

What Are Characteristics Of The New Evangelization?

By Dave Nodar

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In Pope John Paul II's encyclicals, speeches and other writings he uses the term new evangelization. Catholics as well as other Christians have been intrigued and interested in his frequent use of this term. What is he referring to and what are characteristics of this new evangelization'?

According to the pope, "The expression New Evangelization was popularized in the encyclical of Pope Paul VI Evangelization in the Modern World, as a response to the new challenges-that the contemporary world creates for the mission of the Church."¹ Pope John Paul II sees the need for a "great relaunching" of evangelization in the present life of the Church in a variety of ways.² In Mission of The Redeemer (Redemptoris Missio), John Paul II presents a new synthesis of the Church's teaching about evangelization in modern times.

The pope's call to a new evangelization is a prophetic and revolutionary calling to the Roman Catholic Church. As we approach the third millennium, Pope John Paul II is re-directing and re-focusing the Church's priorities. John Paul II proclaims "the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission ad gentes. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples."³ The Catholic Church committing all of it energies to a new evangelization and mission to the nations is a radical change in emphasis. The reality is that the vast majority of Catholics (clergy and laity) are not inclined to evangelization. The term, evangelization, itself for most Catholics sounds Protestant. Additionally the Catholic Church is understood by many her own members, as well as by those outside her life, to be primarily liturgical pastoral and hierarchical. One might argue: "Isn't evangelization and missionary activities something Protestants do?" Yet the Church teaches that she is missionary by her very nature, evangelization is a duty of every Christian.⁴ Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi states, "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize. . ." ⁵ While the notion of evangelization may seem foreign to Catholics, in light of the times we are living in, the changing world scene, the deterioration of western civilization, and the weak condition of the Church in many parts of the world, Pope John Paul II's urgent call to a new evangelization is imperative. The entire Church must come to embrace this calling and make it a normal part of Catholic life.

When Pope John Paul II uses the term "a new evangelization" he does not mean a new message. "Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme is always the one gospel given in Jesus Christ."⁶ In its writings about evangelization the Church means most fundamentally the proclamation of the basic Christian message: salvation through Jesus Christ.⁷ On this foundation of the basic message of eternal life in God, John Paul II extends the notion of evangelization. He notes that there are a diversity of activities in the Church's one mission. He states that evangelization should not be limited to individual unbelievers but also addressed to non-practicing Christians and to entire cultures (those that need re-evangelizing and those who do not yet believe in Christ).⁸ When the pope talks about evangelization that is new he states "evangelization can be new in its ardor, methods and expression."⁹ It must be adapted to the people of our day.

In Redemptoris Missio John Paul II sketches out some of the characteristics of the new evangelization. Although this presentation is by no means comprehensive I have attempted to

bishops of the Church for helping the faithful to share in the responsibility of evangelization and the mission *ad gentes*. In order for all of the Christian faithful to participate in this calling to the new evangelization the reality of the life changing, gospel message must be experienced as "good news" in each of their lives. The message of the Gospel must be heard, understood, embraced, lived and shared by all members of the Church! In order for this radical shift in emphasis to occur priority must be given to proclaiming regularly and clearly what the message of the new evangelization is.

Within this calling that is proper to all of the Christian faithful, Pope John Paul II makes distinctions of responsibility for bishops, priests, members of religious congregations, missionaries, and the laity.¹⁶ Bishops headed by the Successor of Peter are primarily responsible for work of evangelization. Priests are, by vocation responsible to stir up the missionary consciousness of the faithful. Members of religious congregations because of their consecration give testimony of the values of the Kingdom of God. Laity in their daily environments of family life and the market place have excellent opportunities to be witnesses of the Gospel. With declining number of priestly vocations in countries such as our own the importance of the laity's responsibility in evangelization cannot be underestimated. In his address to the Latin American Bishops at Port au-Prince, Haiti in March 1983, John Paul II while speaking of the new evangelization noted three aspects which are fundamental to it. The second aspect had to do with the laity. He noted, "not only the lack of priests but also and above all the self - understanding of the church in Latin America, in light of the Second Vatican Council and Puebla, speaks forcefully of the place of the laity in the church and in society". . . the bishops together with their churches [ought to be] engaged in forming and increasing the number of laity who are ready to collaborate effectively in the work of evangelization." The laity must be trained and released into the service of evangelization as missionaries of the new evangelization. The Holy Spirit as the principal agent of evangelization and mission is calling all of God's people to enter the harvest fields.

3. The New Evangelization is not just for the foreign missions

In *Redemptoris Missio*, the pope says that in today's world from the viewpoint of evangelization we can distinguish three situations that need to be addressed differently. The first is the situation of the mission *ad gentes* in the proper sense of the term. Bringing the gospel to peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known. "(T)o preach the Gospel and to establish new Churches among peoples or communities where they do not yet exist, . . . this is the first task of the Church." ¹⁷

Second, there are healthy mature Christian communities that are fervent in their faith, have a sense of the universal mission, and in which the Church carries out her activities and pastoral care. Here he seems to describe a situation that requires pastoral care and not evangelization. Third, there is what the pope calls an intermediate situation. Within countries there are entire groups of the baptized who have lost a living sense of the faith, or no longer consider themselves members of the Church. "In this case what is needed is a "new evangelization" or a "re-evangelization."¹⁸ In this third situation people need to be socialized into situations of vibrant faith.¹⁹ Some need their faith to be renewed and enlivened. Others have had little or no training in the Christian faith and essentially need to be evangelized with the basic gospel and receive formation in the faith (catechesis).

In *Redemptoris Missio*, this re-evangelization seems to be primarily what Pope John Paul II refers to when he talks of the new evangelization.

This re-evangelization is no small undertaking for the Catholic Church in the United States and in other countries such as those in central and eastern Europe as well as in Latin America. In our country it is painfully clear that many Catholics (and other Christians) have not been effectively incorporated into life in Christ. Baptized as infants many have never made a personal commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel. As adolescents and adults many drift away from the Church. Evangelization must be directed to the Church itself. 20

faithful is called to holiness and to mission."28 He also notes,"the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way."29 The missionary is called to be a "person of the Beatitudes (poverty, meekness, acceptance of suffering and persecution, the desire for justice and peace, charity). He closes his call to a genuine Christian spirituality by telling us. "the characteristic of every authentic missionary life is the inner joy that comes from faith. . . the one who proclaims the"Good News" must be a person who has found true hope in Christ. " 30

"An essential characteristic "of this missionary spirituality,the pope tells us, "is intimate communion with Christ."

Pope John Paul II aims the call and the challenge of a new evangelization at each of us. He is practicing what he preaches. Missionary activity, he tells us, "renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive pope's missionary activity is renewing and revitalizing faith among the faithful! John Paul II is preaching the Gospel to the Church and to the nations. The calling he proclaims is the calling of Christ to his disciples,"come follow me." The pope is proclaiming the fundamental truths of our faith. He is inviting us to join him on the journey in Christ. For those who would participate in the new evangelization they are called to personal communion with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. For those who would be missionaries in the new evangelization they must first be disciples of Christ, in living relationship with the Lord and His Church.

Pope John Paul II is helping us to see how we as Catholics can enter into a new evangelization in a way that is consistent with the Church's teaching and tradition. He also offers to us spiritual perspective that enables us to respond in humility and hope to the difficult times that we live in.

In his call to a new evangelization John Paul II following the directives of Vatican II has helped to focus the Church on some of the crucial priorities necessary for the strengthening and renewal of the Church. Furthermore, I believe that he is proclaiming God's call to the Church in our day in such a manner as to both address the Church's past and present difficulties, and to prepare her for the third millennium. "How many internal tensions, which weaken and divide certain local Churches and institutions, would disappear before the firm conviction that the salvation of local communities is procured through cooperation in work for the spread of the Gospel to the farthest bounds of the earth!" 32 "Missionary activity, declares the pope, renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!"33

*the new evangelization is very much tied up with
"entering a new missionary age,
which will become a radiant day
bearing an abundant harvest,
if all Christians . . .
respond with generosity and holiness
to the calls and challenges of our time."*

In describing the main orientation of his pontificate Pope John Paul II declared in Mexico City, May 6, 1990, "The Lord and Master of history and of our destinies has wished my pontificate to be that of a pilgrim pope of evangelization walking down the roads of the world bringing to all peoples the message of salvation."4 Since the beginning of his pontificate the Pope has taken over eighty missionary trips! He is personally committed to the priority of evangelization and the mission to the nations. He is leading the people of God into the third millennium with the conviction that the 'nineties' are an extended season of advent leading us to the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation. He believes that this new evangelization is very much tied up with "entering a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest,

21. Redemptoris Missio, 52
22. Redemptoris Missio, 51
23. Redemptoris Missio, 51
24. Redemptoris Missio, 87
25. Ibid., 87
26. Redemptoris Missio, 88 Ad Gentes 24
27. Ibid., 89
28. Ibid., 90
29. Ibid., 91 I
30. Ibid., 91
31. Redemptoris Missio, 2
32. Redemptoris Missio, 2 Paul VI, Message for World Mission Day. 1972
33. Redemptoris Missio, 2
34. Text in Origins. vol. 20, May 24, 1990
35. Redemptoris Missio, 92

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