

EVANGELIZATION AND THE CHILD

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Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) is a clear call to the whole Catholic Church to engage in the task of evangelization, in order that the joy that flows from knowing Jesus may spill over into new places. All the baptized are called to share the Good News of Jesus with others and be open to being evangelized themselves as their relationship with God expands and develops.¹ The tendency of most readers would be to understand the call to all the baptized as a call to adults. Yet Pope Francis is emphatic that evangelization is a task of all, and he puts no qualifiers on this such as age or maturity. The question then arises: what can children contribute to the work of evangelization?

Since the catechetical efforts of *Catechesis of The Good Shepherd* (CGS) focus on the child, it will prove a helpful resource in considering children's engagement in evangelization. This movement in the Church seeks to provide children an opportunity to experience scripture and liturgy in a way that will foster their growth in love and knowledge of God. It utilizes Montessori educational philosophy to shape how scripture and liturgy are offered to children, and then observes how children receive and respond to these experiences. The examination of themes common in EG and CGS will demonstrate ways in which CGS is related to the missionary efforts of the Church. Particularly how attending to joy, essentiality, and the proclamation of the Good News can both serve the evangelization of children and allow children to bring their particular gifts to evangelization. This exploration is not intended to be exhaustive, but merely lift up connections in order to invite further discussion.

There is a deep sense of joy that comes from a flourishing relationship with God. Pope Francis begins his exhortation by highlighting the joy that flows from knowing and experiencing Jesus, "The joy

¹ Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," *Vatican*, November 24, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html (accessed November 29, 2013) 119-121.

of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.”² The theme of joy is also lifted up in several other places in the document; there is no question that efforts in evangelization should be approached with and lead to joy.

Through spending time with children one quickly recognizes that responding with joy is something that flows naturally from their experience of life. The development of CGS was a response to a child’s expression of joy upon encountering the Bible. The method the founders Sofia Cavaletti and Gianna Gobbi used in developing CGS involved observing the response of the children to what was presented and then retaining those themes the children responded to with depth and joy. In CGS a sense of joy is understood as a sign of a religious need being met within the child.

The prevalence of the theme of joy both within EG and CGS suggests that there is a connection between the type of evangelization Pope Francis is calling for and the catechetical approach of CGS. Witnessing the response of joy in children as they encounter Jesus can evangelize adults, and indeed the opportunity to be present at these moments of joy is one of the blessings of serving children. The ease with which children come to joy is a particular gift that children posses that serves evangelization.

Joy flows from encountering what is most essential in the Christian faith. In discussing the missionary approach to ministry, Pope Francis lifts up the quality of essentiality, “When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most appealing and at the same time most necessary.”³ This quality of essentiality is a significant theme in CGS. In the process of developing CGS described above the essentials of the Christian faith emerged as the content that best

² Ibid. 1.

³ Ibid. 35.

fostered the child's faith. The CGS catechist strives for essentiality in serving children. When that which is not essential is offered to children, their engagement with the work quickly dissipates. Sofia writes,

If we want to help the child draw nearer to God we should, with patience and courage, unrelentingly strip ourselves of these superfluous elements, and seek to go always closer to the vital nucleus of things. This requires study and prayer. The child himself will be our teacher of essentiality, if we know how to observe him.⁴

This suggests that paying attention to what nourishes the faith of young children may help the Church as a whole to rediscover what is most vital in Christian faith, and also the importance of the careful observation of those we are sharing the Good News with in order to monitor and develop the quality of essentiality in sharing the Christian message. The essentiality of the child can serve evangelization.

A significant part of what is essential to Christian faith is the Good News of Jesus, the great gift of love enfolded in his life, death and resurrection. Sofia suggests that when working with children it may be more appropriate to speak of the ministry as one of evangelization rather than catechesis, since children are being introduced and initiated into the Christian life.⁵ What then should primarily be offered to children is an announcement of the Good News of Jesus. A word the Church uses to speak of this announcement is *kerygma*. In CGS great attention is given to announcing and enjoying the *kerygma*, prior to ever considering the implications of the message. The experience of CGS catechists shows that children younger than the age of six appear particularly able to listen and receive the *kerygma*.⁶

Pope Francis stresses that Catechesis must be focused primarily on the *kerygma*, "On the lips of the Catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: 'Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten strengthen and free you.'"⁷ He

⁴ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992) 48.

⁵ Ibid. 48.

⁶ Ibid. 50.

⁷ Francis, 164.

goes on to express the deep connection between catechesis and evangelization, noting that catechesis expands and clearly connects to the kerygma.⁸

When the kerygma is proclaimed in CGS both the child and the adult receive it. The focus on the kerygma in CGS nurtures the child in developing a deep relationship with God and it assists the adult in keeping their faith flourishing.⁹ The experience of listening to the Good News of Jesus alongside a child, witnessing their joy, and seeing what emerges as essential has an evangelizing effect upon the adult. In this way a child participates in evangelization.

This exploration is not intended to advocate for the inclusion of children on evangelization teams, but to lift up that observing the ways in which children receive and respond to the experience of Jesus can give insight and inspiration to others thus furthering the spread of the Good News. Sofia express it in this way,

We would like the child, as a result of an increased familiarity with these sources (Bible and Liturgy), to share in the renewal that is growing in the Church in our days. We would like the child to find a more clearly defined position in the Christian community, which today places itself in a special stance of listening in the presence of God's Word. We would like the child—as equal of and together with the adult—to be counted among the number of “listeners.”¹⁰

Pope Francis writes, “Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God.”¹¹ By approaching children with love and respect, a space is created in which children reveal new and deeper insights about God. Perhaps the face of God the child lifts up is one the world needs.

⁸ Ibid. 165.

⁹ Cavalletti, 49.

¹⁰ Ibid. 28.

¹¹ Francis, 272.

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