

Joyful Gospel Living - July 2023

“Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 14)



Recently, my husband Jeff and I had the opportunity to use a gift card for a restaurant that has a beautiful riverfront view and a popular menu. Because of the restaurant’s proximity to his apartment, we invited an elderly man to join us who had attended my prison ministry, served his sentence at state prison, and then reentered society with very few friends and no family support. Meeting us at the restaurant while a steady rain was falling, he was full of joy to see us and to be sharing a meal at a place that none of us had ever visited, but he knew was highly rated.

When I asked him why he was so happy, he told me that he had participated in a senior citizens’ trip earlier in the day to some local botanical gardens, followed by a group luncheon at a diner. Since his release, he had found welcome and activity with this group at the parish that Jeff and I recommended that he join in the Diocese of Camden, close to his apartment. His experiences highlight a recurring theme in Franciscan justice settings: the importance of **encounter** in our daily interactions. Do we pay attention to the people that we meet every day? Are we comfortable conversing with strangers? Every encounter is a personal opportunity to meet Christ.

While we were at the dinner table, I mentioned to our friend that our local St. Vincent de Paul Society was assisting a veteran with a criminal record (possibly related to mental issues) to avoid homelessness through every possible source of assistance. Having been in this situation himself as a Marine veteran, our friend began to tell us about several agencies that went out of their way to help him get his life back with security deposits, furniture and furnishings, and firm referrals for available housing. It is very difficult for poor people to succeed at any of those tasks; it is even more difficult when that person has a criminal record. Through personal encounter, we

become more keenly aware of the needs of others.

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), Pope Francis observes that “**Goodness always tends to spread.**” More than 800 years ago, St. Francis embodied that characteristic in his itinerant ministry. So many people were attracted to the Good News that he brought to them, making Christ the center of their lives, too, through authentic conversion and renewed care for others. On our earthly pilgrimage, we must also live for Christ with joy and fidelity, knowing that the Gospel is always relevant for those who love God. Pope Francis refers to it as a “newness” that we must seek with enthusiasm, as it transforms the world around us:

“Christ is always able to renew our lives and our communities, and even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness and ecclesial weakness, it will never grow old. Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose Him and He constantly amazes us by His divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the Source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world.” (EG, 11)

Sometimes, the summer months are opportunities to slow down our lives and to find refreshment in family reunions, vacations, and the beauty of the outdoors. What newness will we find as we look around us? Do we continue to find inspiration from the Gospel stories? Even if we do not attend daily Mass, it is very easy to access the daily Gospel readings and to reflect on their relevance to our lives today. Indeed, there is a joy to be found in the Gospel when we realize that we find the true depth of our own living when we desire to give life to others, just as Christ has given new life to us.

Whenever I talk to people who have watched episodes of “The Chosen” about the life of Jesus Christ, I am always so gratified to see how much they connect to the love of Christ that is so vividly portrayed in the ordinary lives of the people who intersected the path of Jesus. We are on that same pathway—share the JOY!

Pax et Bonum!

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