

***Gaudete et Exsultate: 'Above all, put on love'***

We've been looking at Chapter Two of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* [GE]. Here he cautions against new forms of the ancient heresies of Gnosticism and Pelagianism. Pelagianism, we recall, was the heresy 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). So Pope Francis repeats 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.

And he expands upon this danger he calls '*neo-Pelagianism*' – a subtle reliance on self, substituting for a genuine reliance on God's grace; and in consequence perhaps a substitution of mere external actions for genuine inner charity (supernatural love of God and neighbour).

In 2018 the Pope approved a Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Placuit Deo* [PD], that explored the neo-Pelagian error at its roots, and stated again the truth that we are saved by God, not ourselves: 'Faith in Christ teaches, rejecting all claims of self-realisation, that [our aspirations] can be fulfilled completely only if God Himself makes it possible, by drawing us toward Himself.' (PD 6)

'Salvation consists in our incorporation into [Christ's] life, receiving his Spirit.' (PD 11) It 'is not achieved with our own individual efforts alone, as neo-Pelagianism would contend. Rather, salvation is found in the relationships that are born from the incarnate Son of God and that form the communion of the Church...salvation consists in being incorporated into a communion of persons that participates in the communion of the Trinity.' (PD 12) This 'occurs by means of the sacraments'. (PD 13) In the primary instance it is in Baptism that the Holy Spirit pours charity and grace into our hearts.

In *Gaudete et Exsultate* Pope Francis reflects on various manifestations of the false self-reliance of neo-Pelagianism. What can happen, he warns, is that someone might have (and place their security in and even glory in) typical and necessary *expressions* of grace and charity – for example: orthodoxy of doctrine, adherence to law, performance of ritual – while actually lacking the essential *innermost realities*, the divine gifts of grace and charity that should give these life. What remains is a hollow shell. St Paul taught, the Pope reminds us (GE 56), that 'if I do not have love, I am nothing' (1 Cor 13:2). And giving primary credit for their own Catholic faith and obedience to themselves rather than to God, the 'neo-Pelagian' falls into pride and an elitism that looks down on others deemed less virtuous.

All this is essentially what Jesus warned the Pharisees against, translated from a Jewish to a Catholic context. Pope Francis is really proclaiming and elucidating the Lord's own teaching.

We can also recall the teaching of Vatican II: 'He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity... All the Church's children should remember that their exalted status is to be attributed not to their own merits but to the special grace of Christ. If they fail moreover to respond to that grace in thought, word and deed, not only shall they not be saved but they will be the more severely judged.' (*Lumen Gentium* 14)

The 'neo-Pelagian' state of soul could only come about in its full sense in a Christian by mortal sin. This is because one of its essential characteristics, the Pope says, is that it is 'bereft of true

love' (*GE* 57), and mortal sin is the only way that the supernatural charity infused by Baptism (or restored by Reconciliation) can ever be lost.

But the Pope surely also wants to caution us against *tendencies* within ourselves of a neo-Pelagian nature, which even if not mortally sinful, might nonetheless hobble our growth in holiness. So drawing and reflecting upon his teaching, we can mention some tell-tale characteristics in ourselves we might be alert to:

(1) *pride* in virtues such as our orthodoxy or obedience to law, giving primary credit for these (or any) virtues to self rather than God, their ultimate source; or thinking / acting as though these virtues can even *replace the need for charity*;

(2) *elitism* that looks down on others supposedly less virtuous, and takes satisfaction in our own superiority;

(3) *self-centredness* that habitually focuses on and exalts our own goodness or supposed goodness, rather than God;

(4) *absence of real concern* for others;

(5) focus on *classifying* others or even *judging* their soul;

(6) *lack of focus on growing in love* through openness to the Spirit by the different channels of grace that God offers;

(7) complacency in outward forms of religion and Church, yet *actually neglecting God himself*. (God intends the outward forms that he has established and endorsed to be *transparent*, that is, *showing* us himself, not *displacing* him.)

Now, we must be wary of judging *specific individuals* to be in these states of soul: only God is the judge of souls, and we could fall into the very trap of pharisaism that we are condemning.

And, it should hardly need saying that the Holy Father is not condemning *the virtues themselves* that might occasion someone to illicitly take pride in them. Indeed, any virtue or good work can become an occasion for pride, or maybe a subtle substitute for true charity, but the Pope is certainly not calling us to avoid all virtues and good works for that reason!

So concerning orthodoxy of doctrine, Pope Francis teaches that we must have 'obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard, but also to the Magisterium that guards it' (*GE* 173); 'All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith' (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 36); 'Since faith is one, it must be professed in all its purity and integrity. Precisely because all the articles of faith are interconnected, to deny one of them, even of those that seem least important, is tantamount to distorting the whole.' (Francis, *Lumen Fidei* 48)

Still, doctrinal orthodoxy, the natural expression of the 'foundation-stone' virtue of faith, is *necessary* but not *sufficient* for living the fullness of Christian life as God intended it. More is needed – specifically, charity. In the words of the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 25): 'The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.'