

Too Tired for the Challenges of *Evangelii Gaudium*?

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1) Introduction

Since returning from Nigeria to work in Ireland just a year ago, November 2013, I have been struck by the general air of fatigue, tiredness, lack of purpose, lack of relevance that seems to dominate the missionary and religious circle in Ireland today. Somebody said to me that missionaries in Ireland no longer are joyful, we have allowed a cloud to overwhelm us and we are just like chickens beaten by rain. In fact, I have recently heard missionaries in this country referred to as 'dead ducks'. This was of course used in an analogical sense but it very aptly and very strongly expresses the heaviness and tiredness that is in the air, both within our individual missionary organizations and at the level of national structures. This tiredness is in very striking contrast to the enthusiasm and energy and purpose which bounce from the Pope's encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* and from the Pope's Message for this year's Mission Sunday.

Near the end of his Message the Pope says: "let us not be robbed of the joy of evangelization". I think this Mission Sunday is indeed a good opportunity for us missionaries in Ireland to ask ourselves: Have we been robbed of the joy of evangelization, and if so, what are we going to do about it? I am very grateful to Fr Hugh and all in the IMU for inviting me to say a few words here today during this Mission celebration and I have decided to use the occasion to reflect on this contrast and the challenge to reconcile the two: our 'tiredness' with the joy of evangelization, the joy of the Gospel, spoken off continuously by the Pope.

I will first look briefly at why we are (or say we are) tired. In fact, we might conclude after hearing my examination that really we are not tired at all but we have much more energy within us than we are prepared to imagine or admit. If we do, that admittance in itself could be energizing! Secondly, I will present, in the light of the Popes advice, ways in which we might overcome that tiredness, and thirdly I will look at how we might be called to transmit our buoyed up energy, our hidden joy, to others in Ireland and beyond today. I don't intend to offer any conclusive strategic plan, as it were, but my hope is to generate some discussion and help to rekindle our fire as an Irish Missionary Church.

2) Why we are (or say we are) tired?

The first question then is why do we feel we are tired? From my own experience, I believe it has a lot to do with the realities we are facing. I speak not so much to the reality of lay missionary groups as to that of missionary religious and priests: Our time and energy are taken up with jubilees and funerals as we remember yesteryears and sing the glories of the past; Few if any 'young' blood has entered our missionary congregations in the last twenty years; We have the responsibility of ensuring our very great number of elderly and infirm

members are adequately accompanied and cared for; We are far too often under the attack and ridicule of the media; Our once-glorious reputations have been seriously tarnished; Stark and painful truths have been revealed about the sins committed within our structures by many of our own personnel; We have a moral obligation to compensate the hurts inflicted by our members or the structures we represent and to show compassion to the victims as also to the perpetrators; We must deal carefully and pastorally with those criminals who seek to avail of our vulnerability and compassion for their personal gain; We have to carefully negotiate the heavy weight of the financial and legal issues which crop up daily so as to ensure that as registered charities we are legally compliant, our investments are intact, and our future welfare is secure. What little energy remains is consumed by our efforts to maintain the few apostolates we have under our responsibility, whether in Ireland or beyond.

The tiredness may also result from a greatly reduced conviction in what we believe, what we stand for, and what we represent. Two basic motivations of the past were that there was no salvation outside the Church, so it was urgent that the Church be firmly established everywhere, and the West was best for all the Rest so we had to go out to save the people of underdeveloped nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, primarily through education and health services. Nowadays these convictions are no more: the Church is more vibrant in many of these nations than it is in Ireland; the authoritarian patriarchal clerical and sacramentalised church represents an institution we are not particularly proud to have helped to spread; salvation of the 'soul' is not the monopoly of the church or indeed a major concern for many of us; and the local governments or other aid agencies are better able to provide for the needs of underdevelopment in these nations. Hence, many Irish missionaries feel the era of mission has passed. We no longer, with any real enthusiasm, invite young people to assume this life commitment for themselves. We seem to have lost conviction both in missionary life and in religious life. If we feel we have anything worth offering to young people it is simply the possibility of voluntary work overseas for some months or years in the area of development.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis acknowledges the real and constant challenges of pastoral work: "Along this journey of evangelization we will have our moments of aridity, darkness and even fatigue." (EG 287). He dedicates the second half of Chapter two, (from par. 76 – 109) to an examination of why so many 'pastoral workers', including missionaries, have lost the sense of joy associated with evangelization. Much of what I have mentioned can be found there as well as other reasons such as a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity, a cooling of fervour, a neglect of the poor and of the Gospel, a spiritual desertification. The biggest threat of all, the Pope says, is "when faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness... Called to radiate light and communicate life, in the end they are caught up in things that generate only darkness and inner weariness, and slowly consume all zeal for the apostolate" (EG 83)! He warns us

against becoming "querulous, disillusioned pessimists, sourpusses." (EG 85) and repeats: "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!" (EG 83).

I don't believe Pope Francis is naïve; he knows what we face and he faces it and much more himself. He does not live in a utopian cloud and has not allowed himself to be sheltered in the ecclesial ivory tower. He has been described as a man of faith-filled prayer and justice-filled action. Joy for him is not a superficial emotion but is a vital tool in his evangelizing mission.

I read somewhere that it is unrealistic to be in a constant state of joy. I imagine even Pope Francis has his moments! There is a concept called the "Romance, Disillusionment, True Joy cycle" which is often used during marriage counselling. The Romance stage is one of high energy, glorious visions of the future – I reckon this was the stage of the Irish Church of the 1900s to c. 1980 when many of today's missionaries (most of who are aged 50 – 90) entered this way of life. Then the Disillusionment stage of anger, disappointment, fatigue, soul-searching, re-grounding... I believe that is where we are now, a stage where we look beyond the chaff to focus on the wheat, to rediscover the who and why of our work and our life. Then, if we persevere, comes the True Joy stage, of deeper love, deeper faith, more realistic outlook, a joy that has been tried and tested: we pray that stage is around the corner waiting for us to "awake from our slumber, arise from our sleep". How then can we shake of the tiredness which we feel today and get to that third stage of True Joy?

3) Ways in which we might overcome that tiredness

To answer this question I refer to just five pieces of advice drawn from the Pope. It could all be summed up of course in one piece of advice: Be joyful! But that is so simple it doesn't seem realistic! When we get bogged down with all our concerns, it is not easy to maintain good humour! So, what advice does he give us on how to be joyful:

i. Return to the source of our joy.

The first is very simple: *Return to the source of our joy*. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, in the Message for Mission Sunday, and in basically all his homilies and addresses since his election as Pope, he emphasises Joy as a gift from God, a gift that fills us from within and which flows through us to others. The first advice then is very simply to believe in and be open to the gift of joy. This boils down to our faith and our relationship with Christ. Recognising that many Christians, including missionaries, no longer feel the quiet joy of God's love, Pope Francis says: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this, unfailingly, every day" (EG 3). Pope Francis adds: "Thanks solely to this encounter - or renewed encounter - with God's love...we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption...Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?" (EG 7-8)

ii. Do only what we can do and what we find purpose in doing:

The second is also simple and it is more pragmatic: *Do only what we can do and what we find purpose in doing*: The Pope tells us “The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable.” (EG 82). A consequence of the decreasing numbers in missionary congregations in Ireland is that members may feel obliged to accept appointments they would rather not do. In the words of the Pope: “As a result, work becomes more tiring than necessary, even leading at times to illness. Far from a content and happy tiredness, this is a tense, burdensome, dissatisfying and, in the end, unbearable fatigue” (EG 82). The challenge here is for maturity in discerning whether or not an apostolate asked of us corresponds to God’s will for us at this time in our lives; if we feel it does not, then we should not accept the task. While personnel may be few, nobody is indispensable and there is nothing more stagnating than members holding posts which they then refuse to fulfil. Either somebody else will be found who will do the task better or another manner will be found to fulfil the need which must be met. God does not want unhappy workers in the vineyard.

Other ways in which we allow ourselves fall into the trap of fatigue, mentioned by Pope Francis, is that as missionary organizations, we sometimes “throw [our] selves into unrealistic projects and are not satisfied simply to do what [we] reasonably can”. Or we “have lost real contact with people and so depersonalize [our] work that [we] are more concerned with the road map than with the journey itself.” (EG 83)

iii. Get beyond our *habriaqueísmo*

The third piece of advice is to actually *do what we feel called to do, rather than simply talking about what has to be done*. In the words of the Pope: “How often we dream up vast apostolic projects, meticulously planned, just like defeated generals!” He reminds us that our history as a Church was a history of sacrifice, of hopes and daily struggles, of lives spent in service and fidelity to work. Instead of working today, “we waste time talking about ‘what needs to be done’ (in Spanish we call this the sin of ‘habriaqueísmo’)... We indulge in endless fantasies and we lose contact with the real lives and difficulties of our people” (EG 96).

I believe these words are indeed apt for us here at this moment in our history. Chapters at congregational level, study commissions, think tanks, meetings at one level and the other.... Plans, Minutes, Reports... Of course it is important to plan and to be strategic. But do we go beyond the necessary? How much more energizing it would be for all of us to actually go out to meet our neighbours face to face, get involved in people’s real lives, and truly meet Christ who is moving among us and speaking to us through one another, especially the poor.

iv. Move beyond self-preservation

A fourth advice is to free ourselves from the obsession of self-preservation. Francis says: “I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27). The aim of our activities, then, is evangelization, that is the transmission of the love of God, the joy of the Gospel. It is not the continuation of our missionary institute or of any historical structure.

I often find a sense of hopelessness among my OLA Sisters because there is not an army of young people coming up behind us! Is the continuation, the preservation, of our institute or our networks or any other structure, the aim of our missionary endeavours? It cannot be! Structures are temporary and of use only in so far as they help in the transmission of God’s love and God’s Reign in the world. I find these words of the Pope, calling us to a new impulse channelled towards the evangelization of the world we live in today rather than our own self-preservation, are indeed challenging, reminding all of us of why we exist and encouraging us to live that mission until the end, in whatever way we can.

v. Sing of the glories and the beauty of our life

The fifth is to recognise with praise and thanks the gift of our life now, not just the past. It is certainly energizing to feel that one’s life is worthwhile and is attractive to others. In the past, missionary institutes did not have to put a lot of creativity into finding ways to promote their way of life: young people saw what they did and how they did it and found it attractive. Today, this does not seem to be the case. We celebrate our past glories as missionaries, taking great pride in the hospitals and schools we established in Africa and elsewhere, but we find little to celebrate in what we are doing today. According to Pope Francis, the lack of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life is often “due to the absence of contagious apostolic fervour in communities which lack enthusiasm and thus fail to attract... Wherever there is joy, enthusiasm and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations arise” (Message 2014). I believe there is something for all of us to learn from this: Are we sufficiently convinced of the value of our way of life, so that our fervour will be contagious and others will be drawn to it? Vocation recruitment is not our aim, as I have said, but it is life-giving for ourselves to believe in our way of life as a very valid and beautiful one, a gift from God which we are called to share, a gift which has helped and still helps us find meaning and fulfilment and has made it possible for us to transmit God’s love to others in very meaningful and life-giving ways. Only then will it be ‘attractive’ to others and in turn will give more energy to ourselves.

4) Ways to transmit our buoyed up energy, our hidden joy, today

Having examined why we are tired and had some advice on how we might overcome that tiredness, I want to briefly mention a few areas in which I believe we as missionaries are called to transmit our buoyed up energy, our hidden joy, to others in Ireland today.

i. Promote and facilitate missionary vocations

Firstly, there is still and there will always be need for Irish missionaries abroad just as there is need for missionaries from other countries to come on mission to Ireland. Whether clergy, religious or lay, Irish missionaries who go abroad as well as missionaries who come to Ireland from abroad, give a very concrete witness to the universal love of God and the selfless going out *ad extra* beyond our frontiers on mission *ad gentes*. Mission cannot be understood in a one-way sense as it once was. Mutuality in mission is necessary since mission is an expression of the universality and selfless unconditional self-emptying all-embracing love of God and the all-inclusive communion of God's kingdom. It is important to continue to promote Irish missionary vocations abroad and to facilitate the integration of missionaries who come to work here in Ireland. In his Message for today, Pope Francis emphasises the occasion as one in which we rekindle the desire and moral obligation of all the baptised to take joyful part in the mission *ad gentes* – including through prayer and monetary contributions (cf. EG 40, 51, 120).

ii. Become involved in the local Church

One of the things I find most striking about our presence as missionary institutes in Ireland is our quasi separate existence to that of the local Church. I believe this situation has evolved over the years as a result of the pre-Vatican II practice whereby mission was understood as a very marginal practice in the Church, used solely to describe the work of those who went abroad, to the developing countries, to 'spread the faith'. This has of course changed today with an emphasis on the call of all baptised as agents of evangelization (EG 120). Some local congregations here are very much part of the local Church but specifically missionary congregations live almost on another planet, known only for their mission appeals. I believe we are greatly challenged to seek to overcome that dichotomy and find ways to integrate into the life of our local church communities so as to be mutually enriched spiritually and by way of life experience.

There are also many people in Ireland, living around us, who have lost faith in the Church and no longer feel drawn to its institutional structures. We are challenged to try to find ways to open to them our spaces for quiet, prayer, faith sharing, reflection, to help satisfy the spiritual emptiness and sense of loneliness and meaninglessness felt by so many in Ireland today.

iii. Ministry to the Poor

A central part of the present Pope's pontificate is his emphasis on ministry to and with the poor. He himself has adopted a simpler lifestyle, dress, living quarters. He continuously reminds us that we must let ourselves be evangelized by the poor. In the Message for Mission Sunday he says "The joy of the Gospel is born of the encounter with Christ and from sharing with the poor". He reminds us that God revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom to the little ones, "the humble, the simple, the poor, the marginalised, those without voice, those weary and burdened" and we are invited to embrace the mysterious wisdom God wishes to share with us through them. With our traditional focus on helping

the 'poor' abroad, we missionaries are certainly challenged to find relevant and concrete ways of being more actively engaged with the great number of poor, marginalised and vulnerable in our society here today. Witness speaks louder than words and is always the most credible form of proclamation. Somehow, the tables have turned in Ireland and religious missionary congregations seem to be more comfortable and secure than many of our neighbours. What radical choices must we make to authentically allow ourselves be evangelized by the poor and give a credible witness of evangelical poverty and our trust in providence? How can we do this while also responsibly caring for our members? This is a question I don't know how to answer but which I believe we must ask. I also believe that asking this question and finding a response to it, as radical and demanding as that response may need to be, is key to our discovering again the joy of the Gospel, the joy of evangelization.

iv. Interreligious and Intercultural dialogue

Among the ways in which we are called to transmit our buoyed up energy and hidden joy as missionaries is openness to the great diversity of cultures and religions in Irish society today. Welcoming the stranger, facilitating exchange, inviting our parishes and local communities to become involved in the enriching experience of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, are very necessary activities and are ways in which missionaries can witness to the universal communion which is at the core of all mission. Indeed, in our present global circumstances this is particularly important. It is not when conflict arises that dialogue should be sought. It is now that relationships can be established and avenues for sincere and life-giving dialogue must be explored.

v. Other fields of missionary outreach in Ireland

Reaching out to refugees and asylum seekers, advocating for international justice, working for the prevention of trafficking and offering succour to its victims, are also very necessary ways in which missionaries are called to take a leading role in Ireland today.

We are weighed down by the many responsibilities of our institutes. I would suggest that shared collaborative projects of members of diverse missionary institutes could be initiated, similar to the shared project in Sudan, so as to facilitate the engagement of available members in specific missionary projects in Ireland.

I believe that it is through being engaged, in whatever small or great way that we can, in these 'new worlds' which exist in Ireland today that we are likely to discover the joy that is within us and which comes fully alive when we allow it to flow through us to others.

5) Conclusion

This time about fifty two years ago the Church was gathered in Rome for Vatican II. In the Pope's Opening Speech on October 11th, 1962, John XXIII noted that in the daily exercise of his pastoral office, he sometimes had to listen to "prophets of gloom" who insisted "that

our era, in contrast with past eras, is getting worse". Such doomageers, he lamented, "are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand". He himself, by contrast, saw Divine Providence "leading us to a new order of things." Today we would seem to be living a somewhat similar experience. Pope Francis is insisting on joy, the joy which is centered on a clear faith in the merciful all-inclusive love of God who is always with us; others are insisting on preservation of the law and of the structures. We are living in a time of change as we know too well from our realities as Irish missionary institutes.

In the book of Joel, a book full of old men's visions and young men's dreams, we hear: "Listen to this you elders; everybody in the country attend! Has anything like this ever happened in your day, or in your ancestors' days? Tell your children about it, and let your children tell their children, and their children the next generation" (Joel 1: 2-3). Today is the time for new visions and new dreams. We want to be relevant today, not yesterday. With vision this is achievable. It is a time for hope. The Lord is asking us to trust that God is in this time, and that we do not allow the circumstances of the present to disillusion us or rob us of the joy of evangelization.

I believe it is appropriate to conclude with the invitation extended to us by the Pope in his Message for Mission Sunday: "I invite you to immerse yourself in the joy of the Gospel and nurture a love that can light up your vocation and your mission. I urge each of you to recall, as if you were making an interior pilgrimage, that 'first love' with which the Lord Jesus Christ warmed your heart, not for the sake of nostalgia but in order to persevere in joy."

May the Lord give us that grace.