NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'Evangelii Gaudium' amounts to Francis' 'I Have a Dream' speech

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 26, 2013
Analysis

Dreams can be powerful things, especially when articulated by leaders with the realistic capacity to translate them into action. That was the case 50 years ago with Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, and it also seems to be the ambition of Pope Francis' bold new apostolic exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel."

In effect, the 224-page document, titled in Latin *Evangelii Gaudium [1]* and released by the Vatican Tuesday, is a vision statement about the kind of community Francis wants Catholicism to be: more missionary, more merciful, and with the courage to change.

Francis opens with a dream.

"I dream of a 'missionary option,' " Francis 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."

In particular, Francis calls for a church marked by a special passion for the poor and for peace.

The theme of change permeates the document. The pope says rather than being afraid of "going astray," what the church ought to fear instead is "remaining shut up within structures that give us a false sense of security, within rules that make us harsh judges" and "within habits that make us feel safe."

Though Francis released an encyclical letter titled *Lumen Fidei* in June, that text was based largely on a draft prepared by Benedict XVI. "The Joy of the Gospel," designed as a reflection on the October 2012 Synod of Bishops on new evangelization, thus represents the new pope's real debut as an author.

Early reaction suggests it's a tour de force.

The text comes with Francis' now-familiar flashes of homespun language. Describing an upbeat tone as a defining Christian quality, for instance, he writes that "an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!"

At another point, Francis insists that "the church is not a tollhouse." Instead, he says, "it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone." At another point, he quips that "the confessional must not be a torture chamber," but rather "an encounter with the Lord's mercy which spurs us to on to do our best."

Francis acknowledges that realizing his dream will require "a reform of the church," stipulating that "what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences."

Though he doesn't lay out a comprehensive blueprint for reform, he goes beyond mere hints to fairly blunt

indications of direction:

- He calls for a "conversion of the papacy," saying he wants to promote "a sound decentralization" and candidly admitting that in recent years "we have made little progress" on that front.
- He suggests that bishops' conferences ought to be given "a juridical status ... including genuine doctrinal authority." In effect, that would amount to a reversal of a 1998 Vatican ruling under John Paul II that only individual bishops in concert with the pope, and not episcopal conferences, have such authority.
- Francis says the Eucharist "is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak," insisting that "the doors of the sacraments" must not "be closed for simply any reason." His language could have implications not only for divorced and remarried Catholics, but also calls for refusing the Eucharist to politicians or others who do not uphold church teaching on some matters.
- He calls for collaborative leadership, saying bishops and pastors must use "the means of participation proposed in the Code of Canon Law and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear."
- Francis criticizes forces within the church who seem to lust for "veritable witch hunts," asking rhetorically, "Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?"
- He cautions against "ostentatious preoccupation" for liturgy and doctrine as opposed to ensuring that the Gospel has "a real impact" on people and engages "the concrete needs of the present time."

On two specific matters, however, Francis rules out change: the ordination of women to the priesthood, though he calls for "a more incisive female presence" in decision-making roles, and abortion.

Francis says the church's defense of unborn life "cannot be expected to change" because it's "closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right."

The pope's toughest language comes in a section of the document arguing that solidarity with the poor and the promotion of peace are constituent elements of what it means to be a missionary church.

Francis denounces what he calls a "crude and naïve trust" in the free market, saying that left to its own devices, the market too often fosters a "throw-away culture" in which certain categories of people are seen as disposable. He rejects what he describes as an "invisible and almost virtual" economic "tyranny."

Specifically, Francis calls on the church to oppose spreading income inequality and unemployment, as well as to advocate for stronger environmental protection and against armed conflict.

In the end, "The Joy of the Gospel" amounts to a forceful call for a more missionary Catholicism in the broadest sense. The alternative, Francis warns, is not pleasant.

"We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in our own comforts," he writes. "Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide."

Editor's note: Excerpts of Evangelii Gaudium *will be posted to The Francis Chronicles[3] over the next few days, and watch the NCR Today[4] and Distinctly Catholic[5] blogs for commentary on the apostolic exhortation.*

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org [6]. Follow him on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr [7].]

The Next Step FORWARD [8]

DONATE NOW [8]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [8]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/03/2015 - 22:49*): http://ncronline.org/news/theology/evangelii-gaudium-amounts-francis-i-have-dream-speech

Links:
[1] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html
[2] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[3] http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles
[4] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today
[5] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/msw-praises-chaput-hell-freeze-over-soon
[6] mailto:jallen@ncronline.org
[7] http://www.twitter.com/johnlallenjr
[8] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end