

The New Evangelization

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The term “New Evangelization” was coined by Pope John Paul II for the first time in his speech to the Latin American bishops in Port-au-Prince, Haiti on March 9, 1983. The term does not mean a new message or a new gospel. As John Paul states, “Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme is always the one gospel given in Jesus Christ.”¹ Rather its proclamation needs to be “new in its ardour, methods and expression.”² John Paul II summarized some of these characteristics in his major encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*.

As regards a new ardour, John Paul II declared, “I sense that 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 This “new evangelization” is distinguished from the Church’s traditional missionary work of converting persons or groups who do not yet believe in Christ and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel. Again and again during his pontificate John Paul II emphasized the need to re-evangelize peoples and cultures especially in the first world which have lost the faith. In *Christifideles Laici*, for example, he said “whole countries and nations where religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and capable of fostering a viable and working community of faith, are now put to a hard test and in some cases, are even

¹ Pope John Paul II, “The Task of the Latin American Bishop,” *Address to the Bishop’s Council of the Latin American Churches*, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, *Origins* 12 (March 24, 1983), p. 659.

² *Ibid.*, p. 661.

³ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, no. 3 hereafter, RM.

undergoing a radical transformation as a result of a constant spreading of indifference to religion, of secularism, and atheism...Without a doubt a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world.”⁴

The urgency of undertaking a new evangelization is particularly emphasized in *Redemptoris Missio* as follows:

1. The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion. As the second millennium after Christ's coming draws to an end, an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service. **It is the Spirit who impels us to proclaim the great works of God: ‘For if I preach the Gospel that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!’** (1 Cor 9: 16)

2. In the name of the whole Church, I sense an urgent duty to repeat this cry of St. Paul. There is a new awareness that missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations. . .

For missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others! It is in commitment to the Church's universal mission that the new evangelization of Christian peoples will find inspiration and support.

But what moves me even more strongly to proclaim the urgency of missionary evangelization is the fact that it is the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world, a world which has experienced marvelous achievements but which seems to have lost its sense of ultimate realities and of existence itself.

86. Christian hope sustains us in committing ourselves fully to the new evangelization. We must increase our apostolic zeal to pass on to others

⁴ Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, 1988, no. 34. The urgency is repeated by the Holy Father in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 2001, no. 40 see quote at the end of this document.

the light and joy of the faith, and to this high ideal the whole People of God must be educated.

We cannot be content when we consider the millions of our brothers and sisters, who like us have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, but who live in ignorance of the love of God. For each believer, as for the entire Church, the missionary task must remain foremost, for it concerns the eternal destiny of humanity and corresponds to God's mysterious and merciful plan.

Although the need for a new evangelization was particularly emphasized by John Paul II the roots go back to the documents of Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council. For example in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI writes;

14. 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, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.

18. . . . the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs.

According to Cardinal Avery Dulles⁵, a dramatic shift in emphasis by the Church regarding evangelization took place at Vatican II. Whereas Vatican I never used the terms "evangelize" or "evangelization", in contrast, Vatican II used the former 18 times

⁵ Cardinal Avery Dules, "John Paul II and the New Evangelization: What Does it Mean?" in *John Paul II and the New Evangelization*, eds. Ralph Martin and Peter Williamson, Servant Books: Cincinnati, Ohio, 2006, p. 2.

and the latter 31 times in an effort to stress how crucial it is to be engaged in “spreading everywhere the reign of Christ, Lord and overseer of the ages. . .”⁶

It is also within the documents of Vatican II that one of the key elements to effectively implement the New Evangelization can be found, i.e. **the apostolate of the laity**. For the first time in history the apostolic role of the laity has been resoundingly affirmed and promoted at the highest levels of the Church. Lay Catholics who are in direct contact with the un-churched have been called to bring the light of the gospel to their cultural milieu. The starting point of the apostolate is the universal call to holiness. Chapter five of *Lumen Gentium* was dedicated to highlighting the necessity for all the baptized to participate in the mission of the Church with holiness as its beginning.⁷ “All pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness... it is necessary to rediscover the full pastoral significance of ... the 'universal call to holiness'”⁸ Flowing from the baptismal munera, the laity fulfill their call in the world through intentional discipleship and clear proclamation of the Gospel.

For example, in the document *Apostolicam Actuositatem* we find the following;

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Costello Publishing Company, New York, 1975, no. 1.

⁷ “Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history.” Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the World #40.

⁸ John Paul II *Novo Millennio Ineunte*

2. The Church was founded for the purpose of spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father, to enable all people to share in His saving redemption, and that **through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate**, which the Church carries on in various ways through all her members. For the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate.

In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission. Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling in His name and power. But the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world.

They exercise the apostolate in fact by **their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification** of people and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of all people. Since the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ.

3. The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10) not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world.

6. The mission of the Church pertains to the salvation of humanity, which is to be achieved by belief in Christ and by His grace. The apostolate of the Church and of all its members is primarily designed to manifest Christ's message by words and deeds and to communicate His grace to the world. This is done mainly through the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, entrusted in a special way to the clergy, wherein the laity also have their very important roles to fulfill if they are to be "fellow workers for the truth" (3 John 8). It is especially on this level that the

apostolate of the laity and the pastoral ministry are mutually complementary.

There are innumerable opportunities open to the laity for the exercise of their apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very testimony of their Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have the power to draw men and women to belief and to God; for the Lord says, "Even so let your light shine before men in order that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

However, an apostolate of this kind does not consist only in the witness of one's way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening, and encouraging them to a more fervent life. "For the charity of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5:14). The words of the Apostle should echo in all hearts, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16)

Thus the laity as baptized and confirmed must understand their role and identity as apostles, anointed by Christ for mission to the world. This call by Vatican II, that the laity assume an active and indispensable role in the new evangelization, has been emphasized by John Paul II especially in his document *Ecclesia in America*. In Chapter VI entitled "The Mission of the Church in America Today: The New Evangelization", the Holy Father sets out the importance of the laity receiving formation so that they can bring the faith to the culture. (see # 69-71) One element of formation would be a good missionary catechesis as set out in the 1997 *General Directory*. Paragraph 30 states, "Formation for the apostolate and for mission is one of the fundamental tasks of catechesis." Paragraph 86 further elaborates, "Catechesis seeks to equip the disciple of Jesus to be present as Christians in society through their professional, cultural and

social lives. It also prepares them to lend their cooperation to the different ecclesial services, according to their proper vocation.”

Another important aspect of formation is to assist the laity in encountering Christ so that their faith becomes personal. In this way the laity become natural evangelizers who want to share their faith because they have first been evangelized. As John Paul II states in *Ecclesia in America*:

68. An encounter with the Lord brings about a profound transformation in all who do not close themselves off from him. The first impulse coming from this transformation is to communicate to others the richness discovered in the experience of the encounter. This does not mean simply teaching what we have come to know but also, like the Samaritan woman, enabling others **to encounter Jesus personally**: “Come and See” (Jn 4:29). The result will be the same as that which took place in the heart of the Samaritans, who said to the woman: “It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (Jn 4:42). **The Church, which draws her life from the permanent and mysterious presence of her Risen Lord, has as the core of her mission a duty “to lead all people to encounter Christ.”**

This is in fact the first goal set forth by the US Bishops in their document on the new evangelization entitled *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, i.e., “To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others.” (#89)

Finally the role of gifts, talents and charisms in the formation of the laity toward the new evangelization should be emphasized. Vatican II highlighted the importance of discerning and using these gifts in the apostolate of the laity.

For the advance of age brings with it a more open mind, enabling each person to detect more readily the talents with which God has enriched his soul and to exercise more effectively those charisms which the Holy Spirit has bestowed on him for the good of his brethren. (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, # 30)

For the exercise of this apostolate, the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the People of God through ministry and the sacraments gives the faithful **special gifts also (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7)**, “allotting them to everyone according as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11) in order that individuals, administering grace to others just as they have received it, may also be “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pt, 4:10), to building up the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16). From the acceptance of these charisms, including those which are more elementary, there arise from each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of all people and the building up of the Church, in the freedom of the Holy Spirit who “breathes where he wills” (Jn. 3:8). This should be done by the laity in communion with their brothers in Christ, especially with their pastors who must make a judgment about the true nature and proper use of these gifts, not to extinguish the Spirit but to test all things and hold forth what is good (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12, 19, 21) (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, # 3).

The charisms are essential in the proclamation of the Good News which is evidenced in the Acts of the Apostles and also the Letters of St. Paul, particularly to the Corinthians and Ephesians. John Paul II recognized the need for the people of God to rediscover the charismatic dimension of the Church. In his address in the year of the Holy Spirit leading to the Jubilee year 2000, he states:

Whenever the Spirit intervenes, he leaves people astonished. He brings about events of amazing newness; he radically changes persons and history. This was the unforgettable experience of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council during which, under the guidance of the same Spirit, the Church rediscovered the charismatic dimension as one of her constitutive elements: "It is not only through the sacraments and the ministrations of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the people, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor 12:11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank.... He makes them fit and ready to undertake various

tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church" (*Lumen gentium*, # 12).⁹

John Paul II repeats the importance of lay formation and discernment of the gifts of the Spirit in *Christifideles Laici*:

The Second Vatican Council speaks of the ministries and charisms as the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are given for the building up of the Body of Christ and for its mission of salvation in the world. Indeed, the church is directed and guided by the Holy Spirit, who lavishes diverse hierarchical and charismatic gifts on all the baptized, calling them to be, each in an individual way, active and co-responsible (*Christifideles Laici*, # 21).

Thus lay formation must include recognizing and calling forth the gifts and charisms that are already present through Baptism and Confirmation so that each person with confidence may be active in the new evangelization. Unfortunately, as is often the case, these supernatural gifts of grace intended for the building of the Body of Christ lay dormant in the person and community. It is the duty of the leaders of the Church to activate the charisms and indeed to facilitate their use. (Cf. Acts 1:5, 10:44-47, 11:16, Mark 1:8, John 1:33, Mat 3:11) The normal place for this to occur is in the parish. The parish is to be a school of evangelization in order to equip the people of God in their mission in the world - "our Christian communities must become schools of prayer" (NMI 33). In order for the new evangelization to become a reality, it is vital for the leadership of the parish to move beyond the current practice of relying on another

⁹ John Paul II *Meeting with the Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, 30 May 1998, #4. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980530_riflessioni_en.html

programme to fulfill this duty.¹⁰ The mission of evangelization must extend the boundaries of a “six-week” or “three month” programme which often leaves the participants searching for more but finding the well to be dry.

As the parishes are to be a school of evangelization, it is equally imperative that those who assume the role of formation of our priests, deacons, lay ecclesial ministers, and volunteers begin to “activate” these same charisms within these individuals.

The call for the Church to be evangelizing is vital. It is the essential mission of the Church universal and particular. No longer can we be idle in the marketplace. As John Paul II so aptly states in his document concerning the new millennium:

“Evangelization . . . is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium. Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of the ‘Christian society’ which, amid all the frailties which have marked human life, measured itself explicitly on gospel values is gone . . . Over the years, **I have often repeated the summons to the new evangelization. I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel”** (1 Cor 9: 16). The passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of “specialists” but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God. Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him.” (NMI # 40)

¹⁰ MNI # 29: “**It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new program". The program already exists:** it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a program which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This program for all times is our program for the Third Millennium.” (Bold added by author)