

The joy of the gospel

Last week saw a remarkable 'irruption of the Spirit' in the Roman Catholic Church, one that could be instructive for Friends. The occasion was the release of pope Francis's 'apostolic exhortation' – a personal epistle called *Evangelii Gaudium* meaning, 'The Joy of the Gospel', variously hailed by Vatican watchers as 'a Magna Carta for church reform' and as the pope's 'I have a dream' moment.

In all but name it reads as liberation theology – theology that liberates theology itself towards God's 'preferential option for the poor' – and I was reminded that when it first emerged that the archbishop of Buenos Aires was to become pope the first words he heard were whispered by his friend, Cláudio Hummes, the cardinal of Brazil: 'Do not forget the poor.'

Both in the humility of his lifestyle and in two major interviews pope Francis shows every promise of holding true, even if the question of women's ordination remains sadly in the long grass.

Joy is the tenor of Francis's 48,000 word manifesto. That word occurs 109 times and is exceeded only by *love* (154 times), with variations of *the poor* (91 times), *peace* (58 times) and *justice* (37 times) as runners up.

The document ripples with muscled wisdom and scintillating spirit; statements like: 'I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.'

'Money must serve, not rule!' Francis states, adding that 'the pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor.'

Exercised by his church's scandalous problems he calls for 'a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform.' As befits a Jesuit pope, he reminds that such discernment is 'nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit.'

The spirituality of discernment bridges Friends and Jesuits. Robert Barclay, the seventeenth-century Quaker theologian was educated by Jesuits at the Scots College in Paris, and in 1983 a Jesuit priest, Michael J Sheeran, published *Beyond Majority Rule*. This explored what Jesuits might learn from Friends' voteless decision making process based on the discernment of leadings of the Spirit.

In this age turned upside down many Friends are seeking to discern afresh: from whence cometh our ministry? Is it from *me* in the small sense? Or *we* in the narrow sense? Or from an altogether deeper stratum? From a level of being that is invoked, and maybe can only be experienced, where, literally or figuratively, 'two or three are gathered together in my name' (Matthew 18:20); in God as living presence.

Towards the end of *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis observes: 'The Holy Spirit also grants the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesía*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition.'

But 'boldness' is too limp a translation, which is why the pope inserted the Greek original. In *Fearless Speech* the French philosopher Michel Foucault explains: '*Parrhesía* is [where] a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself).'

We know such *parrhesía* when we hear it, whether in George Fox, Edward Snowden or Pussy Riot. This dear man, good pope Francis, knows it too.

But Friends – are *we*, today – 'bruised, hurting and dirty'?

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