The Kerygma and the New Evangelization
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A year ago Pope Benedict XVI established a new Roman Dicastery, the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. In his Apostolic Letter in the form of Motu Proprio entitled *Ubicumque et Semper* he begins by stating:

It is the duty of the Church to proclaim always and everywhere the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He, the first and supreme evangelizer, commanded the Apostles on the day of his Ascension to the Father: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20).

Forgive me for my simple gratitude. But it is refreshing to hear from the Supreme Pontiff the call to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One does not always hear such things, at least not always in theological circles, or for that matter, in Catholic academia. So, in these days of contextual theologies and hearing “from below” it is good to hear an evangelical word “from above.” To proclaim Jesus Christ, that is the Church’s mission.

What then is the intellectual task before us? Let me begin with St. Paul.

In his Corinthian correspondence Paul gives an account of his apostolic ministry. Early on in his first letter he announces his intent:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of
power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom 
but on the power of God. (1 Cor. 2: 1-5—NRSV)

I have always been impressed with Paul’s success in Corinth, among the “low and
despised in the world” (1 Cor 2: 28), as contrasted with his apparent failure at the
Areopagus of Athens as recorded by Luke. There “some of them joined him and became
believers” (Acts 17: 18), but not like in Corinth. After all, a church was founded in
Corinth (1 Cor 1: 2). And the message was different. Paul’s (or Luke’s) sophisticated
speech about the unknown God, who “is not far from each one of us … in [whom]…we
live and move and have our being” (Acts 17: 27-28), is quite different from the
staurocentric kerygma of 1 Corinthians, viz., the preaching of the cross. Granted the
former won over Dionysius the Areopagite—someone who would have a continuing
legacy among the Church Fathers and Medieval Doctors (not the least of which included
his name sake, pseudo-Dionysius, especially in regard to theological knowing) since he
seemed to have endured Paul’s mention of the resurrection of Jesus—but not quite the
power of God, or the “depths of God” that “God has revealed to us through the Spirit,” as
Paul proclaims in the epistle (1 Cor 2: 10). In fact, if the new evangelization is preaching
Jesus Christ, there is much to learn from Paul about our intellectual task.

Although not eliciting a great deal of commentary Blessed Pope John Paul II in
his encyclical Fides et ratio takes note of this Pauline passage. After a close reading of
this text the pope makes the following statement:

Reason cannot eliminate the mystery of love which the
Cross represents, while the Cross can give to reason the
ultimate answer which it seeks. It is not the wisdom of
words, but the Word of Wisdom which Saint Paul offers as
the criterion of both truth and salvation. (no. 23)

He then follows up with what in my judgment is a rather remarkable challenge.
The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. Here we see not only the border between reason and faith, but also the space where the two may meet. (no. 23)

Within the context of *Fides et ratio* the philosopher pope certainly does not intend to negate the legitimate and necessary role of reason and philosophy; quite the contrary especially in regard to recovering their sapiential dimension. We are also familiar with his successor’s admonitions along similar lines: it is imperative that reason be preserved and its consonance with faith be recognized. But it does signal how the intervention of the gospel kerygma need not await a post-philosophical moment for what is properly theological. The two are intertwined from the outset. Without the philosophical mediation of metaphysics—a task that contemporary philosophy must measure up to—theology’s account of revealed truth is inadequate to its own task of providing a “coherent account of …[its] …universal and transcendent value” (no. 83). On the other hand, the kerygma indeed opens space for proper philosophical reflection. Again, John Paul II:

> The wisdom of the Cross, therefore, breaks free of all cultural limitations which seek to contain it and insists upon an openness to the universality of the truth which it bears. What a challenge this is to our reason, and how great the gain for reason if it yields to this wisdom! Of itself, philosophy is able to recognize the human being’s ceaselessly self-transcendent orientation towards the truth; and, with the assistance of faith, it is capable of accepting the “foolishness” of the Cross as the authentic critique of those who delude themselves that they possess the truth, when in fact they run it aground on the shoals of a system of their own devising. (no. 23)
It is to the elaboration of this task that I would like to turn in reference to the new evangelization and how the intra-theological dispute that Paul faced is still relevant for us as well.

Note that I describe this as an intra-theological dispute, although the relationship between philosophical and theological commitments can be quite porous both for Paul and for ourselves. But let’s take a closer look at Paul’s dispute with the Corinthians for some guidance. Following the work of J. Louis Martyn we may identify how the opponents to his apostolate at Corinth helped Paul to craft his “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages.” Martyn decries Paul’s opponents as Enthusiasts along with the Pseudo-Apostles who aided and abetted them. For the Enthusiasts their epistemology, their intellectual task so to speak, was to announce the full arrival of the kingdom in their knowing. In their language it was kata pneuma (according to the spirit) and not kata sarka (according to the flesh). As with enthusiasts throughout the ages it was a pneumatological claim, a particular temptation for many a Christian and their transcendentalist, romantic, and idealist descendants. There is truth here. The gift of the Spirit is the Church’s and the Christian’s inheritance. In fact, as we shall see, Paul uses the language of the Enthusiasts to counter their claim. But in order to situate what Paul is saying, and how it might benefit us, let us be mindful of what Paul does in fact claim for the Christian, and how this is distinguished from simply natural or, better yet, psychical knowledge, that is, knowledge without the Spirit of God.

The contrast that Paul draws between the spiritual person (pneumatikos anthropos) and the natural person (psychikos anthropos) at the beginning of the third

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chapter of the epistle (1 Cor 3: 1-4) is greater than that between the spiritual person and those who are fleshly (sarkikoi). The indictment of Corinthian believers as fleshly does not mean that they are without the Spirit of God, but that they are minding the ways of the flesh rather than those of the Spirit. And as we know from the Pauline corpus as well as from this epistle, this has more to do with love than knowledge: “for knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8: 1). Nevertheless, this does not negate the contrast Paul draws between the natural person and the spiritual person. The judgment on the former is quite stark: “Those who are unspiritual [natural or psychical] do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). Sounds as if Paul is an enthusiast! Not really, for there are three important qualifications that we must consider.

First, epistemology at the “turn of the ages” has everything to do with knowing kata stauron, according to the cross. Second, knowing between the ages is more a matter of hope, for not only do we see in a mirror darkly (1 Cor 13: 12), but unlike the enthusiasts we still await the resurrection of the body when the natural (psychikon) body becomes a spiritual (pneumatikon) body (1 Cor 15: 44). This eschatological proviso—which has a lot to do with epistemology for humans as embodied as contrasted, for example, with angels—is constitutive of Paul’s staurocentric kerygma and commands our third qualification, already mentioned, of abiding in love.

Paul’s engagement with the Enthusiasts of Corinth leaves us with an epistemological legacy that directs our intellectual formation both within the Church and outside it. It is inherently evangelical, but one where the content of the kerygma and its mode of proclamation make all the difference. Two aspects of Paul’s contestation with
his opponents must be considered. First, without the Spirit of God the natural person cannot know the things of God. Therefore, the proclamation is enacted not in eloquent words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power. Second, such demonstration derives power not from an inherent quality of anthropological spiritual self-possession, but from the kerygma of Jesus Christ crucified. It is a gift and a public display of knowing, so much so, that the mind of the present evil age (Gal 1: 4) indictsthe Holy One for his weakness and foolishness. For Paul, however, this is the apocalyptic showdown, wherein at the turn of the ages “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1: 25).

This also becomes the substance of Paul’s counter against the Enthusiasts both in terms of the kerygma and the apostolate it engenders, the former clothed in the proclamation of the cross as we have seen, and the latter profoundly witnessed to in 2 Corinthians: “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor 4: 10). If one does not understand this, one understands nothing about the truth of the Gospel! How might we appropriate this for our present intellectual task?

First, there are clear concerns in the Motu Proprio. The Apostolic Letter references the observations of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II respectively about the “frequent situations of dechristianization in our day” and about the “indifference to religion and the practice of religion devoid of true meaning in the face of life’s very serious problems.” Pope Benedict does not prescribe a single formula for the “new evangelization” but states that the “variety of situations demands careful discernment” and that “the entire Church” must allow herself “to be regenerated by the power of the
Holy Spirit … [in order] to present herself to the contemporary world with a missionary
impulse.” It is important to underscore the Pope’s call for discernment, something Paul
noted about the natural person who cannot discern the things of the Spirit while the
spiritual person can discern all things. And remember, Paul then goes on to affirm its
ecclesial implication: “But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 1:16).

The new evangelization, it seems, is required because of the new situation; what
many have labeled the post-Christian or post-Christendom culture of the
modern/postmodern West. It is a culture that once heard and received Christ, and was so
transformed by the Gospel that a new culture came into being, one admittedly in need of
continual conversion. To proclaim the Gospel to those who have never heard, and to
those who have heard and forgotten or rejected the kerygma are different matters; hence
the need for the establishment of the new dicastery, something clearly dear to the heart of
the Holy Father and his passion for the future of Europe. Let us consider how we might
translate this into Pauline terms in conversation with the papal magisterium of Blessed
John Paul II as he anticipated the third Christian millennium.

John Paul II in his encyclical Redemptoris Missio referred to this new situation as
an intermediate one, between, on the one hand, “socio-cultural contexts in which Christ
and his Gospel are not known” and, on the other, those with “Christian communities with
adequate and solid ecclesial structures …[that] ... are fervent in their faith and in
Christian living.” Therefore, he calls for a “new evangelization” or a “reevangelization”
in those “countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger
Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith,
or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far
removed from Christ and his Gospel” (no. 33). What was at stake for John Paul II is a living sense of the faith and of Christian living, and what he anticipated for the third Christian millennium was “that new springtime of Christian life” wherein the Holy “Spirit is the principal agent of the new evangelization” (Tertio Millennio Adveniente, nos. 18, 45). If there was a sense of a specific vocation that characterized his papacy he stated it in no uncertain terms.

Since the publication of the very first document of my Pontificate, I have spoken explicitly of the Great Jubilee, suggesting that the time leading up to it be lived as "a new Advent". This theme has since reappeared many times, and was dwelt upon at length in the Encyclical Dominum et Vivificantem. In fact, preparing for the Year 2000 has become as it were a hermeneutical key of my Pontificate. (TMA, no. 23)

Enough has been quoted to suggest a convergence between John Paul II and the Apostle to the Gentiles. Two issues are especially significant. The first has to do with the relationship between faith and reason, essayed magnificently in Fides et ratio.

Suffice it to say that John Paul II was aware that engagement with the West required an emulation of St. Paul: “The more the West is becoming estranged from its Christian roots, the more it is becoming missionary territory, taking the form of many different "areopagi" (TMA, no. 57). That involves a more nuanced conversation about the relationship between faith and reason, one in which Paul’s declaration about the natural person not understanding the things of the Spirit of God must be nuanced by the Areopagus speech that presumes an openness of reason to faith. Recent discussions on this matter as well as on the relationship between nature and grace are welcome contributions to this agenda.
It is the second issue that concerns me, one that is more properly theological, namely thinking the faith in face of the temptation of enthusiasm. This is a temptation that must be acknowledged since the new evangelization is not “a matter of inventing a ‘new program’” since [t]he program already exists: it is the plan already found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition.” The import of this statement has everything to do with the kerygma as the content of the new evangelization because “we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!” (Novo Millennio Ineunte, no. 29). Did not Paul say: “But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2: 16).

Let me be clear. I am not dividing truth into two separable departments, one based on reason and one on faith. In fact, I agree with Prudence Allen that the “genuine complementarity in mutual, but differentiated, explorations of truth” represented by philosophy and theology are best situated within the context of Christian personalism wherein these human activities, viz., the philosophical and theological, “must be understood in relation to the person, not the person in relation to the activity.” The complementarity, as she puts it, cannot be “fractional,” simply “parts of the human person.” Consistent then with the intent of John Paul II we agree that the search for truth and its contemplation are consistent with the entrustment of the person to truth, even as the “unity of truth, natural and revealed, is embodied in a living and personal way in Christ, as the Apostle reminds us: ‘Truth is in Jesus’ (cf. Eph 4:21, Col 1: 15-20)” (Fides

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3 Ibid., 44.
Therefore, the Pope’s sights are set rather high, and are a vocational challenge to both philosophers and theologians. I quote:

The fundamental harmony between the knowledge of faith and the knowledge of philosophy is once again confirmed. Faith asks that its object be understood with the help of reason; and at the summit of its searching reason acknowledges that it cannot do without what faith presents. (*Fides et ratio*, no. 42)

And,

This is why I make this strong and insistent appeal—not, I trust, untimely—that faith and philosophy recover the profound unity which allows them to stand in harmony with their nature without compromising their mutual autonomy. The *parrhesia* of faith must be matched by the boldness of reason. (*Fides et ratio*, no. 45)

The clear challenge for the theologian then is to get the kerygma right. It is indeed possible as we know from Paul that one can proclaim another Jesus than the one he proclaimed, receive a different spirit than the one received, and accept a different gospel than the one accepted (2 Cor 11: 4). To those “foolish Galatians” who had been “bewitched” Paul was eminently clear: “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified” (Gal 3:1). What exceeds the bounds of the natural person also exposes the fleshly one. To think the faith before the crucified and risen Christ is not only an act of humility undermining the hubris of false philosophies as we have heard from John Paul II. That is where the cross stands as a sentinel, so to speak, on the border between reason and faith. However, for it to be “also the space where the two may meet” (*Fides et ratio*, no. 23), requires that act of faith which characterizes the *viator* between the ages (2 Cor 5: 6-7). Here there is no place for enthusiasm or triumphalism, which are distinct from the *parrhesia* of faith and the apostolic obedience that it engenders. It is
simultaneously a staurocentric faith that in the face of human weakness and presumption
boasts only in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31), and because of that it is also a demonstration of the
Spirit and power (1 Cor 1: 2:4). What type of intellectual task is this and what is the
modality of intellectual formation that it requires? Something akin, I think to what Paul
commended to the Romans after his account of God’s plan of salvation:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the
mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual
worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be
transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you
may discern what is the will of God—what is good and
acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12: 1-2)

At the very least, we are aiming at a consecrated intellect at the service of conversion to
Jesus Christ.

Much more needs be said. But I will leave that to our conversation except to
conclude with this. John Paul II was full of surprises in *Fides et ratio*, not the least of
which was particular reference to St. Thomas Aquinas. As is well known, the pope did
not canonize the philosophy of the universal doctor, although amid his affirmation of a
plurality of philosophical approaches he strongly commended him. In the midst of this
commendation he quotes his predecessor Paul VI’s Apostolic Letter *Lumen Ecclesiae*
where the Servant of God reminds us about the Angelic Doctor’s brilliant “prophetic
intuition” by giving to the new encounter between faith and reason a “reconciliation
between the secularity of the world and the radicality of the Gospel”…able at the same
time to avoid “the unnatural tendency to negate the world and its values”…while
“keeping faith with the supreme and inexorable demands of the supernatural order”
(*Fides et ratio*, no. 43; from *Lumen Ecclesiae*, no. 8 ). Who could ask for more?
Indeed more was delivered. Blessed John Paul II follows up this observation by directing our attention to St. Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* and that primacy of wisdom that is gift of the Holy Spirit, that comes from “on high” and by way of connaturaliy, presupposing faith and formulating right judgments on the basis of faith. It complements philosophical wisdom and theological wisdom,⁴ those two orders of reason and faith that we have considered. Along with the impartiality of his love for the truth, we can affirm with St. Thomas, this “apostle of truth” as Paul VI names him, that “whatever its source, truth is of the Holy Spirit” (*Fides et ratio*, no. 44; *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 109, 1 ad 1). May we on the foundation of the wisdom gained by reason and faith not neglect “at the turn of the ages” that wisdom which is a spiritual gift and bestows the mind of Christ. In our poverty of spirit the Holy Spirit groans within us (Rom 8: 15-16) beckoning our own epicletic utterance: “Come Holy Spirit, Come.”

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⁴ They are defined as follows: “philosophical wisdom, which is based upon the capacity of the intellect, for all its natural limitations, to explore reality, and theological wisdom, which is based upon revelation and which explores the contents of faith, entertaining the very mystery of God” *Fide et ratio*, no. 44.