I have been asked to begin the discussions that are going to take place over the next days by some reflections on catechesis and theology in the service of the New Evangelization.

The starting point for us is the recognition that the mission of the Church is to help people encounter Jesus Christ. The context of the effort today is the New Evangelization of which catechesis and theology are constitutive dimensions.

The educational mission – the proclamation of the Good News – the prophetic function of the Church – in all of its forms has as its primary task the communication of the person and message of Christ. This unfolds through a wide range of efforts but the goal is always the same. In the environment where catechesis is the primary focus of the educational effort, as well as at the level of higher education where theology is the task, the goal is that the threads of the encounter with Christ and his life-giving message might be woven into the fabric of our human experience.

Clearly, there is a distinction between catechesis and theology but both have as their starting point the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and both, while relating to revelation differently, must have the same goal – the enriching of our faith. Catechesis can be described as the education of people into the faith of the Church through the teaching of Christian doctrine in an organic and systematic way to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. Theology, on the other hand, presumes the basic introduction into the mysteries of the faith and proceeds to bring the power of reason to bear on the faith in a disciplined and scientific manner. Thus, the ancient definition identifies theology as fides quaerens intellectum – faith seeking understanding.

All of us involved with teaching the faith today recognize that there is no clear demarcation between catechesis and theological studies. Many of the young people coming onto our college and university campuses and taking courses listed in the catalog as theology are minimally catechized and not really prepared to do theological investigation.

Just two weeks ago, I taught a class at Catholic University, as I try to do each year, in a course entitled “Foundations of Catholicism.” It is very clear that the grasp of even the fundamentals of the faith differs significantly. Some were home-schooled or attended Catholic
elementary and secondary schools. Others had almost no knowledge of Christian doctrine. Some came from other Catholic colleges or universities with simply a previously required course in world religions.

The introduction of college / university level students into the faith oftentimes can presume very little. Thus we can speak of catechesis and theology in the service of the New Evangelization.

What I would like to do in these observations is speak about the context of our faith proclamation today, and the importance of both catechesis and theology in the Church’s mission and ministry as these unfold in our time.

Thus, I will include some observations on the New Evangelization, and some of the theological foundations that underpin and support our efforts, both catechetically and theologically in our culture and society today.

How We Can Define the New Evangelization?

The New Evangelization is a term that has become very familiar in the Church today. Blessed John Paul II began, more than three decades ago, to speak of the need for a new period of evangelization. He described it as announcement of the Good News about Jesus that is “new in ardor, methods and expression” (Address to the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), March 9, 1983). Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that the discernment of “the new demands of evangelization” is a “prophetic” task of the Supreme Pontiff (Caritas in veritate, 12). He emphasized that “the entire activity of the Church is an expression of love” that seeks to evangelize the world (Deus caritas est, 19).

Likewise in continuity with his predecessors, Pope Francis calls us to the work of the New Evangelization. This was also a major initiative of his when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires. As in his ministry there, already we can see as a hallmark in this papacy the emphasis that the Church “go out” into the world, to not stay wrapped up within herself, but to go out to give to people the beauty of the Gospel, the amazement of the encounter with Jesus.

From October 7 through October 28, 2012, in response to the Pope’s invitation, over 250 bishops from around the world, together with nearly 100 men and women, representative of the Church, religious communities and expertise in various related areas, gathered for the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.

At the closing of the Synod, Pope Benedict reflected on some aspects of the New Evangelization:

One of which is that all pastoral ministry must be more animated by the fire of the Holy Spirit so as to inflame the hearts of the faithful;

Another element, he said, is that the New Evangelization is essentially linked to continuation of the “missio ad gentes,” that is, the “mission to the nations,” the initial proclamation of the message of salvation to those who do not already know Christ;
A third aspect pertains to those who have already been baptized, but their lives do not reflect it. “The Church is particularly concerned,” the Pope said, “that they should encounter Jesus Christ anew, rediscover the joy of faith and return to religious practice in the community of the faithful.”

The New Evangelization is not one specific action or activity, but rather a way of seeing the whole range of activities carried out by the Church to spread the Good News. It begins with a personal renewal of our own faith, which brings with it fresh confidence and, therefore, a willingness to share it with others, re-proposing Christ and his Church in a comprehensible and convincing way (Prop. 57).

Context of the New Evangelization

However, for our faith proclamation to bear fruit, we must be aware of the context in which this task unfolds, including the many obstacles we face. During his visit to the Archdiocese of Washington in April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, in an address to the Bishops of the United States at the Basilica of the National of the Immaculate Conception prior to his visit to the campus of The Catholic University of America, underlined three particular challenges the Gospel faces in our society – the secularism, materialism, and individualism which have so influenced our culture.

The secularism of today tends to bleach out recognition and appreciation of God and religious faith. This limited view of life has resulted in a dramatically changing societal background for the reception, appropriation and living of the faith.

The New Evangelization recognizes that, even in countries where the Gospel has already been preached, there is an “eclipse of the sense of God” (Evangelium vitae, 21). What brings a new urgency to our mission is the acknowledgment of just how widespread and profound is the new secularism.

Entire generations have become disassociated from the support systems that facilitated the transmission of the faith. It is as if a tsunami of secular influence has swept across the cultural landscape taking with it such societal markers as marriage, family, the concept of the common good, and objective right and wrong.

We are called to re-propose Christ as the answer to a world staggering under the weight of so many unanswered questions of the heart. We are expected to be missionaries in the circumstances of our day with all of its challenges, within the context of the lives of the people who receive the message.

The Gospel offers humanity a different way of seeing life and the world around us. We bring a fuller vision of life than that offered by an individualistic secular society that lives as if God did not exist.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we hear how the blessed way of life involves the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who mourn, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit. We are told to be salt of the earth and a light set on a lamp stand. Later, we hear that we should see in one another the very presence of Christ. Jesus challenges us to envision a world
where not only are the hungry fed, the thirsty given drink, the stranger welcomed, and the naked clothed, but also, most amazingly, sins are forgiven and eternal life is promised.

In his encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, our Holy Father Pope Francis highlights the importance of faith as a light that shines on our lives, minds, hearts and paths. As Pope Francis points out, “There is an urgent need, then, to see once again that faith is a light, for once the flame of faith dies out, all other lights begin to dim. The light of faith is unique, since it is capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence” (4).

**Role of Theologian**

The particular role of the theologian presupposes but goes beyond a catechetical presentation of the faith, “beyond” not by contradiction – authentic theology does not presume to generate new teachings – “beyond” in depth, in intensity and in precision. It is the privilege of theologians to delve more profoundly and systematically into the meaning of the faith, according to the ancient adage, *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”). As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, the faith of the Church is enriched through “the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts” and in particular “theological research [which] deepens knowledge of revealed truth” (No. 94).

The synod offered its support to what Pope Benedict referred to as the correct hermeneutic of theological development. Proper theological investigation must come out of a continuity and connectedness with the living apostolic tradition of the Church. As the synod’s Proposition 12 states, “The Synod Fathers recognize the teaching of Vatican II as a vital instrument for transmitting the faith in the context of the New Evangelization. At the same time, they consider that the documents of the Council should be properly read and interpreted. Therefore, they wish to manifest their adherence to the thought of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, who has indicated the hermeneutical principle of reform within continuity, so as to be able to discover in those texts the authentic spirit of the Council.”

Theology, then, is neither simply catechesis or a radically independent academic discipline. It is always tethered to the faith taught by the Church. Theology enjoys a legitimate autonomy, but one bounded by its very definition and the intrinsic standards of the discipline. There is a broad field for theological exploration and critique. *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop*, published by the USCCB in 1992, notes that this exploration includes the “underlying assumptions and explicit formulations of doctrine…to questions about their meaning or their doctrinal and pastoral implications, to comparison with other doctrines, to the study of their historical and ecclesial context, to translation into diverse cultural categories, and to correlation with knowledge from other branches of human and scientific inquiry.” These investigations, however, are not made in isolation from the received faith of the church, but are made presuming that faith, and in the light of that faith.

It is essential for the health and progress of theology, then, that it take place within the context of a clearly cohesive community of faith, that its creativity be channeled and maximized by boundaries delineated by the received revelation. Identifying these boundaries of the authentic faith constitutes the bishop’s contribution to the flourishing of the theological sciences. Theirs is the duty to see that the noble enterprise of theology is integrated into the overall mission of the church to transmit the Good News.
Theological Foundations

Because the New Evangelization seeks to increase people’s understanding of the faith, its theological foundations are very important. These foundation blocks are all the more significant today because of the need to bring back into equilibrium the balance between the proper understanding of the individual and the correct appreciation of the obligations of the collective society in civil terms and ecclesial communion in spiritual terms.

Ours is an age that has exalted the freedom of the individual to such a level that the legitimate requirements of the common good and the recognition of an objective created order and moral imperative are dramatically overshadowed. The resulting imbalance affects the faithful insofar as they are continually being called by our secular culture to diminish, if not reject, the sense of allegiance to the obligations of Christ’s Gospel and his Church. This phenomenon is often seen when the authoritative teachers of the Church correct the erroneous work of a theologian.

Among the theological foundation blocks, I would include the Anthropological, the Christological, the Ecclesiological and the Soteriological foundations which we will briefly examine.

(1) Anthropological Foundation of the New Evangelization

Human beings, made male and female, are by their nature social beings, created in the image and likeness of the Triune God who is Love and Truth. Thus, we are made to live in relationship and community.

If secularization removes God from the equation, the very understanding of what it means to be human is altered. We see this in the beginning in Genesis, when man rejected God and sought to hide from him. Such removal of God from our lives not only separates us from him, it alienates us from one another. Proper relationships between human beings themselves are estranged, so that, instead of harmony and charity to others, there is discord and exploitation of others.

The fact that each person is created in the image and likeness of God forms the basis for declaring, for example, the universality of human rights and the harmony that should exist among peoples. We must speak with conviction to a doubting civil society about the truth and integrity of realities such as marriage, family, the natural moral order, and objective right and wrong.

At the Synod, we heard the welcome contribution of Dr. Rowan Williams, now-retired Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, who observed that, “to proclaim the Gospel is to proclaim that it is at last possible to be properly human: the Catholic and Christian faith is true humanism.” In short, we call for an authentic humanism, for man to be true to his nature, which is to love and be loved in truth.
(2) Christological Foundation of the New Evangelization

“Who do you say that I am?” asked Jesus. Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

The New Evangelization is the re-introduction, the re-proposing, of Christ, the center of our faith – who Christ is, his relationship to the Father, his divinity and humanity, the reality of his death and Resurrection, and his sending of the Holy Spirit. We are summoned to stand as one with Peter and, like him, profess that Jesus is Lord. The Christ we proclaim as Lord is not of our personal, sociological, or theological creation, but is revealed by God himself. As our Holy Father points out, “Faith’s new way of seeing things is centered on Christ” (20).

(3) The Ecclesiological Foundation of the New Evangelization

The New Evangelization must also clearly explain the necessity of the Church for salvation. The Church is not just one way among many to reach God, all of them equally valid. While the Lord does wish all to be saved, he specifically established the Church to continue his living and saving presence. The Church, a people gathered into the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ as a sacrament – a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all people (cf. Lumen Gentium, 1). Our salvation is intimately related to our participation in this great sacrament that is the Church, through which we hope both to manifest now the kingdom of God coming to be and realize our part in the kingdom in glory.

Our understanding of the nature and significance of the Church explains why the missionary activity of the Church is essential to her identity. The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes) and subsequent documents such as Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975) of Pope Paul VI and Redemptoris Missio (1990) of Blessed John Paul II all insist that essential to the mission of the Church is the work of bringing every individual into communion with the divine persons revealed in Jesus Christ.

The significance of this foundation block is found in the fact that it is probably the most challenged element of the creed. Even at the time of the Great Reformation, the existence, nature, role and function of the Church were not totally denied. Some of its structure was challenged and eventually rejected. But the concept of the Church as a mediating body perured as a generally recognized tenant of Christianity until relatively recently. Today, the term “Church” often means nothing more than a designated group of people sharing similar convictions, one of which is that they are individually saved without reference to the Church.

Ours is an age that sees many religious people convinced that their relationship with God is direct. They see no need for the mediatorship of the Church, sacraments and, most particularly, many fail to understand much less appreciate the need for the Eucharist. But it is only in and through the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, with her uninterrupted tradition stretching back to the time of the Apostles and continued by their successors, the bishops, that we hear and appropriate the words of everlasting life.
(4) Soteriological Foundations of the New Evangelization

Intrinsic to understanding God’s presence with us today is the recognition of what we mean by his kingdom. The kingdom of God is manifest in his Church, but will reach its final fullness only in glory at the end of time. Thus, even though it is unfashionable to do so, we must speak of the truth regarding sin and judgment after death, with the possibility of hell. But we also speak the truth of heaven through redemption in Christ, that God sent his Son into this world to offer us forgiveness of sin and new and everlasting life.

Theologians / Collaborators of the New Evangelization

Theologians who embrace this vibrant vision of their role as responsible collaborators in the teaching of the Church are well poised to contribute to the New Evangelization urged by the Holy Father and recent Synod of Bishops. There are numerous people, particularly in the Western world, who have already heard of Jesus. Our call as Christians is to stir up again and rekindle in the midst of their daily life and concrete situation a new awareness and familiarity with Jesus, to re-propose his Gospel in all its depth, its intensity and its transformative power.

Theologians strive to penetrate more deeply our understanding of the deposit of faith, to draw new conclusions of that faith, to render more precise the understanding of the Church’s teaching, to apply the truths of faith and morals to our time and our culture, and to find better approaches to proclaim the faith effectively to the people of today. Thus they play a crucial role in advancing the banner of the New Evangelization.

This dynamic vision of theology within “the whole of the Church’s life” draws its vitality from the grace of faith. In The Nature and Mission of Theology, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger observed that “there is not theology without faith, there can be no theology without conversion…the opportunity for creative theology increases the more that faith become real, personal experience; the more that conversion acquires interior certainty.” It is faith that allows the theologian to stand on the pillar of revealed truth, to sense the need for theological accountability, to perceive the magisterium as intrinsic to their work.

As Pope Francis in Lumen Fidei reminds us, “Because it draws its life from faith, theology cannot consider the magisterium of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him as something extrinsic, a limitation of its freedom, but rather as one of its internal, constitutive dimensions, for the magisterium ensures our contact with the primordial source and thus provides the certainty of attaining to the word of Christ in all its integrity” (36).

The Synod in the closing propositions, which summarize its deliberations, includes this observation. “The New Evangelization calls for particular attention to the inculturation of the faith that can transmit the Gospel in its capacity to value what is positive in every culture, at the same time, purifying it from elements that are contrary to the full realization of the person according to the design of God revealed in Christ” (Proposition 5: The New Evangelization and Inculturation). This reflection is certainly applicable to both bishops and theologians as they attempt to bring Christ’s Gospel to bear on the transformation of the temporal order.
While it is important that the New Evangelization be alert to the signs of the times and speak with a voice that reaches people today, it must do so without losing its rootedness in the great living faith tradition of the Church.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and the now famous “I Have a Dream” speech by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a time to recall not only that speech but his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in which he says something so relevant and significant for us today. There he reminded us that we have to be today like the early Christians were in their time. He pointed out that they saw themselves and their message, not so much as a thermometer to register the culture of the day, but more a thermostat to try to change the culture.

Surely the same can be said for the effort of catechists and theologians in their presentation of the perennial message of the faith. We are called not to try to conform faith to the culture of our day, but rather transform the culture of our day by the faith.

Qualities of the New Evangelizers

The New Evangelization requires an enthusiastic willingness to share the faith with a society greatly in need of it. Our challenge is to provide people with a new awareness and familiarity with the true Jesus – who is Love and Truth, and makes all things new – in practical language in the midst of their daily lives and concrete situations, so as to lead them toward Christ. Our duty is not just to announce, but to adapt our approach so as to attract and to urge an entire generation to find again the uncomplicated, genuine and tangible treasure of friendship with Jesus.

As catechists, theologians and bishops we do well to remember that the simple definition of an evangelist is the disciple who shares the faith. Pope Francis in *Lumen Fidei* reminds us, “Those who have opened their hearts to God’s love, heard his voice and received his light, cannot keep this gift to themselves” (37).

What, then, are some of the qualities required for the new evangelizer today? Many can be identified and have been mentioned already, but four stand out: (1) boldness or courage, (2) connectedness to the Church, (3) a sense of urgency, and (4) joy.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the word that describes the Apostles after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is “bold.” Peter boldly stands up and preaches the Good News of the Resurrection. Paul boldly announces the Word in frenetic movement around the world. Today, the New Evangelization must show a similar boldness born of confidence in Christ. We cannot be lukewarm, but must be on fire with the Spirit. Other examples abound: Saint Thomas More, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Blessed Miguel Pro, and the various martyrs and missionary saints.

The new evangelizers also need a connectedness with the one Church, her one Gospel and her pastoral presence. The authentication of our message of everlasting life depends on our communion with the Church and solidarity with her pastors.
Another needed quality is a sense of urgency, as we see in Mary’s Visitation to Elizabeth. The Gospel recounts how Mary set off in haste on a long and difficult journey. There is no time to be lost because the mission is so important.

Finally, when we look around and see the vast field waiting for us to sow seeds of new life, we must do so with joy. Our message should be one that inspires others joyfully to follow us along the path to the kingdom of God. Ours is a message to rejoice! Christ is risen, Christ is with us!

Conclusion

This is a new moment in the life of the Church, a new Pentecost. We all recognize that it is now our turn to share the great gift we have been given, the gift of our Catholic faith. It is precisely in this faith anchored to Peter that we take on the challenge to renew the face of the earth.