

Gaudete et Exsultate – Rejoice and Be Glad! Session Two

1. Some key terminology as we get started:

- a) Heresy – taking a part of the truth and making it the WHOLE truth.
- b) *Gnosticism* – salvation is the result of a secret, higher knowledge available only to a select few. Destroys the sense of the mystery of God – forgets that we can never fully comprehend God.
- c) *Pelagianism* – salvation is result of humans doing holy things, good works, which in a sense force God to give us a reward. The more good works we do, the more God ‘owes’ us eternity. This Destroys a sense of God’s grace – forgets that, in the end, everything is a gift.
- d) A good way to summarize these heresies: “I know it all, and I can do it all.”
- e) Anthropocentric immanentism (!!!) –
Anthropocentric = focused on humans, making a human person the center of the universe

Immanentism = how is the transcendent, spiritual, all-powerful God ever revealed within the limits of time, space, this creation? How can a God who is ‘bigger’ than any universe be experienced concretely here and now? Catholic Christians say that the best experience of God’s immanence is in the person of Jesus. But Jesus is unique!

So, an ‘anthropocentric immanentism’ is the mistaken notion that the totality of God’s mystery can be known, experienced and ‘contained’ in one person’s brain or actions. In other words, it leads to the attitude that “I know everything there is to know about God, and/or that my good deeds can somehow force the hand of God to give me salvation.

2. Contemporary Gnosticism

Par. 35 – The dangers of falling into this way of thinking: narcissism, elitism, analyzing others.

Par. 37 – Our holiness/perfection is not measured by our intellectual information, but by our charity. This is contrary to the basic approach of ancient and modern Gnostics and intellectual elites of almost every kind.

Par. 38 – Some people are attracted to this way of thinking because they think it is elite, pure, coherent, explains everything, and gives a methodology for escaping the messiness of life in this body/world.

Par. 39 – There are non-religious philosophies and world views which are Gnostic, and there are some in the Church who fall into this trap. They think that ‘their explanations can make the entirety of the faith and the Gospel perfectly comprehensible.’ “It is another to reduce Jesus’ teaching to a cold and hard logic that seeks to dominate everything.”

Par. 40 – It considers its ‘own vision of reality to be perfect.’ It ‘domesticates the mystery’ of God, and the mystery of other people’s lives.

Par. 41 – “When somebody has an answer for every question, it is a sign they are not on the right road.” But, “God infinitely transcends us; he is full of surprises.”

Therefore, “Someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God’s transcendence.”

Par. 43 – We have to be humble about 1) what we understand about the Lord and 2) how we express it. This is true even of official church teaching (par. 44).

Par. 45 – The dangerous confusion = because I think I *know* something about Jesus, that proves that I am already a saint and better than everyone else who does not have my intellect.

Par. 46 – All theological study should lead us to greater charity and service.

Remember – heresy takes PART of the truth and makes it the WHOLE truth. Well, God did indeed give us a brain with its rational ability. Our intellect is a gift. Faith in God ‘makes sense.’ We are called to spend our whole lives learning more and more about the Lord. BUT – ‘brain knowledge’ alone is not the final measure of our holiness. It is possible to have read lots of books, studied, learned many phrases, but to be completely ignoring the basic message of the Gospel. My brain knowledge does not make me holy. And while we can BEGIN to understand God, we will spend ETERNITY learning more! We never know all that there is to know, about God or each other.

PELAGIANISM took part of the truth and made it the whole truth. Jesus did, indeed, tell us that we were to do good things in this life. “When I was hungry you gave me to eat...” The judgment scene in Matthew 25 could (if read in isolation) give us the impression that ‘doing good things for others guarantees salvation.’ But notice how salvation happens in this way of thinking: it starts with ME and MY decision to do good works. So if I just do enough good works through a decision of my ‘will,’ then I am guaranteed heaven.

This leads to a warped spirituality in which I think it is up to me to save my own soul. Guilt and fear can follow. Or, overconfidence and narcissism!

Par. 48 – At the heart of the Pelagian heresy is the mistaken notion that ‘the human will,’ or ‘personal effort’ is the center of the spiritual journey.

Par. 49 – They end up trusting ‘only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules...’ Judgmental about others, who are ‘not doing it right.’

This mindset fits in well with the American notion that ‘if you just work hard enough’ you can get your act together! It convinces people that, on a spiritual level, perfection is possible for everyone if they will just work hard enough.

But as St. Bonaventure says, “Not everyone can do everything.” Some people struggle with limitations and circumstances, and they simply cannot do what others do in the spiritual journey.

Catholicism, at its best, has always known this. In our official public teaching we will always present the ideal, set the bar high, encourage people to greater heights. And, at the same time, in the confessional, the priest is working with the person to explore one question: “What is the most Christ-like thing you can do, given the cards that you’ve been dealt?” Catholicism, at its best, balances the ‘ideal’ in one hand and the reality of ‘human limitations’ in the other. Pelagians cannot live with that ambiguity.

Par. 50 – Sometimes, we have to be patient with ourselves or others, because grace ‘transforms us progressively.’ This is why the Pope keeps inviting us to ‘accompany’ one another on the journey.

Par. 52 – During the period of the Reformation, there was a false dichotomy set up by some who claimed that Catholics believe that we are saved by our ‘good works’ and Protestants who believe that we are saved ‘by grace alone.’ (Both extremes lead to heresy).

It has never been official Catholic teaching that we are saved by our good works. We are saved “by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative.” It is always a free gift.

God gives the gift – we are called to RESPOND to the gift.

God takes gives us grace – we are called to cooperate with that grace as we live our lives.

God gives everything freely – we then embrace the free gift in order to live a life of grateful response to the gift.

Par. 55 – “We need to acknowledge jubilantly that our life is essentially a gift, and recognize that our freedom is a grace.”

Par. 57 – This fundamental spiritual error leads to a variety of expressions: “obsession with the law, an absorption with social and political advantages, a punctilious concern for the church’s liturgy, doctrine and prestige, a vanity about the ability to manage practical matters, and an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfillment.”

Par. 58 – So, the “life of the church can become a museum piece or the possession of a select few.”

Par. 59 – We “unconsciously complicate the Gospel.”

Are there ways in which we have placed rules, practices, activities, ahead of the basic challenge of the Gospel?

Par. 60 – “The one who loves has fulfilled the law.” (Rom. 13:8-10)

Par. 61 – In the end, we must always turn back to Jesus. “Jesus clears the way to seeing two faces, that of the father and of our brother. He does not give us two more formulas or two more commands. He gives us two faces, or better yet, one alone: the face of God reflected in so many other faces.”

Par. 62 – the Pope asks us to reflect honestly to discern whether these kinds of erroneous thinking have made their way into our own lives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 2:

1. If someone asked you to define “Gnosticism,” what would you say?
2. Why is it spiritually dangerous to let yourself believe that you ‘know what you need to know,’ or ‘know all that you need to know?’
3. The Pope says that when someone has an answer to every question, it is a sign that they are not on the right road. Have you ever met someone like this? Have you every fallen into this way of thinking yourself?
4. If we avoid Gnostic thinking, we are in touch with the fact that the mystery of God is bigger than our ability to fully comprehend. This means that we can spend a lifetime learning about God, and there will always be more to learn. How has your understanding of God grown, deepened, expanded over time?
5. Pelagius suggested that humans could basically reach perfection if they just worked hard enough. This gave rise to the idea that we can achieve salvation by just doing more and more good works. Have you ever heard a preacher or teacher who still suggest this kind of thinking? Is this part of your own thinking?
6. The church teaches that salvation is a free gift from God (grace), and that all the good work we do on earth is a grateful response to God’s gift. Is it hard to keep those two ideas in balance in our busy lives?
7. One problem with Pelagianism is that it reduced God’s gift to something we think we can ‘earn.’ How could a spirit of ‘gratitude’ help us to avoid that mistake?
8. The Pope says that we are called to stay focused on God’s face, and to see God’s face in others. What helps you to do that? What makes that difficult?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 3:

1. How hard is it to think of happiness (blessedness) as holiness?
2. What part of the Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”? challenges you? How can this Beatitude lead us to happiness?
3. Meekness is not a popular virtue. In the competitive world that we live in, how can we promote meekness as a virtue?
4. Pope Francis suggests that people who imitate the compassion of Jesus are blessed. How do we keep from turning our heads away from those we encounter who are suffering?
5. Having a hunger or thirst for justice is a powerful force. How do you maintain your passion for justice when you feel worn down? What helps you be just?
6. Which do you find harder to do—helping and serving others or giving forgiveness and understanding?
7. It is the intentions of our hearts that defile us. How do you work to keep your heart pure?
8. How do you work to sow peace in your community, and in your world when conflict and division surround us daily?
9. Living according to the Gospel and the Beatitudes will not be easy! When have you felt persecuted for living your faith?
10. The Pope is concerned that the demands of a consumer society and the pace of social media make it increasingly difficult for Christians to find the time they need for reflective prayer. How do you avoid this?