



# What Does Evangelization Look Like? Mind the Gap

## The Combination of the New Evangelization: 23-54-23

The car eases its way into the usual parking place, its bumper coming to rest inches from the red brick of the two-story school building. The four doors open leisurely, and the family pours out. Five days a week the blacktop is a school yard, with recess sandwiched between arriving and departing school buses. On Sunday morning the yard becomes a lot, a parking lot, filled, hopefully, with parishioners as they saunter across the asphalt to ascend the steps of the church.

Parish celebrations and events thrive on predictability. But the parish *mission* expressed within those moments does not. Once mission becomes a routine *function* it quickly becomes more chore than service. Proclamation of salvation in the Person of Christ is never routine.

How many no longer saunter across the lot to church? How many who once knew the familiarity of those steps on Sunday morning do not keep pace with faith anymore and cast a measured, yet polite, look on the faithfulness they once held close?

What has created the distance? Could it be that routine itself has so conditioned the practice as to constrain it? Could it be that predictable answers were repeated once too often to hearts with wrenching questions? Could it be that the well-intentioned, but nonetheless unimaginative and muted, explanations for the problems of daily life just did not meet the expectations that walked through the door on Sunday morning? Do

we blame the ones who are not there on Sunday for being “lazy,” or do we *miss* them?

In April 2008 the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) published *Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice Among U.S. Catholics*, a survey of adult Catholics in the United States that was commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). According to this survey, over 76 percent of adult Catholics say they are proud to be Catholic. But only 23 percent of adult Catholics attend Mass at least once a week. This means that 54 percent of adult Catholics are proud to be Catholic but do not practice that pride by weekly attendance at Mass. Fifty-four percent of Catholic adults in the United States experience a notable gap between their identification as Catholic and their commitment to regular practice at Sunday Mass.

The misperception is that Catholics who do not practice regularly are lazy, poor planners, convenience-oriented, or desirous of having their own way or “writing their own ticket.” Worse, they may be judged to be skeptics, doubters, or fair-weather/rule-shunning believers. To label others is to solidify the distance named “fear.” Fear does two things: it either condemns or it shies away. Love, however, calls and creates. How do we access the 54 percent who are proud to be Catholic? We have more opportunities than we are aware of. We see the 54 percent rather often. Some of them attend Mass once or twice a month; they come to Marriage preparation and celebrate at rehearsals and weddings;

they come to grieve at funerals; they attend Baptism classes to prepare to have their children baptized; they attend back-to-school nights.

Among those most strategically aligned to call out to the 54 percent are priests and deacons who preach regularly, as well as all those who serve as catechists on the parish level. We must respond to their absence by our presence. Obviously, the preacher or catechist does not single out such persons and embarrass them. Instead, the preacher and the catechist, mindful of the 54 percent, build into homily preparation and lesson planning a venue through which the Holy Spirit can act on them. The New Evangelization means that we, as priests, deacons, teachers, and catechists, must address the discrepancy. This article conveys the unique nature of the New Evangelization as one that requires a renewed appreciation for the preparation methods for the homily and for the lesson of the catechist.<sup>1</sup>

## A New Springtime

Pope Paul VI called for the New Evangelization on December 8, 1975, ten years to the day after the close of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II frequently referred to Paul VI's sum-

1 The distinction between the homily and the lesson of the catechist is crucial to maintain. The *Code of Canon Law* indicates, "Among the forms of preaching, the homily, which is part of the liturgy itself and is reserved to the priest or deacon, is preeminent; in the homily the mysteries of faith and the norms of Christian life are to be explained from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year" (*Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition: New English Translation [Codex Iuris Canonici] [CIC]* [Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998], c. 767 §1). The *Code* indicates that "by virtue of his function, a pastor is bound to take care of the catechetical formation of adults, youth, and children, to which purpose he is to use the help of the clerics attached to the parish, of members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life, taking into account the character of each institute, and of lay members of the Christian faithful, especially of catechists" (CIC, c. 776).

2 Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1975), no. 2.

mons.<sup>3</sup> The first clue to the nature of the New Evangelization is hidden within the phrase itself.

Pope Paul's call was translated into English as "new period of evangelization." In Spanish, it was "*tiempos nuevos de evangelización*." The Italian translation read "*nuovi tempi d'evangelizzazione*." Given that "*nova*" is the Latin word for "new," one would expect the original Latin to be "*nova evangelizationis tempora*." But the Latin reads, "*feliciora evangelizationis tempora*." The Latin text is the editio typica, or official text. While the word "new" is a suitable and pertinent translation, the quality of the newness ought always to be understood in the sense of "*feliciora*."

The Latin "*feliciora*" comes from "*felix*" or "happy," as in "*beatus*." "*Feliciora*" carries the sense of abundant, noble, propitious, flourishing, auspicious, fortunate, eudaimonistic, or bountiful. The Latin rendering provides an understanding for how the New Evangelization is "new." The new is not the opposite of what was in the past, or the opposite of "old." The new is not synonymous with "contemporary" or "current," and much less with simply another "attempt" at evangelization. The New Evangelization is faithful originality.

The quality of the newness is revealed in the Latin root of "*feliciora*." "*Fe*" has an agricultural meaning. The New Evangelization is new in the sense that evangelization is to be a noble, bountiful flourishing of abundance. The *feliciora* evangelization is a bountiful harvest of springtime.<sup>4</sup> This is why Pope John Paul II's reference to the New Evangelization as a new springtime in the Church should be understood as more

3 See Pope John Paul II, *On the Coming of the Third Millennium (Tertio Millennio Adveniente)* (TMA) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1994), no. 21; Pope John Paul II, *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)* (EA) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999), no. 6; see also his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*: "The expression *new evangelization* was popularized by *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as a response to the *new challenges that the contemporary world creates for the mission of the Church*" ([New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994], 114, emphasis in original).

4 See Pope John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio)* (RM) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1991), no. 4; see TMA, no. 18.

than a random variation of wording. The New Evangelization seeks abundance by proposing the message of Christ with faithful originality to those who have already heard the proclamation of the Gospel but who have fallen into routine, grown cold, or turned away from participation (see RM, no. 30; EA, no. 6).

## The Hunter in the Springtime

The new springtime arises from a consistent appeal to the fact that we preach and teach not a program, but a Person: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who took flesh for our salvation and who by the Holy Spirit communicates his grace to the human person through the Church so that we may be led to his Father. We stand before his plan with docility in the classical sense: receptivity to God's Word so that we may grow in the life of virtue.

Docility does not imply a porcelain, fragile existence. It is a robust claim of trust. Docility approaches mystery with active and eager resiliency. Docility is a feature of conscience that facilitates the response in faith to Revelation. Docility enhances and integrates the human person's reception of the grace of God. The preacher and catechist must develop a proficiency in being docile before the grace of God, and, at the same time, in "reading within" the reality and experience of the people. Secularism is the enemy of docility, so the homilist and catechist must be persistent in faithful originality (see EA, no. 6). The preacher must search continuously with patience for new means of conveying the Gospel. We must transform our experience into knowledge and then into an experience laden with the mystery of Christ. The average thirty-second commercial on television takes two full days simply to film. This is after the script is written, cast chosen, props set, and the lights turned on. This is before editing and splicing. If it takes Hollywood two days just to film a thirty-second message, how long does it take the homilist to form a seven-minute homily and the catechist to develop a lesson?

Perhaps the most concentrated expression of the identity of the preacher, and by extension of the catechist, was composed by the Dominican Humbert of Romans in his treatise *On the Formation of Preachers*, written in the thirteenth century. Humbert said, "Every preacher is a hunter." Humbert based himself on the prophet Jeremiah: "I will send many hunters to hunt them out from every mountain and hill and from the clefts of the rocks" (Jer 16:16). Humbert continued, "So acceptable to the Lord is this kind of hunting that [he] incite[s] the preacher in the words of the Book of Genesis: 'Take up your arms, your quiver and your bow, and go out and catch something, and then make me a dish of it, that I may eat and bless you in the sight of the Lord' (Gn 27:3, 7)."<sup>5</sup>

The preacher as a hunter must pay attention to preparation in an organic fashion. The ideas of the homilist and catechist must marinate in the Gospel and ferment in prayer, rather than take the form of a book report or homily-help. The homilist prepares the homily on several levels at once. Rather than the mechanistic and generic steps of preparation—"read the Scripture on Monday . . . read a commentary on Tuesday . . . let the preparation sit for a day . . . write some thoughts on Thursday . . . begin a final draft on Friday . . ."—the preacher as a hunter probes the Scripture passage in a patient and attentive manner. The catechist turns the lesson over again and again to adapt it to the daily life of those who will be before her. While the well-intentioned conventional preacher goes in one direction with a ceremonial theme, the homilist as a hunter escapes from alignment with ideology and the obvious. The hunter follows the subtle signs of the trail of truth. He disappears into the Scripture passage, camouflaged and still, careful and absorbed. He is heedful of signs, tracks, predictable patterns; he evaporates into the shadows

5 Humbert of Romans, *Treatise on the Formation of Preachers*, in *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. Simon Tugwell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 191.

of the passage and tracks down traces of the Spirit that others easily pass over. He hides not out of fear, but out of expectancy, and by instinct he picks up the scent of a passage. The hunter gets dirty and wet. Likewise, the homilist senses the fears and burdens of the human race. The catechist senses the pain and bewilderment that easily hide behind the pleasantries. The memory lends the preacher the agility to follow the trail of a Scripture passage and that of the daily traps of the congregation. The preacher weighs the words in each passage, with skills that have been developed in the school of the Fathers of the Church. Like the psalmist the preacher can call out, “Your right hand has upheld me; you stooped to make me great” (Ps 18:36).

In *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, Chip and Dan Heath outline a highly effective, yet simple system of communication for the advertising industry. The Heath framework also captures the central task of the preacher: relentless prioritization.<sup>6</sup> Like writers in the advertising industry, the homilist or catechist must “spark unexpected connections” and “tailor” many ideas to “find the core of the idea” without dumbing down the content into sound bites.<sup>7</sup> To “find the core,” the homilist or catechist must discard “a lot of great ideas”<sup>8</sup> and “filter incoming ideas” from the perspective of the core idea.<sup>9</sup> The Heaths quote the French aviator and author Antoine de Saint Exupéry, who said that “a designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.”<sup>10</sup>

In the twenty-first century the homilist or catechist cannot demand attention; he or she must attract it.<sup>11</sup> He or she must appeal to and lure the listener by hunting down the abstract

6 Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007), 16.

7 *Made to Stick*, 27.

8 *Made to Stick*, 28.

9 *Made to Stick*, 241.

10 *Made to Stick*, 28.

11 *Made to Stick*, 64.

and converting it to the tangible.<sup>12</sup> Humbert says, “In the primitive Church there were few preachers, but they were so good that they converted the whole world. Now there are preachers too many to count, but they achieve little.”<sup>13</sup> In a survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), only 18 percent of laity rated preaching by Catholic clergy as “excellent”—almost half the rate at which Protestant ministers rated their ministers as “excellent.”<sup>14</sup>

If the homilist or catechist is a hunter, that means the homily or lesson must be aimed.<sup>15</sup> It cannot be target practice. If the preacher, in the words of Humbert, “achieves little,” it is because instead of the thrill of hunting, the homilist or catechist is confined to the safety of the shooting range where he or she relentlessly fires ideas upon a silhouette. To aim, one must look, gaze, scan, track, learn the signs of the times, learn the categories of one’s congregation, stand by them in their pain, read the newspaper, and discern the categories at work within the culture. Aware of the categories of the culture, the catechist or homilist works subtly to change the categories away from self-centeredness, acquisition, and individualism to other-centeredness, gift, and the communion of persons.

## Childlikeness

One of the greatest senses a homilist or catechist can awaken in the listener is the spirit of childhood. In his work “Sermon of an Agnostic on the Feast of St. Thérèse,” Georges Bernanos writes what he surmises would be the words of an agnostic if he were allowed to preach to a congregation of Catholics. Bernanos has the agnostic mount the pulpit. Seeing how easily Christians are absorbed into the shifty ways of the marketplace, while still professing belief, the agnostic proclaims, “We’re wondering what you do with

12 *Made to Stick*, 104.

13 *Treatise on the Formation of Preachers*, 203.

14 NORC General Social Survey, 2000; Knowledge Network Survey, 2000.

15 *Treatise on the Formation of Preachers*, 206.

the grace of God. . . . Where the devil do you hide your joy?”<sup>16</sup> He continues, “Christian ladies and gentlemen, if ever you were to be filmed unawares, you would be staggered to see on the screen an entirely different person to the motionless double in your mirror.”<sup>17</sup> Bernanos’s fictional agnostic finally preaches, “The only way out is to become children yourselves, to rediscover the heart of childhood.”<sup>18</sup>

Bernanos does not mean a Christian should be a child in the sense of refusing to grow up, but rather in following the summons of Jesus: “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child . . .” (Mt 18:3-4). The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that the child is one who returns easily to the “mentality of his beginnings.”<sup>19</sup> The “ways of the child are long since sealed off to the adult”; the original dimensions of reality open up for the child.<sup>20</sup> The child does not give in to the pressures of technology, ideology, and materialism. The child has a primal trust expressed in an attitude of love; the child values reciprocity as the readiness necessary to participate in the Kingdom of God. The child shows us what virtue is. He or she does not live in fear of mistakes and does not tread on egg shells. Nothing invades the knowledge that the child is chosen and loved.

The Dominican Simon Tugwell points out that in order to live as children in the emphatic present, we must hand the past over to God: “children have no past.” The child actively senses the newness inherent in any situation and is therefore ready to take risks. “Whatever past achievements might bring us honor, whatever past disgraces might make us blush—all of these have been cru-

16 Georges Bernanos, “Sermon of an Agnostic on the Feast of St. Thérèse,” in *The Heroic Face of Innocence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 1999), 26.

17 “Sermon of an Agnostic on the Feast of St. Thérèse,” 25

18 “Sermon of an Agnostic on the Feast of St. Thérèse,” 31.

19 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 9.

20 *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 12.

cified with Christ; they exist no more except in the deep recesses of God’s eternity.”<sup>21</sup>

Perfectionism is the alternative to the risk of being childlike. The perfectionist fears risk and favors control and so becomes a pleaser, who associates value with what he or she manages to produce. Perfectionism is the root of procrastination—the fear of being judged as imperfect in any manner cripples the completion of a project. The pleaser opts for the safety of measurement and calculation, while the child chooses the security of risk.

The dedication of the homilist and catechist is a key ligament in the New Evangelization. The faithful originality of the hunter is imagined best in the spirit of childhood. The child is the ultimate “non-secular” person and, as such, is a sign. The renewal of the originality of a childlike inquisitiveness is the antidote to the routine and function that make us all too predictable. Faithful originality leaves a deep layer in the conscience to which the proclamation of the New Evangelization can more easily adhere, especially for those who experience a gap between their identity as Catholics and their commitment to practice. The commitment to address this gap is transformative because it responds to the summons of the Good Shepherd. Under his guidance, the gap becomes a furrow into which the new seed is cast and from which the new springtime emerges.

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21 Simon Tugwell, *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Tradition* (Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1980), 7.