more words should be said about the teaching of this exhortation in general. Lest anyone think Francis' joy and enthusiasm are simplistic, let us also note that throughout the exhortation he stresses the many problems of mission in the contemporary world and the many spiritual failings that can all too easily beset Christian disciples and make them less than able to share the good news effectively¹⁷.

Other features of the teaching of this exhortation that will commend themselves to Protestants are the emphasis upon the evangelistic duty of all Christians, both lay and ordained and the importance of regular and thorough bible study.

Chapter 3, Section 1 is entitled 'The entire people of God proclaims the Gospel' and a sub section reinforces this with the title 'We are all missionary disciples'. Francis teaches, 'All the baptised... are agents of evangelisation... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus'. These statements are followed by an intriguing section on the evangelising power of popular piety which has been powerful both in the Catholic and mainstream Protestant traditions¹⁸. I can give an example of this from the small village Methodist church of which I am a member. Our people there love and appreciate the great hymns of Charles Wesley, but they also love the simpler evangelical choruses that sustained their parents' and grandparents' faith and which they still often, quite spontaneously, sing at the conclusion of a service. This fervent singing has often had a profound effect on visiting worshippers and preachers.

One of the favourite choruses, 'Christ Jesus lives today!' with its words, 'He walks with me, he talks with me' parallels almost exactly Francis statement in para 266 that 'a true missionary... knows that Jesus walks with him, talks with him, breathes with him, works with him.'

Very movingly, Francis seems to say that each individual Christian has a particular mission. 'My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off... I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason I am here in this world'. The mission is inextricably tied up with both the work that the person does and his or her particular gifts, so that where there are truly dedicated Christians, 'we begin to see nurses with soul, teachers with soul, politicians with soul, people who have chosen deep down to be with others and for others'¹⁹.

Francis also stresses the importance of the parish in developing Christian community and formation²⁰. Again, this resonates with the experience of Protestant parishes and congregations. We know then to be places where we bear each others' burdens, where we build each other up in faith and hope through wise counsel and the example of committed Christian lives of prayer and service. For most lay Christians, the parish or congregation is the key element, under Christ, in their growth in grace.

¹⁷ In particular, he notes that 'there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. EG, para 6.

¹⁸ EG, paras 122-6.

¹⁹ EG, para 273.

²⁰ EG, paras 28-9.

Francis rightly says ‘the parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration’.

Great emphasis is also placed on regular and contemplative study of the Bible. Francis stresses that ‘the best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart’²¹. Methodists will immediately think of two of Charles Wesley’s great hymns on Scripture, ‘While quiet in my house I sit, thy book be my companion still’ and ‘Come divine interpreter’, a hymn that invokes the aid of the Spirit, essential in understanding the word read, heard or preached. We think of such lines as

‘My joy thy sayings to repeat,
Talk o’er the records of they will,
And search the oracles divine,
Till every heartfelt word be mine.’²²

Or, in ‘Come, divine interpreter’.

‘Words that endless bliss impart,
Kept in an obedient heart’²³.

Finally, in this section, we may note the wise counsel given by Pope Francis in two sections of the exhortation (paras 76-109, 135-159) to ordained ministers and lay pastoral workers alike. He begins by commending the ‘beautiful example of so many Christians who joyfully sacrifice their lives and their time.’²⁴, but he goes on to warn that there are also many pastoral workers in whom he sees ‘an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity’. Such people often limit their spiritual life to ‘a few exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others’.²⁵ He is deeply concerned about those that become cynical, disillusioned and lose all real joy and enthusiasm for their work. Beyond this, he also identifies other temptations that can beset such workers, such as obsession with particular tasks or enthusiasms in ministry which divert them from a truly rounded ministry in which they engage both with their flocks and beyond their immediate flocks.

A particularly significant remark is made in para 89. ‘Our challenge is not so much from atheism as the need to respond adequately to many people’s thirst for God’. This is profoundly true in both Britain and western Europe. Church attendance has slumped in all the historic denominations since the 1950’s, but, despite the noisiness of some atheists and secularists, it has not generally been replaced by antagonism to religion as such. Many retain deep respect for those committed believers that they see living good lives of service to others. Many explore new forms of spirituality from outside of the mainstream churches. A few even

²¹ EG, para 264.

²² From ‘When quiet in my house I sit. *Methodist Hymn Book* (1933) no 310.

²³ *Singing the Faith* (the official British Methodist hymn book), (2011), no 154.

²⁴ EG, para 76.

²⁵ EG, para 78

return to the Church in retirement when, with more leisure for thought and contemplation, they come to feel the need for Christ again²⁶.

Francis' approach is challenging to ordained ministers and lay pastoral assistants across the oikoumene. In paras 135-159, he gives sound advice about preaching, which applies just as much to Orthodox and Protestant ministers and lay preachers²⁷. Effective preaching demands a mind steeped in Scripture and one that faces the dual challenge of careful exegesis and personal appropriation in each lectionary text. It demands careful consideration of the nature of the congregation concerned. Finally, he stresses that such preaching should come from the heart, not, of course, in terms of emotion, but in terms of the sincerity and love that shine through the preacher's presentation of the Gospel.

However, perhaps the most immediately relevance, ecumenically, of all the teaching in the exhortation lies in its social justice dimension. In the strict sense, there is little new in it. What Francis asserts, as he himself stresses, has been part of Catholic social teaching and, one may add, that of the other ecumenically engaged churches, for a long time²⁸. For a good hundred years, there has been a stress on the search for *The Common Good* at national and international level, accompanied by an insistence on the dignity of human nature as created in the divine image.

The exhortation coincided with a World Council of Churches Assembly devoted to the search for justice and peace²⁹. It also came soon after the publication of the latest Anglican-Lutheran international dialogue report in which the key theme is the diakonia of the whole Church, not just that of permanent deacons who, quite correctly, have a social leading role within it, but the diaconal ministry of the whole people of God in a world of suffering and poverty³⁰. In Britain, a key ecumenical conference has just addressed the issue of the Common Good and how the churches, together, can promote this in Britain and beyond. Catholic theologians and activists have played a prominent part in this. Additionally, The British Free Church Public Issues Group has been particularly active in stressing the case for a living wage. Francis acknowledges these efforts made by other churches³¹.

All this, of course, has happened in the context of a globalising world, many parts of which have reeled under the impact of the financial crisis of 2008. It has taken place amidst increasing inequity as between an elite whose income continues to grow faster than other incomes and an impoverished minority which continues to be ever increasingly marginalized. There is no doubt that this was the right time for the Pontiff to encourage the Catholic faithful to reflect on such issues.

²⁶ In making this last statement, I am speaking out of experience of my own Methodist church where there are certainly a few people who have returned at such a stage of life to regular church worship and fellowship.

²⁷ Almost all the 'historic' denominations have lay preachers. A few Orthodox laymen are licensed to preach by their bishops. The Church of England has lay readers, British Methodism the Order of Local Preachers and the United Reformed Church its lay preachers.

²⁸ Indeed, the Pope refers readers to the *Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching* for a thorough review and analysis of the teaching of his predecessors and the Council (EG, para 184). For a British Methodist comparison see *The Declarations of the Methodist Conference on Social Questions* (1959) and the subsequent 1960 Declaration *A Christian View of Industry in Relation to the Social Order*.

²⁹ For an assessment of this Assembly, see Loughran, J. 'The World Council of Churches Tenth Assembly', *Ecumenical Trends*, Dec 2013, pp.5-10.

³⁰ *To Love and Serve the Lord. The Jerusalem Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission (ALIC III)*, (2013). I reviewed this briefly in *One in Christ*, (2013), pp. 155-162.

³¹ EG, para 60 'The Catholic Church unites its own commitment to that made in the social field by other churches and ecclesial communities'

What is new in the exhortation is the sharpness of insight with which the Pontiff applies the social teaching of the twentieth century to current conditions. Much earlier Catholic teaching, in particular that in the Vatican II Decree *Gaudium et Spes*, was framed in an era when conditions, particularly in the ‘developed’ world, were very different. In the period from 1945 to the early 1970’s, there was full employment, reasonably buoyant wages even in unskilled jobs and, at least in Europe, generous Welfare provision for those for those unable, for whatever reason, to work. Since then, as Francis points out at various points, conditions have changed. The knowledge and information technology revolutions, valuable as they have been in education, have ‘created new and often anonymous forms of power’³². Other technological advances have rendered many jobs, even of a formerly skilled nature redundant. The naïve assumption of many futurologists of my childhood was that, as a result, hours of working for everyone would come tumbling down. Rather, the result has been that more and more of the people who might once have had secure semi and even fully skilled manual jobs have been forced either into low paid unskilled work or even rendered effectively unemployable in the current labour market. Commenting on the overall changes of more recent years, Francis says the key problem is no longer that of simple oppression or exploitation of the poorest, it is that of their exclusion, their being discarded as irrelevant, ‘without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape’³³.

Consequently, in almost all the developed and developing economies, the gap between the best off and least well off has widened, most notably in Britain and the USA, but also to an extent in continental Europe. The worst effect has been that the poorest in, for example, Britain, have been plunged into levels of poverty not seen since the great pre-World War II Depression. These effects have been particularly visible since the 2008 financial crisis and resulting Depression. The poorest people in Britain are now sometimes forced to resort to food banks for food that they cannot otherwise obtain.

At the same time, important currents of opinion defend the situation. Three defences are employed, in varying degrees. The first is that market forces are almost like physical laws that cannot be altered. To interfere with them only brings about an even worse situation. Francis attacks this directly. Just as we have to say no to murder, ‘today we also have to say, “thou shalt not to an economy of exclusion.”³⁴’ He attacks the idolatry of money, arguing it that it must ‘serve, not rule’³⁵.

The second is the trickle down effect, i.e. the belief that growing overall prosperity will ultimately enhance the incomes of even the poorest. This is a point which may have had some substance between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1970’s, but, clearly, is not happening currently, a point that Francis makes trenchantly, calling it an opinion that is not confirmed by the facts and which expresses a crude and naïve trust in those wielding economic power and in the sacralised powers of the economic system³⁶. The third, with which Francis does not engage so much is the widespread complacent assumption amongst many, particularly in the anglo-saxon countries, that the poor are only poor because they are idle or

³² EG, para 52.

³³ EG, para 53. Discarded is a sadly appropriate description. The BBC morning news on 2.1.2014 contained a report to the effect that many of the 440,000 young people who had been unemployed for more than six months in Britain felt life had no meaning for them. A third had even considered suicide

³⁴ EG, para 53.

³⁵ EG, paras 55, 58.

³⁶ EG, para 54.

incompetent. To complement Francis' teaching in this respect, we can turn to John Wesley who dealt as trenchantly with that argument in the eighteenth century as Francis does with the other two points in ours. In 1753, he said, 'So wickedly, so devilishly false is the common objection, "they are poor only because they are idle."³⁷' On another occasion, he said, 'one reason why the rich have so little sympathy for the poor is that they so seldom visit them'³⁸. Wesley, by contrast did. Even in his mid-eighties, he trod through the snow of a London winter to beg for the poor.

For both Francis and Wesley the poor are at the very centre of the mission of the Church. Francis wants a church of the poor and for the poor³⁹. Like Wesley, he has spent a lot of his ministry with them. Theodore Jennings argues that, for Wesley, 'religion, if it was not just to be a pious form of worldliness...must begin where God begins, amongst the poor, despised, oppressed and marginalized...Wesley made a point of visiting the poor and even lodging with them.'⁴⁰

Francis argues that 'God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself "became poor" (2 Cor 8:9). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor'. He argues that 'for the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one'⁴¹. In a particularly beautiful paragraph, Francis stresses the importance of a contemplative attentiveness and love towards the poor, 'which permits us to serve the other not out of necessity but rather because he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances'⁴². Francis is able to contemplate as they will be at the end of time when the full splendour of the divine image is restored at the New Creation.

Charles Wesley celebrates in verse both his brother's missionary practice among the poor and Christ's preference for them. I add just two extracts.

The poor are Jesus' bosom friends,
The poor he makes his latest care.
To all his successors commends
And wills us on our hands to bear
And cherish for their Saviour's sake
And love them with a love like His⁴³.

In 1757, a certain Mrs Mary Naylor died, a woman for whose loving ministry to the poor Charles had great respect as appears in these lines written then.

Her Saviour in his members seen
A stranger she received Him in,
An hungry Jesus fed.
Tended her sick, imprisoned Lord
And flew in all His wants to afford

³⁷ We may note Francis parallel attitude in para 60, if expressed more mildly than Wesley's.

³⁸ cited by T. Jennings in Meeks, M. Douglas (ed) *The Portion of the Poor* (1995), p. 21. To a degree Francis echoes this when he talks of how easily the poor can be simply ignored.

³⁹ EG. para 198.

⁴⁰ T. Jennings, cited in M. Douglas Meeks (ed), *The Portion of the Poor* (Abingdon, 1995), p. 20.

⁴¹ EG. paras 197-8.

⁴² EG. para 199.

⁴³ Cited by S.T. Kimborough in his essay in Meeks, op cit, p. 156.

Her ministerial care⁴⁴.

Francis is very clear about what the poor of today, wherever found, want and need, both spiritual care and care for their flourishing in this life. He rightly asserts that, though our final destiny is only reached beyond this life, God nevertheless intend us all to enjoy this beautiful earth and flourish in *this* life⁴⁵. He is quite clear that temporary welfare and relief measures are not enough. The poor must be able to flourish though the provision of adequate health and education. No Christian must regard what he calls ‘a la carte charity’ as an adequate response to their needs. One is reminded of the complementing teaching of Wesley who talked of God ‘appointing the poor’ to receive the surplus of the rich and who defined a rich Christian rigidly as any Christian who has more than is necessary for his most essential basic needs⁴⁶. Time and time again he urged the early Methodists to give all that they could to the poor. They were not to limit their charity to the poor within the Methodist societies but to give also to the poor outside. Above all, they were not self-indulgently to lay up treasure on earth, but rather in heaven by giving to the maximum⁴⁷.

Wesley further feared that when, later in his ministry, many Methodists began to prosper in worldly terms, they would soon lose the spirit of true religion and keep only the outward form of it⁴⁸. Its interesting to compare this with Francis’ teaching on the spiritual dangers of the consumerism so prevalent in modern developed economies. He argues, at the very beginning of the exhortation, that ‘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’⁴⁹. He continues that in those that succumb to such a lifestyle and outlook, ‘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.’

Such an analysis of our present western society rings only too true. Its needs to be said that its victims are not just the poor but in just as profound a sense many of those rich who have no contentment with life despite their acquisitiveness which is all the greater for their lack of any real satisfaction from their wealth⁵⁰. It is quite clear in contemporary British society that chief executives of large companies of all sorts rate their success and achievement in life by their bonuses and by salaries which bear a less and less proportionate relationship with those of their ordinary underlings. Their attitude is in contrast to the some of the great Christian businessmen of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were respected by their employees both for their payment of fair and adequate wages and for the provision of many leisure and other facilities to enhance the workers’ enjoyment of life. Many such Christian businessmen valued what they did as wealth creators, benefiting both their employees and the

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 162.

⁴⁵ EG, para 182.

⁴⁶ Wesley addresses all Christians thus, ‘As to yourself, you are not the proprietor of anything; no. not of one shilling in the world. You are only the steward of what another entrusts to you, to be laid out, not according to your will, but His.’ *Journal of John Wesley*, Oct 26, 1754.

⁴⁷ Wesley, J. Sermon ‘On Laying up Treasure on Earth.’ *Works of J. Wesley* (Abingdon edn, 1987), no. 131.

⁴⁸ See, for example, his Journal entry of 11 July 1764. ‘Riches increase for many Methodists. What but the mighty power of God can hinder their setting their heart upon them? And, f so, the life of God vanishes away’.

⁴⁹ EG, par 2

⁵⁰ EG, para 2.

wider community whose needs they were also fulfilling⁵¹. They were truly servants of the Common Good.

Francis points to the corrosive effect of consumerism even on believers, stating that it is not the 'way to live a dignified and full life'⁵². He is insistent that the Common Good takes precedence over the privileges of the wealthy.

Three further aspects of Francis' teaching are particularly noteworthy. First he stresses the importance for every Christian of participating fully and where necessary *critically*, in the life of his or her community. 'Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life "related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good."⁵³ The Gospel is not just about a personal relationship with God but about loving the God that reigns in the world⁵⁴. Life in the community and engagement with others are at the heart of the Gospel call.

All this means that Christians cannot shirk what the British Methodists of my childhood called 'Christian citizenship', that is the responsibility to look at all social political issues from a Christian point of view and to adjust one's values, and even one's behaviour as an elector, appropriately. Francis refers to politics as 'a noble vocation' which suitably talented Christians should consider embracing. He cites the US Bishops Conference, "responsible citizenship is a virtue and participation in political life is a moral obligation." Finally, he asserts that all Christians are called to show their desire for a better world⁵⁵. One may add that all this is implied in Christ's call to us to be 'salt and light'⁵⁶.

Secondly, the Pontiff stresses the importance of the search for the Common Good, in terms of what makes for a community truly at peace with itself and in which particular effort is made to ensure that none are exploited marginalised or simply discarded as being of no value in market economic terms to it. It is interesting to note the way in which secular wisdom backs up Francis' position. A recent study by two medical statisticians, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, shows that those societies in the developed world where there is greater equality and less of a gap between the richest and poorest citizens, have lower crime levels, better educational attainment and, particularly significantly, have better levels of health, this last not simply among the poorer section of the population but even amongst the wealthiest. Maybe it is because such societies are less fraught and those who are better off are, in general, less feverish in their pursuit of wealth⁵⁷.

One may add that the concept of the Common Good relates both to the dignity and welfare of each individual as well as to the flourishing of the community as a whole. Francis points out that it involves ensuring that each individual has the basics of life and enough education and opportunity for meaningful work to allow him to contribute to the Common Good⁵⁸.

⁵¹ In saying this, I am thinking of such great Quaker business men and philanthropists as the Cadburys and Frys who were concerned not just to pay fair wages but also to improve the living conditions and even the educational opportunities of their employees.

⁵² EG. para 2.

⁵³ EG. para 182

⁵⁴ EG. para 180.

⁵⁵ EG. para 183.

⁵⁶ Mark 9:50, Matthew 5:14..

⁵⁷ Wilkinson R and Pickett, K. *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, (2009). Their point also applies as between the states of the USA, those with less inequality showing the same better record.

⁵⁸ EG. para 192.

Furthermore one may add that the concept is related both to nature and to grace. By nature, human beings are pack animals and community creatures, needing communities in which to flourish through free interchange, both in terms of satisfying basic needs and the creative and social talents of all. By grace, we are called to participate in the supreme Common Good, a life as the adopted brothers and sisters of Christ in His Church on earth, as anticipation of our eternal destiny in the embrace of the Trinity, a life in which each, in his or her destined place in the pleroma of the divine plan, will eventually reach that final bliss which God has appointed for them. Of course, that goes beyond anything that can be delivered in a society or state in this life, but that is not to say that a society can never, albeit in a finite and imperfect way, approximate more closely to the ideal of *koinonia* than is anywhere currently the case⁵⁹. Everything in human life, personal and social, points to a fulfilment that will only be realised in and by the new Adam, who will finally restore our true nature and bring it to its eschatological fulfilment.

It is significant that the Pontiff deals with interfaith relationships within the context of social peace. He displays a particularly loving concern towards Jews and Muslims, stating that ‘we Christians should embrace with affection and respect muslim immigrants to our countries.’⁶⁰ He pays tribute to the secret work of the Spirit in the lives of the faithful of other religions, a point at which he might have added a brief reflection on the way in which some converts to Christianity from other faiths have, nevertheless, continued to cherish all that is noble, true and, indeed a preparation for the Gospel, within their previous religions⁶¹. A mention might also have been made of those people of genuine goodwill but of no religion who nevertheless seek the Common Good.

Finally, the Pontiff does not mince his words in pointing to the practical consequences of his teaching. Charity and welfare programmes are not an adequate answer to the problems⁶². The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges⁶³. Business is extolled as a noble condition, but *only* when practiced as a service to the community. It is ‘a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life’, when they ‘serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and make them more accessible to all.’⁶⁴

I would add that it is important for all of us to reflect closely on the personal consequences for us of this teaching, which will demand sacrifices in monetary terms as well as in terms of commitments in social action, political involvement and other spheres. In the current conditions of a Britain which is experiencing greater marginalisation of the poor as a result of recent government cuts in welfare spending, increasing casualisation of low paid employment and effective wage cuts for the many as inflation outstrips rises, it is increasingly borne in on me that I personally, and indeed a high proportion of the British population (not just the very rich), would have to pay more in tax if a future government were to seek seriously to remedy some of these problems.

⁵⁹ Christianity, as J.S. Whale pointed out is a melioristic religion, neither ultimately pessimistic nor naively optimistic about human nature, but believing that improvement is possible, but never inevitable. *Christian Doctrine* (1941).

⁶⁰ EG, para 253.

⁶¹ A particular example is the Sikh, Inderjit Bhogal, who became a Christian and entered the Methodist ministry.

⁶² EG, para 180.

⁶³ EG, para 199.

⁶⁴ EG, para 203.

Mr Wesley would unhesitatingly have told us to grasp the nettle. He constantly reminded rich Christians that everything that they owned was not theirs to do with as they pleased . It was a sacred trust from the Lord, to whom, like all the earth, it really belonged. His definition of a rich Christian was very strict. It was anyone who had anything left over once he had provided for the basic necessities of his family⁶⁵.

I am aware that I have only touched lightly on the richness of the exhortation. It is a document I will want to and will need to return, time and time again. Its teaching is deeply congruent with the social teaching of my own British Methodist Connexion⁶⁶ and sums up what I believe to be a growing consensus across the oikoumene as it grapples with the challenges of the world today.

It is a beautiful document, which I will need to revisit again many times. It is a document suffused with the joy of the Gospel. It is one which, in its core practical teaching on mission, pastoral ministry and social justice, could be and should be affirmed by the other major communions and their leaders and responsible synods.

David Carter.

⁶⁵ Wesley, J. Sermon 'On the Danger of Increasing Riches' (1790). 'Whoever has the necessaries and conveniences of life for himself and his family, and a little to spare for them that have not, is properly a rich man'.

⁶⁶ See ref. 29 above for the relevant British Methodist documents.