

This column was originally printed in the January 2014 issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.

The Joy of the Gospel

Bishop John Folda

In a broadly-written document that reflects his own character and personality, Pope Francis has given the Church a manifesto of joyful evangelization. The very title, *Evangelii Gaudium*, or the Joy of the Gospel, speaks of the Holy Father's conviction that, come what may, we are all called to a joyful living of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Pope Francis goes so far as to say that it is impossible "to imagine a Church without joy; and the joy of the Church lies precisely in this: to proclaim the name of Jesus."

St. Teresa of Avila was a woman of great zeal and common sense. In a moment of typical bluntness and candor, she is known to have said, "Dear God, save us from sour-faced saints!" Even Pope Francis warns against this same affliction; that is, being a "sourpuss" while claiming to be a disciple of Jesus. What greater contradiction of the Gospel could we imagine than a disciple who is perennially unhappy or even angry? Undoubtedly, there are reasons for sadness and frustration in the world and in our own personal lives. We would be fools to act as if everything in the world were rosy or has already reached perfection. We are realists, and we know better.

But despite the sadness and disappointment that we all know only too well, the Gospel can still give us authentic and enduring joy. Jesus assures those who follow him and commit their lives to him a destiny of unending joy. He promises a place in his own kingdom, where there are no tears or sorrows. And that kingdom, Jesus tells us, is already among us. Already we experience the joy and satisfaction of discipleship, of knowing the Lord and experiencing his love and mercy. Although we know we are sinners, we also know that Jesus forgives us. What could give greater joy than to know we are forgiven and healed of such deep spiritual wounds?

Pope Francis reminds us of our responsibility to be evangelizers, to bring the joy of the Gospel to others. We must invite others to come and know the joy and hope we find in the message of truth which we call Jesus Christ. Harkening back to words of Pope Paul VI, the Holy Father says, "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral. Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that 'delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow...And may the world of our time, 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.'" Indeed, the French philosopher Leon Bloy wrote, "Joy is the most infallible sign of God's presence." And while a modern skeptic might not initially be interested in the eloquence and logic of our proclamation of faith, he or she may be attracted by the witness of our joy.

I was privileged to witness this kind of joyful evangelization in a beautiful way just this past Christmas Eve. I saw a notice in the local newspaper that Nativity parish in Fargo was holding a Christmas Eve dinner open to the public, especially for those who did not have family gatherings or anyplace special to celebrate Christmas. I decided to stop by and say hello, and I was

overwhelmed by what I saw. A multitude of happy and joyful volunteers were on hand to greet and serve hundreds of guests, who came in out of the cold to a warm and cheerful Christmas dinner. The good people who were preparing, serving, and delivering meals were uniformly happy to be part of this great occasion, and I was delighted to learn that this event has been going on for 43 years. Those who came for dinner seemed genuinely grateful for the welcome they received, and there was a real spirit of joy among them.

Although there was no explicit preaching or catechizing going on, this was undoubtedly a work of evangelization. On Christmas Eve, the many people who worked so hard to put on this event again this year demonstrated by their joy and charity that “there is room at the inn.” By their actions they heeded the Pope’s call to go out to the margins, and they taught their visitors that all are welcome in the Church, which is God’s family. Without question, there is also a need for clear and joyful preaching and catechesis, which will perhaps be a topic for another reflection in this space. But we, as Catholics, must first evangelize by our deeds, and by the joy of our Christian lives. It is said in legend that St. Francis of Assisi told his followers, “Preach always, and when necessary, use words.” By the witness of our lives, each of us can preach an eloquent homily of God’s grace and love to all those we meet. Of course, this Christmas Eve dinner is just one event in one parish, and I know I could cite numerous examples from all our parishes where the joyful Gospel of Christ is being lived and preached in a thousand different ways. But the spirit of joy that Pope Francis speaks of seemed to be especially evident on this occasion.

Later this month I expect to witness another very different type of joyful evangelization. I will travel to Washington D.C. for the annual March for Life, and while there, I plan to meet up with more than one hundred fellow pilgrims from the Diocese of Fargo. One of the things that is often noted about the March for Life is its youthful character. The young pilgrims and marchers, who come from all over the country, some after long hours or even days of travel, are an exuberant and joyful group. Despite the solemn and somber character of the anniversary we commemorate, that is, the legalization of abortion, the many people - young and old - who attend the March for Life maintain a positive and upbeat spirit. They do not succumb to anger, bitterness, despair or hostility, but they keep the spirit of the Gospel in their hearts, in other words, a spirit of joy.

These young people are one of the best advertisements on earth for the Gospel of Life and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are unabashed in their faith and friendly in their demeanor. They willingly accept the hardships that such a journey entails, and they describe the journey as “life-changing.” They put forward the best face of the Church and witness to the joy of living as followers of Jesus Christ. I know many who witness this annual March have been deeply affected and even converted to the pro-life cause. Once again, the joy of the Gospel has the power to change hearts, and our joyful witness to the love and mercy of Christ, even in such a heartbreaking cause, can transform the moral landscape of our nation. I hope each of us will unite our prayer and joyful witness to those marchers who will witness to the Gospel of Life in Washington. And I hope that by our witness, wherever we are, minds and hearts will be turned to Jesus and to the sanctity of life.