

Pope Francis: Salvation entirely from grace

Earlier we started looking at Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* [GE]— 'On the Call to Holiness in Today's World'. Today we'll begin to reflect on his second chapter, in which he cautions against new forms of the ancient heresies of Gnosticism and Pelagianism.

As a preliminary, I wanted to comment about the negativity one hears from some people about Pope Francis' Magisterium, obstructing the benefits they might receive from documents such as *Gaudete et Exsultate*. It's concerning to see a few Catholics, formerly very respectful of the Magisterium, spiralling down into a spirit of generalised opposition to the Successor of Peter.

True, according to the Church it can happen in exceptional cases that a theologian, after humble prayer and study, legitimately withholds assent from some individual non-infallible teaching of the Magisterium, when, for reasons that seem to him convincing, he sincerely thinks some specific statement is incorrect. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Donum Veritatis* (1990) 24-31) But a theologian who does that in an individual instance really has to carefully *confine* that respectful disagreement to this or that particular statement – not leaping into writing off entire documents, or sinking into a habitual spirit of criticism, cynicism and alienation. 'To succumb to the temptation of dissent...is to allow the "leaven of infidelity to the Holy Spirit" to start to work.' (*Donum Veritatis* 40)

Neither may we restrict our assent to magisterial teachings based on some negative judgement about the way we think a pope is handling his whole ministry. Now, as I've said before, it's hardly the task of every Catholic to debate and judge the *prudence* of every action of popes, past or present. We have quite enough to do discerning how God wants us personally to act, without worrying about the prudent course for every other person as well.

But leaving aside whether various negative judgements about the policies of this or that pope or bishop have any merit in the first place, the truth of *magisterial teachings* doesn't depend on the holiness or the wisdom of the human teacher, but on the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit. To choose between magisterial teachings based on our liking for the pope who gave them – whether as a 'liberal' who loves Francis but rejects Benedict, or as a 'conservative' who loves Benedict but rejects Francis – is to place our faith in human qualities instead of in God.

So we listen with humility to the different papal teachings, in the certain expectation that God is offering us something important that we can learn from them. There's a risk we assess Magisterial teachings based purely on the thinking, 'This is really good for those *other* misled people in the Church to be hearing about', and lose the sense that we ourselves might be challenged and corrected by what the Pope and Bishops are saying.

Naturally we interpret old and new teachings in the light of each other, seeking harmony, because we trust the one Spirit guides both old and new. Some are quick to find 'contradictions' between the old and the new – but with a fairly low standard of what constitutes a contradiction. If the same loose standard were applied consistently, Catholic teaching and Scripture itself would be found full of 'contradictions'. One reason is, the realities they speak of have many facets, and for their inner compatibility to be discovered calls for patient prayer and study.

In Chapter Two of *Gaudete et Exsultate*, the Holy Father affirms the Catholic Tradition that justification – our being cleansed from sin and made inwardly righteous, with the end in view of eternal salvation – flows completely from the free gift of God’s grace. In this connection, he alludes to the ancient heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagius was a British monk around AD 400, who held that ‘man could, by the natural power of free will and without the necessary help of God’s grace, lead a morally good life.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n.406)

At issue is our total dependence on God. Now, *every* created being fully depends on God – to exist in the first place, and then to be sustained in being from moment to moment. But beyond this is the fact that God has raised humanity to a destiny surpassing natural human capabilities: the destiny of sharing his life forever. In theological language, this destiny is ‘*super-natural*’ – *above* the natural powers of any created thing. (*Catechism* n.1998) And to lead us to this supernatural *destiny* we absolutely need supernatural *grace* – a gift unmerited by anything we could do just by our natural powers.

And so Pope Francis writes: ‘The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative. The Fathers of the Church, even before St Augustine, clearly expressed this fundamental belief. St John Chrysostom said that God pours into us the very source of all his gifts even before we enter into battle. St Basil the Great remarked that the faithful glory in God alone, for “they realise that they lack true justice and are justified only through faith in Christ”.’ [GE 52]

‘The Second Synod of Orange [AD 529] taught with firm authority that nothing human can demand, merit or buy the gift of divine grace, and that all cooperation with it is a prior gift of that same grace: “Even the desire to be cleansed comes about in us through the outpouring and working of the Holy Spirit”. (Canon 4: DH 374)’ [GE 53]

‘Subsequently, the Council of Trent, while emphasising the importance of our cooperation for spiritual growth, reaffirmed [AD 1547] that dogmatic teaching: “We are said to be justified gratuitously because nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification; for ‘if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise, grace would no longer be grace’ (Rom 11:6)”. (*Decree on Justification*: DH 1532)’ [GE 53]

An important consequence of all this, as St Paul emphasises, is that we have nothing to ‘boast about’ to God. (*Eph 2:9*) It’s a proud delusion to think that we might ‘impress’ him by our good deeds, or to think that ‘he owes us’. Any merit of ours flows entirely from his gift in the first place. And we can only merit an increase in eternal glory if Christ *already* dwells within us by sanctifying grace.

Pope Francis quotes St Therese: “‘In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you empty-handed, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justices have stains in your sight”.’ [GE 54] And so in the same spirit, we reflect everything back to God, imitating the humility of our Blessed Mother: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour. He looks on his servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed. The Almighty works marvels for me. Holy his name.’