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# Proselytism and Evangelization: Important Distinctions for Catholic Catechists

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Certain things in life should never be confused. I was reminded of this recently when I bit into what I expected to be a chocolate chip cookie and discovered, to my horror, that it was actually an oatmeal raisin cookie! In a similar way, catechists are sometimes perplexed by the distinction between proselytism and legitimate evangelization. They might look similar, but they are very different realities.

As teachers of the faith, it is extremely important that we get it right. Confusing the two can have eternal consequences. This article will explain the nature of proselytism, starting with the benign origins of the word and then explaining some of the factors that led to negative connotations being associated with it. Next it will explore the characteristics of legitimate evangelization, which is at the heart of the Gospel message.

## What Is Proselytism?

One of the best etymologies of the word was offered recently by Paul J.

Griffiths, Arthur J. Schmitt Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Illinois in Chicago:

We can begin with the now-archaic English noun “proselyte,” a calque (rather than a translation) of the Greek *prosêlutos* and the Latin *proselytus*. The Greek noun is derived from the verb “to come” with a prefix meaning “over” or “towards,” and so a literal etymological rendering of “proselyte” might be “one who comes over (from one location to another).” The term has a biblical use: there it always designates a Gentile convert to Judaism, or, more precisely, a Gentile who has begun to observe the Jewish law. In this case the “coming over” is from life as a Gentile to (or towards) life as a Jew. (Paul J. Griffiths and Jean B. Elshtain, “Proselytizing for Tolerance,” *First Things*, no. 127 [November 2002]: 30)

Thus, the proselyte leaves an old community, whether of belief or practice, and enters a new one. For example, one becomes a proselyte by leaving the values and policies advocated by one political party to

embrace the values and policies advocated by another. Similarly, according to Griffiths, one becomes one of Christ's proselytes when he leaves the pagan community and enters that of the baptized, and so on.

A proselytizer then, is one who acts so as to create proselytes. Usually such a one is already a member of the community for which he or she is advocating. Proselytizers want to turn aliens into kin, and they are often motivated by the belief that it would be good for those who are still alien to become part of the fold. For example, nonsmokers may believe that smokers would enjoy a myriad of benefits from "kicking the habit." But, Griffiths points out, the motivation is not always benevolent. It can also be motivated by fear or even hatred. One can want the alien to become kin for the protection of the home community. This is known as "protective proselytism."

Particular proselytisms can be analyzed according to scope depending on the methods they employ. At one end of the spectrum are those who advocate making proselytes by coercion and force, such as when the U.S. Supreme Court mandated the integration of public schools in the United States with its landmark decision in the case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483 [1954]. The case was argued December 9, 1952; reargued December 8, 1953; and decided May 17, 1954. See the National Archives and Records Administration, [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)). On the other end of the spectrum are those who prefer to seek proselytes simply by presenting their way of life to the wider community without compulsion, such as the Amish communities in western Pennsylvania.

It is important to recognize that proselytizing always carries with it a moral judgment. "To engage in proselytizing implies a moral judgment of error (in assent) or impropriety (in action) on the part of the aliens being proselytized, and the consequent adoption of a course of action designed to bring the mistaken aliens into the fold of those who think rightly or behave properly. Particular proselytisms, then, imply (and are sometimes explicit about) the rightness or propriety of what they proselytize on behalf of, and, concomitantly, the wrongness or impropriety of what they proselytize against" ("Proselytizing for Tolerance," 32).

It is this element of moral judgment that gives the term its pejorative connotation in the present-day climate that so highly extols the virtue of "tolerance." We can find many historical reasons for this attitude, but it is enough to acknowledge that, in the present day, the terms "tolerance" and "proselytism" are understood to be diametrically opposed.

Another factor contributing to the pejorative sense of the word is frustration with the attitudes and methods employed by proselytizers. In a statement in 1995, the Joint Working Group between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches acknowledged that at one time the term had a positive meaning as a term for missionary activity, but in the context of the modern ecumenical movement, it takes on a negative connotation when Christians try to win adherents from other Christian communities. "These activities may be more obvious or more subtle. They may be for unworthy motives or by unjust means that violate the conscience of the human person; or

even if proceeding with good intentions, their approach ignores the Christian reality of other churches or their particular approaches to pastoral practice” (World Council of Churches, “The Challenge of Proselytism and the Calling to Common Witness: A Study Document,” Geneva: *Oikoumene* [September 25, 1995], sect. 4, par. 18, [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/joint-working-group-between-the-roman-catholic-church-and-the-wcc/challenge-of-proselytism.html](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/joint-working-group-between-the-roman-catholic-church-and-the-wcc/challenge-of-proselytism.html)).

Aberrant proselytism includes certain activities and methods that are directly intended to induce people to change their church affiliation. These include

- Making unjust or uncharitable references to other churches’ beliefs and practices and even ridiculing them
- Comparing two Christian communities by emphasizing the achievements and ideals of one, and the weaknesses and practical problems of the other
- Employing any kind of physical violence, moral compulsion and psychological pressure, e.g., the use of certain advertising techniques in mass media that might bring undue pressure on readers/viewers
- Using political, social and economic power as a means of winning new members for one’s own church
- Extending explicit or implicit offers of education, health care, or material inducements or using financial resources with the intent of making converts
- Manipulative attitudes and practices that exploit people’s needs, weaknesses or lack of education especially in situations of distress, and

fail to respect their freedom and human dignity (ibid., par. 19)

The problem with proselytism as it is understood in the twenty-first century is that, by doing the wrong thing for the right reason, the result is not increased unity but even deeper division in the Body of Christ. One can be very sincere, but very, very wrong. Thomas Aquinas was right when he said that one is never justified in using an evil means to a good end (see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, II, Question 51, Answer to Objection 1: “There is no good counsel either in deliberating for an evil end, or in discovering evil means for attaining a good end, even as in speculative matters, there is no good reasoning either in coming to a false conclusion, or in coming to a true conclusion from false premises through employing an unsuitable middle term. Hence both the aforesaid processes are contrary to euboulia [deliberating well], as the Philosopher declares [Ethic, vi, 9].”).

## What Is Evangelization?

Evangelization, on the other hand, is concerned with the proclamation of the faith and the invitation to enter into communion with Christ and his Church. In the years following the Second Vatican Council and in light of certain documents, particularly *On the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, *On the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostrae Aetate)*, *On Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae)*, *On the Church’s Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes Divinitus)*, *On the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, and *On Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, Pope Paul VI saw the need to give articulation to the Church’s

evangelizing activity in the modern world. This was the focus of the 1974 Synod of Bishops in Rome. The result was the landmark apostolic exhortation *Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)*. Paul VI cited three “burning” questions that the Synod kept in the fore:

- In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man’s conscience?

- To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century?

- What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect? (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi—The Gospel Must Be Proclaimed* [Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1975], no. 4. AAS 68 [1976], 5-76)

In short, he asks, “Does the Church or does she not find herself better equipped to proclaim the Gospel and to put it into people’s hearts with conviction, freedom of spirit and effectiveness?” (ibid.). This is important because “the presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved” (ibid., no. 5).

A central theme in the latter years of the pontificate of John Paul II was the “new evangelization,” which he promoted in a variety of settings, including his Sunday *Angelus* addresses, letters, speeches, and the encyclical *On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio)*. Scholars will be unpacking his teachings on the matter for some time,

but some central themes are readily apparent. The six characteristics summarized below were first outlined by David Nodar. (See Ralph Martin and Peter Williamson, eds., *John Paul II and the New Evangelization: How You Can Bring the Good News to Others* [Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1995]. See also, David Nodar, *Characteristics of the New Evangelization: A Call from Our Redeemer* [Ellicott City, MD: Christlife Publishing, 2000].)

### **1. The New Evangelization is Christocentric.**

To be Christian is to proclaim the person of Jesus Christ. We should not get distracted from this.

### **2. The New Evangelization is the responsibility of the entire People of God.**

In the past, missionary work and the work of evangelization were seen as the domain of a select few who were specially trained for the task. If Christ and his Gospel are to be proclaimed in every place and in every circumstance, then every member of the Church—clergy, professed religious, and lay—is called on to do so, each according to his or her abilities and circumstances. This is a remarkable shift in emphasis from earlier times.

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

While this is the first call of evangelization, a need for a “re-evangelization” also exists in many places that have been nominally

Catholic for centuries, particularly in Europe and the Americas. There are three groups that specifically need to be addressed.

First, there is the situation that the Church's missionary activity addresses: peoples, groups, and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or that lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups. This is mission *ad gentes* in the proper sense of the term.

Secondly, there are Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures. They are fervent in their faith and in Christian living. They bear witness to the Gospel in their surroundings and have a sense of commitment to the universal mission. In these communities the Church carries out her activity and pastoral care.

Thirdly, there is an intermediate situation, particularly in 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. In this case what is needed is a "new evangelization" or a "re-evangelization" (John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate [Redemptoris Missio]*, no. 33 [Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, December 7, 1990]. *AAS* 83, no. 4 [April 8, 1991], 249-340).

Indeed, it is this "re-evangelization" that seems to get the primary emphasis.

#### **4. Evangelization does not just transform individuals, but society as well.**

The New Evangelization is directed to individuals and to whole cultures, much as Paul VI envisioned in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

#### **5. The New Evangelization is not limited to the presentation of the basic Gospel message (*kerygma*) but is a comprehensive process of Christianization.**

The proclamation of the Gospel is the essential first step, but more importantly, it is the foundation of a lifelong process of catechetical instruction, moral doctrine, and the social teaching of the Church. Acceptance of Christ and his Gospel means incorporation into his Body, the Church, and participation in the life of grace through the sacraments and the Church community (ibid., no. 51).

#### **6. Finally, the New Evangelization calls for a missionary spirituality.**

Since all members of the Church are called to evangelize, all must enter deeply into union with Christ, the Great Evangelizer. "*Nemo dat quod non habet*," as the saying goes. One cannot give what one does not have. Christians are called to know Christ and to make him known. Thus, the fundamental requirement of the Christian is complete openness to the Holy Spirit. This willingness to be formed by God's grace is the condition for doing the

work of an evangelist. “It is not possible,” John Paul II states, “to bear witness to Christ without reflecting his image, which is made alive in us by grace and the power of the Spirit” (ibid., no. 87).

Evangelization, then, is an *enormous* reality encompassing all the Church is and all she was founded to be. In a nutshell, to evangelize is to know Christ, to make him known, and to transform individuals and society by the reality of that proclamation.

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