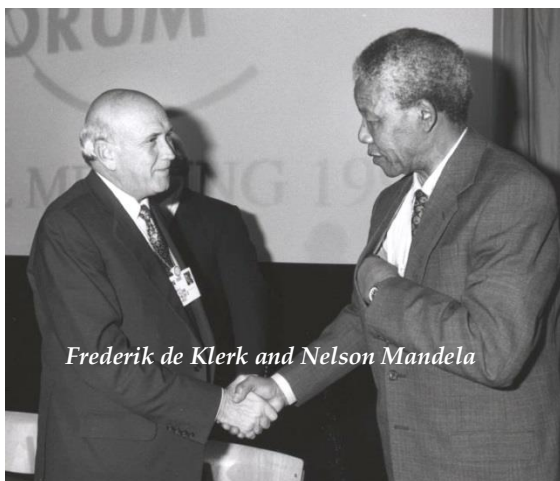


A CHRISTMAS-EPIPHANY REFLECTION ON *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

Veronica Lawson RSM

What we bring to any text informs our reading of that text. The joy of the gospel, so evident in the lives of the Ursuline sisters in my little school at Mt Macedon and in the lives of the Mercy sisters at Sacred Heart College in Ballarat, was for me the catalyst for a life-defining decision to throw in my lot with the Sisters of Mercy. From my perspective, the sisters of both congregations lived simply and gave their considerable talents to creating a better world for all, particularly for those on the edge. As I look back on five decades of Mercy life and ministry, I am overwhelmed with a deep sense of gratitude that might be described as “joy”. Like the *magoi* or wise ones of Matthew’s gospel who followed the star that rose in the east, I have now and again sought answers to my questioning with those who have the right words, like the Jerusalem scribes, but lack the wisdom to seek for themselves (Matt 2:1-8). Like the *magoi*, I have also known what it is to be “overwhelmed” with the joy of the gospel and the one who brings the good news of God (Matt 2:9-10). A life time of personal and scholarly engagement with the gospel has brought me back again and again to the incarnate Wisdom of God and has been a gift beyond my imagining. The struggles of the Earth community, human and other-than-human, on the one hand and the unfailing commitment of so many gospel-inspired friends on the other have functioned as my anchors in a sometimes broiling sea. I bring all of that to my reading of Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (henceforth EG).



Frederik de Klerk and Nelson Mandela

As I write these words, I am conscious that some hundred thousand people, including Pope Francis, are gathering in Johannesburg for a public memorial service for Nelson Mandela. They gather to celebrate the life of a remarkably courageous person who changed the course of history. Few of us will ever have to endure what Mandela endured in the cause of justice, equality, and the dignity of every person. Mandela’s life is witness to the truth that deep joy has little, if

anything, to do with a comfortable life. His was the deep joy that comes from a readiness to forgive without reserve and so break through the hardness of heart that caused untold pain to his people. Pope Francis is in Johannesburg to honour one who embodied so much of what he now seeks for all God’s people and so much of what we find articulated in his Apostolic Exhortation.

EG is addressed to “the Christian faithful”. It calls for “a new chapter of evangelization” marked by the joy of the gospel, and promises to indicate “new paths for the Church’s journey in years to come” (#1). None of this is any surprise from a pope who has already demonstrated his commitment to and desire for radical change. From the outset, he brought to the papacy a long-held love for the poor, a steely determination to dismantle what makes for inequality and the courage to promote new structures and systems that will promote life to the full for all. The address to all is reiterated most powerfully in Chapter Three where we are reminded that “the entire people of God” proclaims the gospel.

The human community is the primary focus of the Pope’s attention in this document. His deep concern for the poor is pervasive as is his concern that the causes of poverty be addressed. He lists some of the new forms of poverty and vulnerability: “I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others. Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers...” He urges all countries “to a generous openness...” (#210). This plea finds a particular resonance in our country at this time when the rights of asylum seekers are severely compromised. In another section, cultural diversity and the diversity of cultural expression within the Church are affirmed (#132-4).

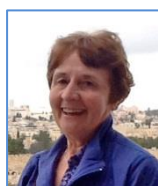


The human community is by no means, however, the exclusive focus of EG. For Pope Francis, “All creation shares in the joy of salvation” (#4). To support this claim, he cites the song of the prophet Isaiah: “Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth! Break forth, O mountains, into singing!” (49:13). Towards the end of the Exhortation, the Pope draws attention to the other “weak and defenceless beings who are frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation” (#215). He states explicitly that he is “speaking of creation as a whole”. He reminds his readers that the members of the human community “are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures”. He draws attention to the intimate relationship between the human and other-than-human inhabitants of our planet: “Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.” He makes a heartfelt plea that we not leave behind us “a swath of destruction and death which will affect our own lives and those of future generations” (#215). He makes his own the prophetic lament of the

Catholic Bishops of the Philippines in their 1988 Pastoral Letter, *What is Happening to our Beautiful Land?*

Pope Francis shares his dream of a “missionary option” or a “missionary impulse capable of transforming everything” (#27). Nothing is exempt from the process of transformation: customs, language, schedules and structures. Self-preservation is to give way to evangelisation. There is a hint that this pope is willing to take seriously “demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected” (#104) when he writes that these demands present the Church “with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded.” As a woman committed to the proclamation of the gospel, I yearn for the day when women as well as men might, at the very least, break open the word in our liturgical celebrations.

This reflection is necessarily brief. It addresses some of the aspects of *EG* that impinge on my life and mission as a woman religious. As a Sister of Mercy, “mercy impels me and my sisters to extravagant hospitality, compassion and justice in the earth community being shattered by displacement” (2011 ISMAPNG Chapter Statement). Transformation is our goal, the joy of the gospel the path we choose. *Evangelii Gaudium* calls us beyond ourselves to co-create a renewed Church that emulates the humility of the one we call Emmanuel, God-with-us, the incarnate Wisdom of God.



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