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# What Is “New” About the New Evangelization?

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## Evangelization as an Ecclesial Act

Before we can speak about the New Evangelization, we need to recall that evangelization is something the entire Church is called to embrace according to how we each have been called to live our vocation as believers.

Evangelization charges us, as Christians, to preach and witness to our faith in whatever circumstance we find ourselves and through whatever vocation the Lord has given us. The pastoral leadership of the Church must guide us in how we carry out these evangelization efforts.

Our Holy Father and all the bishops united to him, constituting the Magisterium of the Church, guarantee that the Gospel of Christ is interpreted, handed on, and taught in its totality. The faithful rightfully expect to receive and encounter the same Gospel that Christ left to the apostles. This is very much an essential norm for evangelization. What the people of today hear and receive is the same Gospel that was preached during the apostolic times of the Church. Every

Catholic lives this Gospel accordingly and invites others to Christ.

Since Catholics live evangelization according to their personal state of life, evangelization begins with personal discernment. The initial discernment of a Christian involves a personal understanding of how the gifts of the Holy Spirit have nurtured the faith of that individual and how those gifts are to be lived in building up the Body of Christ, the Church. Pope John Paul II addressed this issue directly in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (see John Paul II, *On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World* [*Christifideles Laici*], [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html)).

While evangelization involves the personal discernment and contribution of each Catholic, evangelization is always an ecclesial act, an act of the Church. We profess clearly our belief in the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. This evangelical profession declares that within the faith

community people encounter the living Christ. Hence, our witness to evangelization is a witness to the Church. The Church is not an extraneous dimension of evangelization, but a goal. Christ intended believers to be united as a family of faith, a family that would experience together the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

This is a challenge today because we are confronted with movements that promote a personal relationship with Christ apart from the Church, a faith without the necessity of Church teaching, the sacraments, and worship. New forms of community are being created apart from the apostolic community, which then places emphasis on the individual, one's emotions, and social conditions, rather than on Jesus Christ and the means he left us for experiencing intimately his mercy, grace, and love.

Each member of the Church discerns in union with the Church how he or she is to live his or her vocation. Evangelization therefore presumes that each member of the Church has a clear sense of his or her Catholic identity, vocation, and the need to live out faith in an explicit manner.

## **Evangelization as Mission**

The mission of the Church is to bring the Gospel of Christ to people wherever people are found. The Second Vatican Council confirmed this mission in such documents as *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) and *Ad Gentes* (1965). Pope Paul VI, in the groundbreaking document on evangelization, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), confirms that “evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. . . . 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 [the Gospel]” (Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World [Evangelii Nuntiandi]* [EN], no. 14, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html)).

Throughout the history of the Church, from the upper room in Jerusalem to the shores of North Africa to the streets of Rome, the interpretation of the Catholic faith and how to live it have been questions of discernment. Thankfully Christ gave the Church the certain and sure gifts of *indefectibility* and *infallibility* that would guide the Magisterium to articulate the truths of our faith and define doctrine to express in words and concepts all that Jesus gave to the apostles.

When the Church finds herself persecuted, when believers are apathetic, when schism has divided the Church, when false doctrines have arisen, when power has been abused by members of the Church, the *deposit of faith* has remained intact. The gift of “authentic interpretation” given to the Magisterium has assured us that, in whatever condition the Church finds herself, the content of our faith remains unchanged. Evangelization always preserves this theological reality lest it be reduced to an act of personal opinion.

With the assurance of authentic interpretation, the Gospel is never silent on any matter of human affairs. This is evangelization—discerning how the Church can make effective the Gospel of Christ in whatever situation people finds themselves. Evangelization does not mean changing the Gospel so that it fits or corresponds to the human

condition. There is no expiration date on any aspect of the Gospel. Throughout our two-thousand-year history, we have understood that we will always encounter something new about the human condition and, therefore, something new in how the Church will respond.

Considering significant historical developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Church was discerning once again how to bring the Gospel of Christ to people in the new situations in which they found themselves. Without oversimplifying why the Second Vatican Council was convened, the Church recognized that the Gospel of Christ indeed has something to say about the changing conditions facing individuals, families, cultures, and the world.

The Magisterium of the Second Vatican Council articulated a present-day understanding of *mission* and how this mission has an impact on every aspect of the Church: from the sacred liturgy to the training of priests; from the education of the lay faithful to our relationships with non-Christians; from our deepest theological identity as the Body of Christ to how the Church relates to the modern world. The Second Vatican Council set the stage for how we would come to understand the New Evangelization.

### **The Developing Concept of the New Evangelization**

The Latin American bishops used the concept “new evangelization” in 1968 in their “Message to the People of Latin America” to address how the Gospel can reach both the elite and the poor in equal manner and with intense fervor (see Second General Conference

of Latin American Bishops, Message to the People of Latin America, September 6, 1968, *The Church in the Present Day, Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*, 22). The political and social conditions of Latin America resulted in a discernment that the Church must respond to these new situations with a new evangelization, methods that would bring the Gospel of Christ to all people, no matter their condition in life.

Blessed Pope John Paul II used the concept “New Evangelization” in a homily while visiting his native country Poland during the first year of his pontificate. He experienced firsthand the tensions between the Church of Poland and the Communist government while he was a priest, bishop, and cardinal. Therefore, his use of “New Evangelization” recognized both the realities the Church was finding herself in as well as how the Church could find an opportunity for evangelization in those tensions (see John Paul II, “The Cross of Nowa Hutu: A New Seed of Evangelization,” Homily, June 9, 1979, *L’Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, July 16, 1979).

The “New Evangelization” became a neologism during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. The early years of his papacy saw an evangelization that would take the Church into all spheres of human activity in keeping with the promise made in his inaugural homily after being elected to the papacy. “To his saving power open the boundaries of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of cultures, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows ‘what is in man.’ He alone knows it” (October 22, 1978, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/homilies/1978/documents/hf\\_jp-](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1978/documents/hf_jp-)

[ii\\_hom\\_19781022\\_inizio-pontificato\\_en.html](#)). The Universal Church would confront Communist governments, political ideologies, false or underdeveloped theologies, and the emergence of radical secularism. The Holy Father was doing something new, but in continuity and in the same manner the apostles carried out their ministry.

Considering the internal life of the Church, Pope John Paul II used the concept of the “New Evangelization” to describe the situation of Catholics no longer practicing their faith or leaving the Church for other denominations (see Pope John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate* [Redemptoris Missio], no. 33, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](#)).

Preparing the Universal Church for the Great Jubilee, Pope John Paul II convened special assemblies of bishops, asking each region of the world to study how the Church could be more effective in preaching the Gospel of Christ considering the unique opportunities and challenges in those regions. Following these assemblies, the Holy Father wrote post-synodal exhortations providing those local Churches a framework for evangelization.

In the exhortation *Ecclesia in America* (1999), Pope John Paul II wrote, “The program of a new evangelization . . . cannot be restricted to revitalizing the faith of regular believers, but must strive as well to proclaim Christ where he is not known” (John Paul II, *On the Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: The Way to Conversion, Communion, and Solidarity*

*in America* [Ecclesia in America] [EA], no. 74,

[www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_22011999\\_ecclesia-in-america\\_en.html](#)). Hence, the New Evangelization explains the nature of the Church’s mission: wherever people are, the Church must be present.

The “New Evangelization” was a developing concept in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. Today, it describes the Church’s deepest identity and the extent of her mission. There are two methods of the new evangelization: inculturation and catechesis.

### **Evangelization: Inculturation of the Gospel**

“[The Church] should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life. . . . We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live” (Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* [Gaudium et Spes] [GS], no. 4, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). Why? Because people cannot live without culture. The Incarnation of the Word confirms and consecrates the goodness of creation and human nature. Jesus Christ teaches us how to live our human nature and reveals how faith enlightens the potential of life: how to be saints on this side of heaven.

The mission of the Church is to evangelize both people and culture. To achieve this, the New Evangelization promotes an authentic humanism that

can only be found in Jesus Christ. The meaning of culture finds expression in the Gospel. When culture, therefore, becomes what God intends, people discover their potential, vocation, and purpose in life. “It is a feature of the human person that it can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture” (GS, no. 53). The Council teaches us that culture “flows from humanity’s rational and social nature,” hence man needs to be evangelized so that culture does not become poisoned destroying what God intends for man (GS, no. 59). Pope John Paul II emphasized that “human beings are both child and parent of the culture,” and thus responsible for what they receive from culture and how they shape it (John Paul II, *On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason [Fides et Ratio]* [FR], no. 71, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_15101998\\_fides-et-ratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html)).

The goal of the New Evangelization is to bridge faith and culture. One cannot fully express itself without the other. Faith that has no connection to culture can lead to superstition, an unrealized spirituality, an abstract idea. Culture that is not shaped by faith leads to chaos, disorder, and the subjugation of man to ideology. Faith can never be adapted or identified with any one particular culture, but rather enlightens the beauty, goodness, and truth of each culture. Culture gives expression to faith without ever exhausting the mystery that faith brings to man and culture.

Pope John Paul II stated that the “inherent missionary nature of the Church means testifying essentially to the fact that the task of inculturation, as an integral dissemination of the Gospel

and its consequent translation into thought and life, continues today and represents the heart, the means, and the goal of the new evangelization” (John Paul II, Address to the International Council for Catechesis, September 26, 1992, *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, October 7, 1992).

The Church has a rich history of how the Gospel of Christ has been inculturated into the very fabric of culture and society. Forces today want to keep the Church and faith out of the public square. The result of these ideologies has been devastating.

## **Evangelization as Life-Long Catechesis**

If Catholics are not able to understand, articulate, explain, and defend their faith, then evangelization cannot occur. For the Gospel to truly penetrate culture, believers need to live their faith in every aspect of their lives. To achieve this end, believers and their families must allow the Word of God to consume their very being and lifestyle in such a way that all their actions and decisions reflect a life of faith.

The second method of the New Evangelization is catechesis. “The new evangelization . . . means that faith cannot be taken for granted, but must be explicitly proposed in all its breadth and richness. This is the principal objective of catechesis, which, by its very nature, is an essential aspect of the new evangelization” (EA, no. 69). One must admit that if Catholics do not understand the nature of their faith, they cannot be explicit, earnest, and heartfelt in living faith in practical ways. Faith will be reduced to a memory of fact, an empty discipline of habits, and a worship that has no significant meaning.

The Church has been anxious about this situation. The promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), the Holy See's release of the second *General Directory of Catechesis* (1997), and the USCCB's efforts in promoting catechesis with its release of the *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005) and the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (2006) are real and practical responses to the New Evangelization and offer tools to equip Catholics to better understand their faith. The 2011 World Youth Day event in Madrid involving the distribution of *YouCat*, a catechism for young adults, is another example of how the Church understands the role of catechesis in evangelization.

From the responsibility of the individual to the vocation of parents, from pastors and bishops to parish and diocesan structures, the promotion of lifelong catechesis is an aspect of the New Evangelization. The more Catholics are intimately involved with their faith and know their faith and their relationship with Jesus Christ, the more believers are able to bring their witness and words into culture, the more culture itself becomes shaped. The passivity of Catholics in the United States, resulting from historical and sociological conditions, has left generations of Catholics with the notion that what we learn and believe in catechesis is meant for our own personal edification rather than for the purpose of mission. The disconnect between what the believer knows about this faith and how to live this faith threatens the credibility of the Church's convictions on moral issues related to human sexuality, medical ethics, and marriage.

## **The New Evangelization: Freedom of Faith**

"I opened the way for a reflection to begin on a subject I had pondered over for a long time: the need to offer a specific response to a moment of crisis in Christian life which is occurring in many countries" (Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, May 30, 2011,

[www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2011/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110530\\_nuova-evangelizzazione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110530_nuova-evangelizzazione_en.html)). The New Evangelization involves every pastoral situation people could encounter.

Recently, however, Pope Benedict XVI has asked the Church to consider the phenomena of Christian cultures losing their identity to the sweeping waves of secular humanism. The Christian life that the Holy Father refers to is being silenced with the creation of new laws that are destroying institutions of the natural law, that is, marriage, and forces that are attacking the role of the Church in society.

Creating a new pontifical council and calling for a Synod of Bishops in October 2012 are immediate responses to these situations. Catholics in Christian cultures such as those in Europe, North and South America, and the Middle East are finding themselves in new situations that are quickly eroding the importance of faith. "It is precisely these changes which have created unexpected conditions for believers and require special attention in proclaiming the Gospel, for giving an account of our faith in situations which are different from the past" (Address Promoting the New Evangelization).

The attitude being created by these situations often leaves people thinking that the Church is an enemy of culture when, in fact, she is its greatest proponent. Indeed, the Church speaks clearly when situations exist in which culture is being poisoned, people lose their rights, and political or economic forces oppress people. The New Evangelization is the Church's mission to bring the Gospel of Christ in response to these concerns so that all peoples, even the unbeliever, can benefit from the truth about the meaning of life and the purpose of culture.

A missionary Church known for proclaiming her message to all peoples must necessarily work for the freedom of the faith. She desires to transmit the gift of the truth that exists for one and all. At the same time, she assures peoples and their Governments that she

does not wish to destroy their identity and culture by doing so, but to give them, on the contrary, a response which, in their innermost depths, they are waiting for—a response with which the multiplicity of cultures is not lost but instead unity between men and women increases and thus also peace between peoples. (Pope Benedict XVI, Discourse to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2005, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html))

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