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WHY A NEW EVANGELIZATION NOW?

by

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In June 2010, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his homily for the Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, announced the formation of a new Vatican office for the New Evangelization. This action gave a formal structure to what had been addressed by Pope Paul VI and, at great length, by the Venerable Servant of God Pope John Paul II.

Why a call for a New Evangelization now? What exactly is the New Evangelization? What makes this the time for the New Evangelization? I would like to share some reflections on these questions, beginning with a definition or description of the New Evangelization.

What is the New Evangelization?

Pope Benedict XVI calls all of us to “re-propose the Gospel.” Somehow in what we do and how we express our faith, we have to be able to repropose our belief in Christ and his Gospel for a hearing among those who are convinced they already know the faith and it holds no interest for them.

In the presentation of the Lineamenta or outline for the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization to be held in 2012, we are told that “a distinction is drawn between evangelization as a regular activity of the Church; the first approach ‘ad gentes’ to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ, and the new evangelization which is directed towards those who have moved away from the Church, those who have been baptized but not sufficiently evangelized.”

The Church never tires of announcing the gift she has received from the Lord. The Second Vatican Council has reminded us that evangelization is at the very heart of the Church. In *Lumen Gentium*, the fundamental text and nucleus of the Council’s expression on the life of the Church, the Council Fathers emphasized, “The Church has received this

solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the Apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth.” The Council spoke eloquently of the truth that the divine mission that Jesus entrusted to the Church continues through the Apostles and their successors and will last until the end of time.

The duty to proclaim the saving truth is not just the responsibility of clergy and religious. On the contrary, the Council highlighted the important role of “every disciple of Christ” in the mission of “spreading the faith” (LG, 17). The Council Fathers accentuated the crucial and vital participation of every Catholic, especially through the eager dedication and gifts of the lay faithful to the mission of evangelization: “The laity go forth as powerful proclaimers ... when they courageously join to their profession of faith a life springing from faith. This evangelization, that is, this announcing of Christ by a living testimony as well as by the spoken word, takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world” (LG, 35).

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI drew on the teaching of the Council when he affirmed that the Church is “a community which is in its turn evangelizing. The command to the Twelve to go out and proclaim the Good News is also valid for all Christians, though in a different way ... the Good News of the kingdom which is coming and which has begun is meant for all people of all times. Those who have received the Good News and who have been gathered by it into the community of salvation can and must communicate and spread it.” In this historic document, issued ten years to the day of the close of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI discerned the need for “a new period of evangelization” (13).

The Venerable Servant of God Pope John Paul II, reminding us that evangelization is “the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity,” took up the commitment begun by Pope Paul VI to an evangelization, “new in ardor, methods, and expression” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 2, 3, 30).

Pope Benedict XVI has affirmed that the discernment of “the new demands of evangelization” is a “prophetic” task of the Supreme Pontiff (*Caritatis in veritate*, 12). He emphasized that “the entire activity of the Church is an expression of love” that seeks to evangelize the world (*Deus caritatis est*, 19).

The New Evangelization is not a program. It is a mode of thinking, seeing and acting. It is a lens through which we see the opportunities to proclaim the Gospel anew. It is also a recognition that the Holy Spirit is actively working in the Church. The New Evangelization recognizes, as the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* issued by Pope Benedict XVI also explains, that our God still speaks to his people.

Why a Call for a New Evangelization Now?

The Church is the voice which transmits the Word to the world. Like John the Baptist, the Church cries in the wilderness that the Messiah has come. The New Evangelization calls us to adapt how that voice speaks to this age. The Word never changes but the voice must modulate. Our voice must be clear and relevant. Our voice must be alive and enthusiastic. Our voice must transmit in the modes and places where our people are.

On September 16, 2010 as our Holy Father arrived in Glasgow, Scotland as part of his trip to Great Britain, he set the tone, for his visit by calling upon “Catholic professionals, politicians and teachers of Scotland never to lose sight of their calling to use their talents and experience in the service of the faith, engaging contemporary Scottish culture at every level.”

He highlighted what exactly the New Evangelization entails. “The evangelization of culture is all the more important in our times, when a ‘dictatorship of relativism’ threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man’s nature, his destiny and his ultimate good. There are some who now seek to exclude religious belief from public discourse, to privatize it or even to paint it as a threat to equality and liberty... Society today needs clear voices which propose our right to live, not in a jungle of self-destructive and arbitrary freedoms, but in a society which works for the true welfare of its citizens and offers them guidance and protection in the face of their weakness and fragility.”

As we undertake the New Evangelization and the presentation of the richness of the experience of Jesus and his Gospel, we must be aware of the context in which this arduous task unfolds. The context of the New Evangelization and the very reason why we need to repropose our Catholic faith to the world around us and of which we are a part is the secularism that is now rapidly enveloping our society and our Western culture.

During Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the United States, April 15-18, 2008, he spoke to a number of themes as he did more recently during his September 2010 visit to England and Scotland. The Pope recognized that bishops are called to sow the seeds of the Gospel today. But he went on to say, “this leads me to ask how in the twenty-first century a bishop can best fulfill the call to ‘make all things new in Christ our hope’? How can he lead his people to ‘an encounter with the living Christ’ the source of that life-transforming hope of which the Gospel speaks (cf. *Spe Salvi* 4)?”

He then went on to say that we need to begin by clearing away some of the barriers to such an encounter and he noted three in particular: “the subtle influence of materialism, which can all too easily focus attention on the hundredfold which God promises now in his age, at the expense of the eternal life which he promises in the age to come (cf. Mark 10:30).”

The Pope also reminded us that “while it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior.”

Finally he noted that “in a society which values personal freedom and autonomy, it is easy to lose sight of our dependence on others as well as the responsibilities that we bear towards them. This emphasis on individualism has even affected the Church (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 13-15) ...”

Under the heading of overemphasis on personal autonomy at the expense of shared responsibility are the challenges to religious liberty. An example of the hegemony of individualism is found in the desire of some to redefine what has always been understood as marriage.

For the Catholic Church the redefinition of marriage is a serious matter because the new definition tries to change something that has already been defined in human experience across human history. The word marriage describes the commitment of a man and a woman to come together for life with the possibility of generating and educating children.

Some people over the ages have come together in a variety of ways, physical, financial and social. But these various unions have always had other names because they are not marriage. Domestic or civil unions or legally domiciled adults can all describe two people deciding to live together and share their affection and property.

Some words have a meaning that not even a majority of politicians can change. Childbirth is one such word. It clearly and precisely describes the action of a woman bringing forth from her womb a baby. It would not be right for the legislature to decree henceforth that adoptions are to be called childbirth lest someone feel that he or she is the object of discrimination. The law already recognizes the equality of children regardless of how they become a part of the family.

The defense of the definition of marriage is neither discrimination nor homophobic any more than those who seek to redefine it are anti-Catholic or those who oppose the Opportunity Scholarship Program in the District of Columbia are racist since the majority of the children served are African American.

Our Vision

In the Sermon on the Mount presented in Matthew’s Gospel, we hear of a new way of life and how it involves the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who mourn, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit. Here we learn of the call to be salt of the earth and a light set on a lamp stand. Later in that same Gospel, we hear the extraordinary dictum that we should see in one another the very presence of Christ. Jesus’ disciples are challenged to envision a world where not only the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given drink, the stranger is welcomed and the naked are clothed, but also most amazingly sins are forgiven and eternal life is pledged.

That same vision is held out for us today when we open the pages of the Gospel and read about the invitation to you and to me to be branches connected to the vine of the Lord, to eat of the bread of everlasting life and to hear the words of truth, words that endure forever.

God is calling his Church to renew her efforts for the salvation of all. The current emphasis on the significance of the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church is, I believe, a manifestation of the call. The Church cannot simply maintain the *status quo*; rather we must never tire of finding creative ways of sharing the “words of eternal life.” (Jn 6:69)

But no darkness, no matter how dense, can thwart or shroud the seed of new life waiting to emerge in this fresh moment. The missionaries in the first evangelization covered immense geographic distances to spread the Good News. We, the missionaries of the New Evangelization, must surmount ideological distances just as immense, oftentimes before we ever journey beyond our own neighborhood or family.

Just as he diagnosed the problem, so too does our Holy Father present a practical solution and a challenge. The Pope specified the work of the New Evangelization as the reproposal of Jesus Christ and his Gospel “in the countries where the first proclamation of the faith has already resonated and where churches with an ancient foundation exist but are experiencing the progressive secularization of society and a sort of ‘eclipse of the sense of God’...” (Homily, Saint Paul Outside the Walls, June 28, 2010).

A Catechetical Renewal Underway

We have witnessed the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *The General Directory for Catechesis*. Both of these catechetical tools focus our attention on the need for ongoing catechesis at every stage in our lives and both confront the difficulties the Holy Father spoke about in his exhortation on passing on the faith. In our own country, we have our own *National Directory for Catechesis* and the newly published *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. Both of these are tools available to us in providing renewed emphasis on the content of the teaching of the Church.

Recently I had the joy of presenting, together with Mike Aquilina, a long time friend and editor of the Catholic paper in my former diocese, a new book on the Mass. It is one of many resources available to us as we try to better understand our faith and pass it on to others.

Many pastors have noted that the New Evangelization is unfolding on two levels simultaneously, the introduction into the faith of their young children, and the instruction of their parents. For many teachers and those catechized, this is a particularly enriching moment because this time around, the young adults approach the faith with a great deal more openness out of their own felt need to know more.

Social Justice Issues

Another area that points to a renewed appreciation of our Catholic faith and interest in it is the value being placed on questions of social justice. We recognize that more than a century of articulated Catholic social teaching has shaped and continues to influence much of the development of social justice in large parts of the world and certainly in our own nation.

Catholic social justice did not develop in a vacuum. In the decades prior to the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the stage was set on which the struggle for social justice and human rights would take place. With the promulgation of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, the Church sought to confront the terrible exploitation and poverty of European and American workers at the end of the nineteenth century.

While it would be inaccurate to say that Jesus promoted any particular political, social or economic program, he did establish basic principles that should characterize any just, humane, economic or political system. Only faith can provide the conviction that our works of justice endure as part of the plan of God to bring about the kingdom of God.

Today when we look to issues of grave concern in our country in the political, social and economic orders, we can take great encouragement from the desire of so many young people today to be involved in service ministry. For them, the Church's teaching on social justice is both a revelation and an invitation to a fuller life in the Church.

New Communities / Ecclesial Movements

Another sign of the New Evangelization underway in our land are the Ecclesial Movements and New Communities. Many of you are familiar with longstanding organizations in the Church in our country. The Knights of Columbus is one of the most visible, the largest and extremely credible organizations that continues to invite the next generation into its ranks and, therefore, into the service of Brother Knights, their families and the Church.

There are also new religious communities such as the Missionaries of Charity and the Sisters Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará. New Ecclesial Movements such as Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei and the Neocatechumenal Way all point to the work of the Holy Spirit engaging the Church today to those who have drifted away.

Personal Witness

Each one of us is invited to be a voice of the Gospel, a witness to the effectiveness of Christ's Church and a testimony to the presence of the Risen Lord in our world.

In answer to the question “Why the New Evangelization Now?” I think we can say with assurance that there is an awakening of the Spirit in the hearts of many people, young and not so young, that the pretensions of the secular order are not able to satisfy the longings of the human heart. We can profess with pride and conviction the Gospel message continues to be the answer to our needs and longings today.

At the heart of our conviction is our faith that we proclaim at every Mass: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again!