

# Love Like You Mean It!

## Becoming Spirit-filled Evangelizers

A Reflection by Martha Fernández-Sardina

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### **Spirit-filled evangelizers!**

That is exactly what the Church and the world need! That is exactly what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit expect and equip us to be. Always have. Always will. Until the Lord returns in glory – and the glory of God is exactly what we are to seek in all we are and do. That’s what Pope Francis says as he opens Chapter 5 and closes his Apostolic Exhortation *On The Proclamation of the Gospel of Joy, Evangelii Gaudium* (paragraphs 259-274.)

What are spirit-filled evangelizers? “Evangelizers fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit” who “go forth from themselves”, “heralds of God’s wondrous deeds, capable of speaking to each person in his or her own language”, filled by the Holy Spirit with “courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesía*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition”, “firmly rooted in prayer, for without prayer all our activity risks being fruitless and our message empty.” That’s what Jesus wants, the pope insists, “evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God’s presence.” (EG, 259)

### **Missionary disciple’s job description and qualifications**

Pope Francis shares what he calls “some thoughts about the spirit of the new evangelization.” (EG, 260) He begins by describing the word “spirited” – which in some circles often carries a negative connotation such as forceful, feisty, strong-willed, and at best refers to people considered a bit more enthusiastic than average, the singularly determined, vigorous, energetic, and lively among us. It appears that this is exactly what the pope is looking for: people who are driven – driven by the Holy Spirit, missionary disciples who are drunk with love and are driving under the influence of the Spirit of God! He speaks of “spirited” evangelizers on a mission, moved by an “interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity” – an interior impulse capable of stirring up “enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization

full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction!” This spirit-filled, individually-assumed, ecclesial-minded, lovingly-bold, and ever-new evangelization can only come about, he says, if “the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts. A spirit-filled evangelization is one guided by the Holy Spirit, for he is the soul of the Church called to proclaim the Gospel.” (EG, 261)

### **Risks and remedies, problems and solutions for Spirit-filled evangelizers**

Pope Francis, in his ever candid, fatherly manner of speaking, points out that “Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work”, advising us to avoid extremes: “mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach” and “dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts.” Why? “These unilateral and incomplete proposals that only reach a few groups and prove incapable of radiating beyond them because they curtail the Gospel.”

Having pointed to problems to be avoided, he offers the solution to these and other Spirit-filled evangelization deterrents: deep prayer! “What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space... prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord” or else, he warns, “our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervor dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer”! Deep, incarnated prayer will allow us to “reject the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality” and to avoid using prayer as “an excuse for not offering one’s life in mission”, denouncing that “a privatized lifestyle can lead Christians to take refuge in some false forms of spirituality.” (EG, 262)

### **What are we to look like as Spirit-filled evangelizers?**

Our evangelization models, the pope states, are “the early Christians and our many brothers and sisters throughout history who were filled with joy, unflagging courage and

zeal in proclaiming the Gospel.” We need not fall prey to the illusion that things are far worse for us than they were for them: “Every period of history is marked by the presence of human weakness, self-absorption, complacency and selfishness, to say nothing of the concupiscence which preys upon us all... Let us not say, then, that things are harder today; they are simply different.” So, rather than give into disillusionment, “let us learn also from the saints who have gone before us, who confronted the difficulties of their own day” as we “pause to rediscover some of the reasons which can help us to imitate them today.” (EG, 263)

### **Encounter your Lover! Speak of your Lover’s love!**

Pope Francis reveals once more that he is madly in love with Christ, like his predecessors – irrespective of their different temperaments and cultural backgrounds! The Vicar of Christ speaks of the love relationship without which we can neither live nor share the Faith of the Church. Personal encounter with the saving love of Jesus is what characterizes the life and mission of the Spirit-filled evangelizer! In fact, “the primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him”, the pope says. A person in love shouts it from the rooftops! “What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?”

Not only do we feel compelled to share the love, if we don’t perhaps our first love has grown cold: “If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence. Standing before him with open hearts, letting him look at us, we see that gaze of love which Nathaniel glimpsed on the day when Jesus said to him: ‘I saw you under the fig tree’ (Jn 1:48).”

When we have tasted and seen the goodness of the love of the Lord, we like the Apostles are deeply touched and the love of Christ “impels us to share his new life! What then happens is that ‘we speak of what we have seen and heard’ (1 Jn 1:3).”

And herein we find the key to an effective evangelization: “the best incentive for sharing the Gospel

comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart”, allowing the same Gospel beauty to “amaze and constantly excite us.” Recovering a contemplative spirit, he says, will help us realize that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others. (EG, 264)

### **Be convinced and in love...**

#### **...and you will speak to people’s hearts**

Pope Francis points to Jesus’ own life – “his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity, and finally his complete self-giving” – as the precious mystery the human heart longs for and needs, and as the foundation for the conviction which drives our evangelization efforts: “we become convinced that it is exactly what others need, even though they may not recognize it.” When this conviction is lacking or waning

“we lose our enthusiasm for mission because we forget that the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters. If we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel, surely this message

will speak to the deepest yearnings of people’s hearts... Enthusiasm for evangelization is based on this conviction. We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint... It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach. Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love.” (EG, 265)

### **Be convinced and in love...**

#### **...or you will convince and enamor nobody**

Pope Francis admonishes that this evangelistic conviction has to be sustained and constantly renewed by savoring Christ’s friendship and his message: “It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced

for GOD DID NOT GIVE US  
A SPIRIT OF COVARDICE  
  
BUT RATHER A SPIRIT OF POWER  
and LOVE AND DISCIPLINE  
2 T I M O T H Y 1:7

from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to." Pointing to the obvious advantages of life in Christ, he adds: "It is not the same thing to try to build

the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize." And here, as elsewhere, we see the intimate relationship between encounter and discipleship, and discipleship and mission: "A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise. Unless we see him present at the heart of our missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigor and passion. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody." (EG, 266)

### **Do it like your Lover!**

#### **...Seek only and always the Father's glory!**

Jesus Christ was in love with his Father! He was, and is and always will. So must we. He sought his Father's glory. So must we. Thus will we truly be Spirit-filled evangelizers as "In union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves... the glory of the Father" and like Jesus "live and act 'for the praise of his glorious grace' (Eph 1:6)." To this we must "commit ourselves fully and perseveringly (and) ...leave behind every other motivation. This is our definitive, deepest and greatest motivation, the ultimate reason and meaning behind all we do: the glory of the Father which Jesus sought at every moment of his life." Pope Francis states in no uncertain terms that it's all about God and for God! "As the Son, he rejoices eternally to be 'close to the Father's heart' (Jn 1:18). If we are missionaries, it is primarily because Jesus told us that 'by this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit' (Jn 15:8). Beyond all our own preferences and interests, our knowledge and motivations, we evangelize for the greater glory of the Father who loves us." (EG, 267)

### **Do it like your Lover!**

#### **...Know and love your people!**

A hallmark of the pontificate of Pope Francis so far is his closeness to people – all people, every people, any person he encounters. He now challenges us to get as close up and personal as he and as Jesus get: "To be evangelizers of souls, we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people's

lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy. Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people", the pope says – reminding me of the words I, as an evangelizer, have used for many years in speaking of "My two great loves: God and people." An evangelizer's love for all people flows from the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5); from contemplating Jesus crucified and the depth of his love; from realizing "that Jesus' gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all his people" and "that he wants to make use of us to draw closer to his beloved people." For this, "He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people", the pope says, adding that "without this sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity." Christ's people are our people; we are one with our people – not separate from them or above them! Christ's love must be our love and his mission is our mission. Closeness to and deep love for Christ's people to whom we belong is demanded of every Spirit-filled, Christ-like evangelizer. (EG, 268)

### **Do it like your Lover!**

#### **...Get up close and personal, evangelizer!**

Pope Francis states plainly that "Jesus himself is the model of this method of evangelization which brings us to the very heart of his people." Yes, there is a model to this method – One greater than Pope Francis himself, Jesus, who shows us the way, the pope says: "contemplate the closeness which he shows to everyone! If he speaks to someone, he looks into their eyes with deep love and concern... We see how accessible he is... and eats and drinks with sinners... We see his sensitivity... the way he lived his entire life." He is the model par excellence of Spirit-filled evangelization! Imitate him, the pope says: "Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep; arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world. But we do so not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a

personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives.” (EG, 269)

### **Do it like your Lover!**

#### **...Enter people's lives and know the power of tenderness**

It can be tempting, the pope says, to keep the wounded Lord at arm's length, but “Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people.” (EG, 270)

### **Do it like your Lover!**

#### **...Evangelize with, in, and motivated by love**

Pope Francis offers us a biblically balanced approach to the challenging tasks we face in evangelization efforts, especially when it comes to apologetics and catechesis, two very special moments within the overall process of evangelization. Though we must give reasons for our hope, we need not do so “as an enemy who critiques and condemns” he says. In fact, Scripture commands that we “do so with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet 3:15) and attempt to “live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18) and strive to overcome “evil with good” (Rom 12:21) and to “work for the good of all” (Gal 6:10), and that “Far from trying to appear better than others, we should ‘in humility count others better’ than ourselves” (Phil 2:3). Anticipating any would-be critics, he adds that “This is not an idea of the Pope, or one pastoral option among others; they are injunctions contained in the word of God which are so clear, direct and convincing that they need no interpretations which might diminish their power to challenge us. Let us live them sine glossa, without commentaries.” (EG, 271)

### **The force be with you!**

#### **...Love – or be blind, dead, and godless**

So similar are several of the concepts herein contained, one could think that Pope Francis and I were brainstorming together over the past several months as he wrote this Exhortation and as I developed my latest New Evangelization Outreach Project, Remember You Are Loved, launched at

World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in July 2013. I'm not telling, but what I can say is this: he is on a mission of love and wants you and me to join him! He spells out clearly what motivates and sustains our evangelization efforts: love, the force that changes everything – and without which nothing changes for good. He reminds us that to love God is to love neighbor, quoting Sacred Scripture and his most recent predecessor: “Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God; indeed, one who does not love others ‘walks in the darkness’ (1 Jn 2:11), ‘remains in death’ (1 John 3:14) and ‘does not know God’ (1 John 4:8). Benedict XVI has said that ‘closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God’, and that love is, in the end, the only light which ‘can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working.’” He goes on to link love to action, growth, and mission by calling us to “live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare” so that “our hearts are opened wide to the Lord's greatest and most beautiful gifts”, adding that “whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God... we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries... A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others.”

Not only do we benefit from being a love missionary, but, as the pope seems to wish to point out, in truth there is no way to be a missionary disciple or a love messenger as I like to say: “Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary.” Not only do others benefit – so do we: “This openness of the heart is a source of joy, since ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35). We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in our own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide.” (EG, 272)

### **Do it like your Lover!**

#### **...Make love your mission in life**

The Pope is on a mission – a mission of love – from above and so must we. Pope Francis makes clearer than ever before what he is about and what we must be about: “My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an ‘extra’ or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from

my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world.” He adds in no uncertain terms that the Mission of the Redeemer ought to profoundly alter the way we see ourselves: “We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing.” He describes what the world looks like when we fully embark on this mission of love – “All around us we begin to see nurses with soul, teachers with soul, politicians with soul, people who have chosen deep down to be with others and for others” – and describes what the world looks like when we fail to do so – “once we separate our work from our private lives, everything turns grey and we will always be seeking recognition or asserting our needs. We stop being a people.” (EG, 273)

### **Show and tell the world that everyone is lovable and love-able**

Pope Francis is a lover of souls. Here again, his words reflect almost verbatim the first aim on my latest New Evangelization Outreach Project, Remember You Are Loved, when the pope says that “to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving...because they are God’s handiwork, his creation...and he or she reflects something of God’s glory (and)...is the object of God’s infinite tenderness, and he himself is present in their lives.” Indeed, everyone “deserves our love”! And as we say and know from experience at Remember You Are Loved, it is possible and rewarding to “break down walls and our heart is filled with faces and names!” (EG, 274)

### **Dare to love someone new today!**

Evangelii Gaudium is a timely document. Spirit-filled evangelizers are exactly what the Church and the world need. Love makes Spirit-filled evangelization possible and delightful. Challenges notwithstanding, let us go out of ourselves and into the existential peripheries where so many are distant from and indifferent to God and Church. There – in our own homes and families, workplaces and neighborhoods, social circles and in society at large – let us dare to boldly share the love of our Lover: the One who Won our salvation; the One who became flesh and dwelt among us; the One who lives and reigns and loves and rains down blessings upon his children; the One True God who has called us to be missionary disciples and messengers of

love through whom He might draw all into his open side for all eternity.

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