

*Evangelii Gaudium*  
The Joy of the Gospel



EXPLORING POPE FRANCIS' VISION FOR THE CHURCH



A Vision 20/20 Initiative  
Diocese of Davenport

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.”  
~ Pope Francis

## Series Overview

The Joy of the Gospel is the first apostolic exhortation written by Pope Francis. This wide-ranging document speaks candidly and personally to all of us. It calls us into life-changing encounters with Jesus Christ, filling us with joy and inspiring us to share that joy with others.

This Small Group Series is provided for all members of the Diocese of Davenport with the hope of renewal, relationship, and a heightened sense of the part we play in the mission of evangelization. The heart of the initiative will consist of six small group gatherings for prayer, reflection and formation.

Each meeting will include an exploration of the major themes of *The Joy of the Gospel* in addition to opportunities for prayer and action. The document is of considerable length, so you'll find key paragraphs to focus your discussions. All the numbers indicated in your guide refer to **paragraphs, not pages**, so that no matter which version of the document you are using – a bound book, a print-out from the Vatican website, or an electronic version – you can find these sections for discussion. **Please bring the document with you each week.**

Each session of the six-week series will last about 90 minutes. All passages and indented paragraphs from *The Joy of the Gospel* should be read aloud.

Your small group guide also includes a section called “On Your Own,” inviting your reflection and active engagement with the material throughout the week. Suggestions are provided for bringing *The Joy of the Gospel* to bear in your own life. Feel free to come up with your own ideas too!

This series will ultimately end but we hope that your group will consider continuing into the future. Pope Francis urges us to “create spaces where we can be helped and healed, places where faith in Jesus is renewed, where questions and daily concerns are shared”(77). This is precisely the vision for Vision 20/20 and the greater body of Christ throughout the diocese.

Dig deep and be filled with the joy of the Gospel!

Dr. Michael Havercamp  
Co-chair of the Vision 20/20 Steering Committee



## Session I: Introduction

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### Preparation

- *The Joy of the Gospel*, Introduction
  - Focus on paragraphs 1-8, 10, 14-15
  - Pope Francis emphasizes that a personal encounter with Jesus Christ is the essential precursor of evangelization, the very foundation of the Christian life. Using this lens, reflect on your own encounters with Jesus and how those encounters have changed your life. Are those stories worth sharing?
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### Reflection on *The Joy of the Gospel*

#### The Primacy of Encounter

The entire exhortation begins with these words, “**THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL** fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” (1). These words form the very title of Pope Francis’ message. Why do you think these words are so important? What is Pope Francis saying in this very foundational introductory sentence?

Read the following passage aloud:

“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 each day.” (3)

**Q: How can I have such an encounter? What words might you use to welcome a renewed personal encounter with Christ? Share your own words and then discuss together the following words from Pope Francis:**

Read the following passage aloud:

“Now is the time to say to Jesus, ‘Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.’” (3)

**Q: Pope Francis describes this renewed personal encounter with Christ as a “risk”. What is “risky” about this encounter? What has prevented you from taking this risk?**

Read the following passage aloud:

“The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. . . How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost! God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy.”  
(3)

### **This Encounter Produces Joy**

**Q:** Perhaps a little tongue and cheek, Pope Francis notes, “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter” (6). What do you think he means by that? Turning the question upon yourself, how might your own life seem like Lent without Easter?

Pope Francis says he never tires of quoting Pope Benedict XVI about the very heart of the Gospel (Read the following passage aloud):

“Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (7)

**Q:** Why does this sentence so clearly articulate the “heart of the Gospel”? Describe an encounter with Christ which changed your life, giving it a new horizon and a decisive direction. Remember the thoughts, feelings, tensions and challenges. Tell the story.

### **The Joy of Evangelization**

Read the following passage aloud:

“Goodness always tends to spread. . . Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others. When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment.” (10)

**Q:** To simplify, what Pope Francis is saying is that evangelization leads to our own fulfillment. Sharing our encounters of Christ with others actually makes us happy. Do you believe that? Why or why not?

### **So What Are You Waiting For?**

Read the following passage aloud:

“What would happen if we were to take these words seriously? We would realize that missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity*. . . We cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings; we need to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry.” (15)

**Q: What would happen if *you* took these words seriously? What would happen to our parish? To our workplaces? To our homes? To our neighborhoods? To our schools? To our world?**

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**On your own**

**Reflection:** Take a few moments every day to spend some time in quiet prayer. Take an opportunity to go for a long walk this week and ponder any significant moments when Christ touched your heart, changed your direction, or helped you to grow. **What person or people played a key role in your spiritual life? Reach out to them, share how their words or actions impacted you, and say ‘thank you’.**

**Action:** This formation period provides a space where we can grow in our relationship with God and with others. Every day is a new day, so pray about the ways God is calling you to enter more closely into His Presence. **Who in your life could use your caring heart? Who can you reach out to this week? Is there someone in your midst who needs a dose of joy? Pray about this ‘who’ in your life. Reach out in an arm of love to do something kind for this person. Come to next weeks small group gathering prepared to share your experience.**

## Session II

# “The Church’s Missionary Transformation”

Evangelization takes place in obedience to the missionary mandate of Jesus:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”

Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 19

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### Preparation

- Read *The Joy of the Gospel*, Chapter One (The Church’s Missionary Transformation)
- Focus on paragraphs 24, 27-28, 33-35, 46-49
- This section presents Pope Francis’ “I Have a Dream” speech. In it he dreams of changing *everything* in the Church so that it all contributes to the one essential thing – evangelization. What is your response to this exhortation to change? Consider what might need to change – in your life and in your parish – if you were to accept the pope’s invitation.

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### Reflection on *The Joy of the Gospel*

Read the following passages aloud:

“An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.” (24)

“Mere administration can no longer be enough.” (25)

“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 channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.” (27)

“Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.” (33)

**Q:** *The Joy of the Gospel* has been described as Pope Francis’ “I Have a Dream” speech. What is his dream for the Church? What needs to change?

“Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines . . . the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary.” (35)

**Q: What do you think Pope Francis is saying about the message we are called to convey? What’s been the most beautiful, most grand, and most appealing aspects of your own encounters with Jesus?**

“In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.” (36)

“Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others.” (39)

**Q: Here Pope Francis presents the Gospel as an “invitation” of God to respond to. How have you responded to this invitation?**

“Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. . . 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. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the center and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat’ (Mk 6:37).” (49)

**Q: Reflect on the above passage. How does it speak to you? This is how Pope Francis concludes this chapter entitled “The Church’s Missionary Transformation.” What kind of transformation is the Holy Father calling us to embrace? What is your immediate reaction? In this season of Lent when we are called to “repent” or “turn around,” what is Pope Francis asking us to turn from and what is he asking us to turn to?**

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## On Your Own

**Reflection:** Spend some time this week in quiet reflecting on Pope Francis' "I have a dream" speech. What changes would you like to see in the church? In the way we welcome others? In the way we are in relationship? What are your dreams and hopes for the future of our faith?

**Action:** As a family or small group, discuss and commit to one action step that you could live out the changes you hope for in your parish.

## Session III

### “Amid the Crisis of Communal Commitment”

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#### Preparation

- Read *The Joy of the Gospel*, Chapter Two (Amid the Crisis of Communal Commitment)
  - Focus on paragraphs 52-54, 63-64, 77, 87-91, 98-101
  - In this chapter, Pope Francis presents various grave challenges to the fundamental dignity of the human person and to the Church’s evangelizing activity. Only the Gospel has the power to restore us and offer the abundant life that can only be found in Jesus.
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#### Reflection on *The Joy of the Gospel*

**Q: Pope Francis asks, “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?” Why is this so challenging for us?**

“Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling the need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own.” (54)

**Q: Can you relate to this paralyzing feeling? Do you *want* to feel more compassion for the poor? For those that have fallen away from the Church?**

“We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization.” (63)

**Q: Have you ever felt unwelcomed in the Church? How might we overcome these challenges and offer a truly welcoming atmosphere at our parish?**

“We need to create spaces where [we] can be helped and healed, places where faith itself in the crucified and risen Jesus is renewed, where the most profound questions and daily concerns are shared, where deeper discernment about our experiences and life itself is undertaken in the light of the Gospel.” (77)

**Q: Do you have a space where these things can happen? Would you be interested in providing this kind of space for others? This is exactly why we are meeting in small groups!**

“The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction.” (88)

“The only way is to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude, which is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way. . . Better yet, it means learning to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas.” (91)

**Q: What is Pope Francis saying about the importance of real relationships in effective evangelization?**

**Finally:**

“Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another: ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (Jn 13:35).” (99)

**Q: How does this challenge you? How does this inspire you? Consider what you might do this week to encourage and accompany someone in need.**

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### **On Your Own**

**Reflection:** Spend some time reflecting on the upcoming Gospel passage for this week. What does relationship with Christ offer us? How can we live more into the relationship we have with him? Who around you is suffering because they do not know Christ?

**Action:** Start praying everyday for one person you know who could use the light of Christ in their life. Make them your daily prayer intention and pray that God might show opportunities for you to reach out to them.

## Session IV

### “The Proclamation of the Gospel”

#### Preparation

- Read *The Joy of the Gospel*, Chapter Three (The Proclamation of the Gospel)
- Focus on paragraphs 110-113, 119-121, 127-129
- In the famous adage, repeatedly misattributed to St. Francis of Assisi, we are called to “Preach the Gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words.” This reminds us that at the heart of the Gospel, love is revealed in action. Yet at the beginning of this chapter, Pope Francis reiterates the words of Pope Paul VI saying, “There can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord” (110). To proclaim the Gospel is to use every word we can, in addition to our actions, to joyfully communicate the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But what is the essence of the Gospel message?

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#### Reflection on *The Joy of the Gospel*

#### Read the following aloud:

“In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. . . All members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization. . . Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization. . . So what are we waiting for?” (120)

“Each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and strength, and gives meaning to our lives. In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without him; what you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and has given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others.”

**Q: Do you consider yourself a missionary disciple? An evangelist? Why or why not? What are the obstacles in your life that prevent you from sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ?**

**Q: When and where do you find opportunities to share the Gospel?**

“There is a kind of preaching which falls to each of us as a daily responsibility. It has to do with bringing the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they be our neighbors or complete strangers. This is the informal preaching which takes place in the middle of a conversation, something along the lines of what a missionary does when visiting a home. Being a disciple means being constantly

ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey.” (127)

**Q: How do relationships play a part in sharing the Gospel? Are we expected to simply walk up to strangers and start talking about Jesus?**

“In this preaching, which is always respectful and gentle, the first step is personal dialogue, when the other person speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns for loved ones, or so many other heartfelt needs. Only afterwards is it possible to bring up God’s word, perhaps by reading a Bible verse or relating a story, but always keeping in mind the fundamental message: the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship.” (128)

**Q: What is the “art of accompaniment”? Who has accompanied you toward greater faith in Christ? Do you think you could accompany others? Why or why not?**

**Q: This question often comes up: Does the Catholic Church believe in salvation by works or by grace? How do you understand it?**

“The salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy. No human efforts, however good they may be, can enable us to merit so great a gift. God, by his sheer grace, draws us to himself and makes us one with him. . . This principle of the *primacy of grace* must be a beacon which constantly illuminates our reflections on evangelization.” (112)

**Q: Do you think this primary message of grace is sufficiently communicated at your parish? Do you share this message with others?**

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### On Your Own

**Reflection:** Think back on times in your life when you have been able to share the Gospel? Who was it with? What did it feel like? When were you most motivated to share the Good News? Why?

**Action:** Remember the ‘who’ you have been praying for. Take a moment this week to give them a call, send them an email, reach out and invite them to lunch. Invoke a gesture of love with this person and come ready to talk about it. No agenda. Just love.

## Session V

# “The Social Dimension of Evangelization”

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### Preparation

- Read *The Joy of the Gospel*, Chapter Four
  - Focus on paragraphs 177-180, 182-83, 187-89, 194, 201, 204, 224-25
  - At the start of his exhortation, Pope Francis clearly established the importance of personally encountering Jesus. Yet in this chapter he reminds us that while the Gospel is personal, it's not private. Our relationship with God should spill out into the lives of others. It should impact the world, bringing it in line with the kingdom. In other words, “realities are greater than ideas” (233). What does this mean about being intentional disciples of Jesus?
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### Reflection on *The Joy of the Gospel*

“An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.” (183)

**Q: By this measure, would you call your faith authentic? Why or why not? How do you long to change your family, your parish, the world?**

**Read the following aloud:**

“Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members. . . A lack of solidarity towards [their] needs will directly affect our relationship with God.” (186, 187)

**Q: Who are society’s most neglected members today?**

**Q: Pope Francis recalls Jesus words from Scripture, “As you did it to one of these, the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). If your treatment of the “least of these” is used as a metric to evaluate our relationship with God, how would you be doing?**

**Read the following:**

“This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have so much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sense of the faithful*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.” (198)

**Q:** Have you encountered Christ in the poor (i.e. “been evangelized by the poor”)? What have your interactions with the poor taught you?

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### **On Your Own**

**Reflection:** There is an old adage that says “the Gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.” Reflect this week on what areas of your life and in what ways God has comforted/afflicted you. Is he challenging you now to do something that seems radical and out of your comfort zone? Does it mean stepping out in faith with friends? Is it being more conscious of the poor? Is it being a wiser steward of the resources you’ve been given? Does it mean standing up to someone who is taking advantage of another? Reflect on how God is calling you to radically be His servant.

**Action:** Take an action step. Is God calling you to serve the poor? Find a way to do so. Is God calling you to stop spending and increase your charitable giving? Is God asking you to address a broken relationship? Is God calling you to stop an unhealthy behavior? Take the time actually follow through. Reflect. Commit. Act.

## Session VI

### “Spirit-Filled Evangelizers”

“How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction!”  
Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 261

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#### Preparation

- Read *The Joy of the Gospel*, Chapter 5 (Spirit-Filled Evangelizers)
  - Focus on paragraphs 262-66, 268-70, 273
  - Here Pope Francis gives us our joyous marching orders: “keep marching forward,” give Jesus everything, and allow our connection with God to bear fruit in his good season. “Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God’s presence” (259). Now is time to consider the question: What is God calling me to do? What is my mission on earth?
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#### Reflection on *The Joy of the Gospel*

**Q:** Pope Francis asserts, “Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless.” (262) Do you have designated “prolonged” time for prayer? Describe the last time you had a sincere conversation with the Lord. How did it impact you?

**Q:** In this chapter, Pope Francis gives the “primary reason for evangelizing.” What is it? Is that what motivates you to evangelize? If we’re not feeling inspired to share our faith, what does Pope Francis advise us to do? (264)

Read the following aloud:

“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.” (268)

**Q:** What do you think it looks like to “develop a spiritual taste for being close to people’s lives”? Are you as passionate for people as you are Jesus? Visa versa?

**Q:** Pope Francis says, “I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world” (273). What is your mission on this earth? How has *The Joy of the Gospel* shed some light on it?

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On Your Own

**Reflection:** What have you learned these past six weeks? What has comforted you? What has challenged you? In what ways do you need to be further equipped to share the “joy of the Gospel” with those around you?

**Action:** Think and pray about how to take this ‘missional living’ beyond this time of formation. What is something you can continue to do as you live as a “Spirit-filled evangelist” in this world?