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Attentive to God's Signs

Evangelii Gaudium and Mission Today

The Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, was issued on the Feast of Christ the King in 2013. In this lengthy document (51,000 words), Francis, quoting Paul VI, exhorts all communities to an "ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times" (51). He also speaks of our attempt "to read the signs of the times" (108) and to be "attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us read the signs of the times" (14). Francis situates his reflections within the framework of the imperative to discern God's signs.

This task of examining current realities in the light of Christian faith is "a grave responsibility" (51). Francis proposes using "an evangelical discernment" which is "the approach of a missionary disciple" who is guided by "the light and strength of the Holy Spirit" (50). Christian faith does demand "recognizing and discerning spirits" and ultimately "choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil" (51). This presentation seeks to examine how Francis can be seen to be employing a type of "signs of the times" methodology in *Evangelii Gaudium*. We are challenged to inquire how this inductive approach can assist us in exploring the Church's mission today.

A Vatican II Pope. Francis is the first pope in many decades who was not actually present during the deliberations of Vatican II. Remarkably, five popes did take an active role in the Council: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. However, as manifested in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis is clearly imbued with Council perspectives. He quotes from several Council documents, asserting that "it is important to draw out the pastoral

consequences of the Council's teaching" (38).

In two places (41, 84), Francis directly quotes the words of John XXIII's opening address to the Council, recalling at length John XXIII's clear disagreement with the "prophets of doom" (84). Francis also notes that "fifty years after the Second Vatican Council," the Church does not adopt a "naïve optimism," but this "must not mean that we are any less trusting in the Spirit or less generous" (84).

Francis frequently uses texts from Pope Paul VI. He twice quotes *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI's first encyclical, written in 1964 during the Council (26, 51). One finds at least a dozen quotes from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (e.g., 10, 12, 146 [2x], 150, 151, 154 [3x], 156, 158, 176, 181). In the first two quotes of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis directly cites Paul IV's 1975 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, a document that obviously influenced the writing of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Furthermore, even without presenting a full documentation of the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, one recognizes that Francis is remarkably conversant with the popes, documents, and theological themes of Vatican II.

Historical Background of "Signs of the Times." The Second Vatican Council was convoked by Pope John XXIII in the apostolic constitution *Humanae Salutis*, dated December 25, 1961. In this document Pope John XXIII first used the expression "signs of the times"; here one finds the beginnings of a new direction in theological methodology. John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* has a section concluding every chapter which is entitled (by its

editors) the “Signs of the Times.” In this his last encyclical, John XXIII enumerates three major signs as important characteristics of our age: the evolving roles of (1) laborers, (2) women, and (3) the “new” nations that were formerly colonies.

Undoubtedly, the impetus given by John XXIII to this inductive method of theologizing on life’s events and empirical reality is clearly one of his innovations. As a result, this methodology sees the “signs of the times” as a valid *locus theologicus*, though methodological precision must be provided on its use within contemporary theology.

This method is found at the basis of some Council documents; the best-known passage is from *Gaudium et Spes*: “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (4). Priests are to cooperate closely with the laity “so that together with them they will be able to recognize the signs of the times” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9). The laity should promote solidarity among all people as one of the keys “signs of our times” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 14). The Council encourages “all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 4). Some other passages where an understanding of God’s work in human history is manifested are: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 43 and *Gaudium et Spes* 11, 42, and 44.

The Second Vatican Council created (in 1964) a special sub-commission [*de signis temporum*] to assist it with a descriptive definition and explanation of what was meant by the signs of the times. In the great signs of the times, which are present within the entire human community, one may discern the visible presence and action of God. One perceives God’s action directing humanity toward the fulfillment of His designs. Thus, in these great movements and aspirations—even in great secular movements that occur in history—one can discern God’s purposes being made manifest to humanity.

An insightful discourse on the signs of the times is found in the address of Paul VI at his general audience on April 16, 1969; here the pope provides abundant clarity of direction on the proper use of the signs of the times as a theological methodology. He notes that the expression itself has taken on “a current use and a deep, very wide and interesting meaning”; it is “the theological interpretation of contemporary history.” Pope Francis would certainly resonate with Paul VI’s insights on how a genuine discernment of current events is necessarily associated with the Church’s evangelizing mission in the contemporary world.

Terms and Method. The *biblical* expression “signs of the times” (Mt 16:2-4) originates in Jesus’ reference to the messianic signs present in his life; he invites the Jews to open their perception to these signs and see the fulfillment of God’s prophecy to his people regarding the coming of the Messiah. The *theological* meaning of the signs of the times is somewhat different; thus, respecting exegetical accuracy, the scriptural reference quoted above does not appear in the official text of *Gaudium et Spes* 4. In addition, Pope Paul VI, speaking of the “Signs of the Times” [April 16, 1969], notes that the expression only has “a remote evangelical reminiscence.” All these clarifications, while providing precision, in no way jeopardize the valid theological use of the signs of the times as a *locus theologicus*.

To achieve the objective of interpreting contemporary history theologically demands methodological precision in using the theology of the signs of the times. What then is the correct procedure to follow in this form of theologizing (an approach that will be helpful in understanding *Evangelii Gaudium*)?

According to the Vatican II sub commission dealing with the proper understanding of this approach, the signs of the times must be seen as operating on a double plane: the *sociological* level and the *theological* level. Within the sociological level itself a dual reality is present.

Firstly, on the sociological level, the signs of the times emerge from the great changes in science and technology, in transport and communications, in medicine, in computerization, etc. Society becomes more complexly organized; the world becomes economically interdependent; humanity finds itself living in a “global village”; history seems to be speeded up. These are simply some of the great changes taking place in the modern world. This lining up of the “sheer facts” is the first dimension of the *socio-historical* level.

The second aspect of this level is an investigation of these changes by using the behavioral and social sciences. This is done in terms of *what effects and what human impact* all these developments have on human consciousness and on social life. How does such rapid and all-pervasive change affect human minds, human hearts, human life? What effects result from such change—the impact on human awareness, on human knowledge, on human sensibility, on human aspirations and desires, and so on?

Clarifications. The signs of the times are NOT the mere facts alone; the facts are, as it were, only the *materia ex qua*, the matter from which the signs of the times arise; thus, the “signs” are more properly the human desires and questions that arise because of the avalanche of change. In short, as noted earlier, what is the “human impact” of the events in humanity’s total environment? As Paul VI noted, the world becomes a book for us. Thus, the Church must give a close reading of this book to see how all humanity has been affected—and what implications are present for her mission of evangelization.

Sociological thematization is essential to this methodological approach; yet, it is incomplete by itself. Paul VI, in describing the “method to follow,” remarks: “We willingly admit that sociology is a science of great merit in itself and for the purpose that interests us, that is, the search for a higher and indicative meaning of the facts themselves. But sociology cannot be an

independent moral criterion, nor can it replace theology.”

Thus, the method necessarily moves to the *theological* level. *Gaudium et Spes* 4 insists that the Church’s task is to *scrutinize* the signs of the times (*sociological* level) and to *interpret* them in the light of the Gospel (*theological* level). Empirical and historical thematizations of reality must be discerned in the light of Christian faith and Gospel values.

This discernment on the theological plane is accomplished by a reflection on the direction in which these signs are pointing. Are they leading human history to be a fulfillment of God’s plans for humanity? Are they (in Paul VI’s words) events which “spontaneously meet higher plans, which we know to be Christian and divine (such as the pursuit of unity, of peace, of justice)”? Do they suggest “a simultaneous step forward of the Kingdom of God in the human kingdom? Are they a clear manifestation that (as Pope John XXIII spoke of in his *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* opening speech at Vatican II and which Pope Francis also quotes in *Evangelii Gaudium* 84) “divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfillment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church”? Clearly, this is the *theological* level where the reflection of faith enters to see just precisely how these developments are furthering or hindering the designs of God.

This “theology of the signs of the times” obviously is not a methodology independent of the ecclesial community. Paul VI acknowledges the role of all Christians and the reality of the *sensus fidei* (see also *Evangelii Gaudium* 119, 198). However, Paul VI also asserts that “the assistance of the hierarchical magisterium will always be provident and decisive,” especially when “the ambiguity of the interpretation deserves to be solved either in the certainty of truth or to the benefit of the common good.” Indeed, the necessity of the Church’s role arises from

the fact that this approach deals with “signs,” and signs by their nature need interpretation. The Church is the privileged place for the discernment of the signs of the times, because the Spirit is present within her, leading her to the fullness of truth (cf. Jn. 16:13).

Schematic Presentation of the “Signs” Theological Approach. At this juncture in the presentation, readers may find it helpful to view the “signs” theological method in the form of a simple schema. The pivotal “signs” quote from *Gaudium et Spes* 4 will be integrated into this overview. In outline form, here is a presentation of the “Signs of the Times” Theological Method.

First, on the **Sociological-Historical** level (**A**) one must: **(1)** *investigate* empirical reality (data and its context) and then **(2)** *thematize* empirical reality (the “human impact” of this reality or environment). Secondly, on the **Pastoral-Theological-Missiological** level one must: (**B**) offer a “faith-evaluation” of the “signs” which necessarily incorporates the following: **(1)** Word of God/Scripture; **(2)** Christian faith and Tradition; **(3)** *Sensus fidei* of the believing community; **(4)** Specific guidance of the hierarchical magisterium; **(5)** Reality of sin (personal and social) within the world; **(6)** Centrality of the person of Christ; and, **(7)** Role of the Holy Spirit. **Note:** This first task (**A**) is seen as a “scrutiny of the signs of the times”; the second task (**B**) is the “interpretation in the light of the Gospel” (cf. GS 4).

This brief schematic overview can serve as a kind of concluding synthesis to the theory and theological bases of the “signs of the times method” whereby the Church seeks to be deeply engaged with the realities of the contemporary world for a more effective preaching of the Gospel. In light of these helpful clarifications on the “signs” inductive approach to theological reflection, the presentation now moves more directly back to Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Francis’ View of the Church’s Task. In several places in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis expresses his insights on the imperatives facing the Church as it practices an “ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times” (51). He admits that the Church would not be “well served by a purely sociological analysis which would aim to embrace all of reality” (50) and that it is “not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality” (51). Yet, this does not mitigate against the “grave responsibility” (51) of the Church to be deeply engaged in understanding and serving contemporary society and humanity. What Francis envisions is a genuine “evangelical discernment” which is “the approach of a missionary disciple” (50). “We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also—and this is decisive—choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil” (51). In this discernment process Francis notes: “I take for granted the different analyses which other documents of the universal magisterium have offered, as well as those proposed by the regional and national conferences of bishops” (51). Francis favorably cites numerous insights from conferences of bishops around the world (e.g., Latin America and Caribbean, USA, France, Congo, Oceania, India, Brazil, Philippines, etc.). In this way, Francis is employing a world-wide perspective in his discerning of the signs of the times; he humbly admits: “It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory” (16). “It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country” (184), to effectively read the signs for their own location and local Church.

Further Insights. The Pope is clearly aware of “today’s vast and rapid cultural changes that demand we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language

which brings out their abiding newness” (41). And here, once again, Pope Francis quotes the opening speech of John XXIII to the Second Vatican Council: “The deposit of faith is one thing ... the way it is expressed is another” (41). Francis goes on to assert that in “her ongoing discernment” of current signs and trends, the Church will realize that some customs and practices “may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them” (43). Again, a commitment to discerning the signs of the times will help the Church realize that she “has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people’s lives” (43).

The open vision and perspective of Pope Francis to discern concrete events of history and their impact on people leads him to many helpful insights. “When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity” (117); in fact, “the faith and life of the Church [can] be expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture” (118). Francis appreciates “the challenge of an inculturated preaching” (143) for an effective communication of the Gospel. Such “signs-sensitive” preaching actually becomes “an exercise in evangelical discernment” (154).

Francis’ vision of linking the concrete reality of people’s lives with Gospel values is manifested in one of his lengthy quotes from Pope Paul VI: “We know that ‘evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the increasing interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both social and personal’” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 181); see *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 29. Francis then takes this perspective and applies it to the human family “with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses” (183).

In a later section, Francis notes: “I intend to concentrate on two great issues which strike me as fundamental at this time in history. I will treat them more fully, because I believe that they will shape the future of humanity.

These issues are: first, the inclusion of the poor in society, and second, peace and social dialogue” (185). To address these signs, Francis enunciates four principles which he believes are foundational for “building a people in peace, justice and fraternity” (221-237).

The foregoing citations from *Evangelii Gaudium* are, in the opinion of this author, an affirmation that Pope Francis is deeply involved in a “faith-reading” of the signs of the times (though his actual use of the “signs of the times” terminology only appears three times in his text: 14, 51, 108). Francis is humble in his pastoral approach; “the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue” (241). He states his objective: “Starting from certain social issues of great importance for the future of humanity, I have tried to make explicit once again the inescapable social dimension of the Gospel message and to encourage all Christians to demonstrate it by their words, attitudes and deeds” (258). Francis invites all Christians to engage the ever-changing world as “Spirit-filled evangelizers” who are “full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction” (261).

A Brief List of Signs. As one navigates *Evangelii Gaudium*, the great panorama of subjects that Pope Francis treats emerges. More than just a catalogue of topics, these many areas may be considered “signs” which the Church must attentively address as she embarks upon “a new chapter of evangelization” (1). Permit a brief sampling of some areas noted by Francis: “health care, education and communications” (52), “a ‘throw away’ culture” (53), “an impersonal economy” (55), “widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion” (56), “inordinate consumption” (60), “attacks on religious freedom” (61), “human trafficking, the narcotics trade, the abuse and exploitation of minors, the abandonment of the elderly and the infirm” (75), “heightened individualism” (78), and many more.

Francis is not overwhelmed by current realities. He asserts: “The evils of our

world—and those of the Church—must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervor. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow” (84). “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment” (109).

Time and again, *Evangelii Gaudium* provides a profound faith-perspective which assists Christians in their reading of the “signs” and in living their commitment as missionary disciples. Francis boldly states: “In our time humanity is experiencing a turning-point in its history” (52). “Seeing reality with the eyes of faith, we cannot fail to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is sowing” (68).

The Church is to recognize that “the changes taking place in these great spaces and the culture which they create are a privileged locus of the new evangelization” (73). “What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values” (74). The “new world” in which we live means that Christians must “realize that a uniform and rigid program of evangelization is not suited to this complex reality” (75).

Challenges not only exist in the external world; they are also present within the Church. Francis notes: “one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity, and a cooling of fervor. These are three evils which fuel one another” (78). “They end up stifling the joy of mission” (79). “It pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy.... Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?” (100).

Creative Responses to Challenging Signs.

To assist Christians in addressing profound challenges both within and outside the Church, Francis presents an innovative list of eight “no” statements and seven “yes”

exhortations. First, employing a kind of *via negativa*, Francis alerts us to factors that could diminish the Church’s effectivity in the world today. He bluntly says: “No to an economy of exclusion” (53-54); “No to the new idolatry of money” (55-56); “No to a financial system which rules rather than serves” (57-58); “No to the inequality which spawns violence” (59-60); “No to selfishness and spiritual sloth” (81-83); “No to sterile pessimism” (84-86); “No to spiritual worldliness” (93-97); and, “No to warring among ourselves” (98-101).

Francis also exhorts us to be vigilant and not to let ourselves be “robbed” of pivotal dimensions of the Christian life: “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!” (80); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!” (83); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!” (86); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!” (92); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel!” (97); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!” (101); and, “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor!” (109).

These “no” statements and “yes” exhortations clearly show that Pope Francis is neither naïve nor unrealistic in his efforts to promote evangelization within the Church. He is simply reflecting the realism needed to read the “signs” for a more effective missionary evangelization. He affirms that “in spite of everything, Saint Paul’s exhortation is directed to each of us: ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’ (Rom 12:21). And again: ‘Let us not grow weary in doing what is right’ (Gal 6:9)” (101).

Joy, Pivotal Sign of Missionary Disciples.

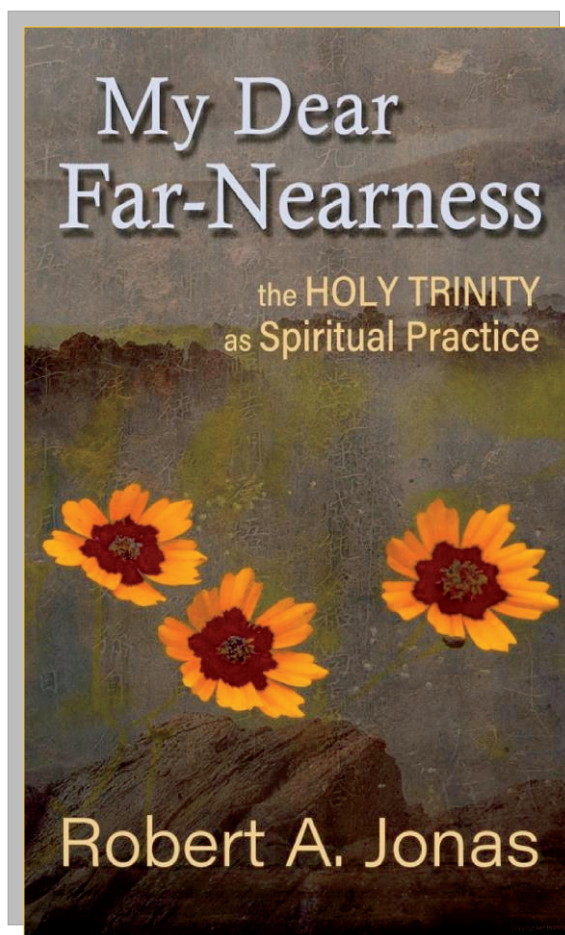
The obvious focus on joy in *Evangelii Gaudium* is seen in the sheer number of times that words such as joy, joyful, and joyfully are repeated (nearly 100 times). Pope Francis has mined the treasures found in the two interrelated apostolic exhortations written by Paul VI in 1975: *Evangelii*

Nuntiandi (Evangelization in the Modern World) and *Gaudete in Domino* (On Christian Joy). Both popes constantly assert that if the Gospel is not heard from “joyful evangelizers,” it will not be heard at all by contemporary humanity. The lack of joy and hope is an obstacle to effective evangelization. In the introduction of *Evangelii Gaudium* (10), Francis quotes extensively the sentiments of Paul VI who believed that joy would enable the world of our time “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” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 80).

The success of mission and evangelization requires “renewed evangelizers.” Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” Joy is convincing; joy evangelizes. All the daunting “signs of the times” and the complex dimensions of contemporary evangelization will not overwhelm those whose lives have been transformed by a joyful encounter with the Risen Lord. With heartfelt emotion, Pope Francis writes: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.... I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (3). “I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy” (1).

Missionary disciples must listen frequently to the admonition of Saint Paul: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near” (Phil 4:4). Be transformed by joy. Surrender to the “Lord of Joy” for he is: *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring!* Become a joyful herald of missionary evangelization!

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