

# Called to be Witnesses in the New Evangelization — Lessons from the Saints

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How does a Catholic live as a disciple in the new evangelization? Does discipleship look markedly different? Such questions arise as Catholics find themselves at a new juncture in the life of the church where traditional modes of passing on the faith — particularly the Catholic milieu that enveloped generations — have largely disappeared. The gathering of bishops, experts, and advisors in Rome for the Synod for the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith addressed such questions with which the church must grapple as it strives to “re-propose the perennial truth of Christ’s Gospel”<sup>1</sup> in a world that is increasingly secular, materialistic, and individualistic.

## THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRIST REMAINS UNCHANGED

One fruit of the Synod is a list of 58 propositions that reflect the focus of the three weeks of consultation and discussion. In reading the list of the propositions, one is keenly aware of the all-encompassing vision of the new evangelization, beginning with core content: “The Holy Trinity is the Source of the New Evangelization” (4); to practicalities, “Witnessing in a Secular World” (8) and “Right to Proclaim and Hear the Gospel” (10); to incorporating the social teaching of the church, the “New Evangelization and the Option to the Poor” (31); to the aesthetic “The New Evangelization and the Way of Beauty” (20)<sup>2</sup>. This is no program or policy change; this is a re-visioning of what it means to prepare adults to contribute to the new evangelization. Discipleship in the new evangelization must be rooted in a deep, personal relationship with Jesus that overflows in a life of powerful witness.

The propositions themselves also serve as an important reminder of the distinction made by Blessed John Paul II when he first spoke of the new evangelization. He remarked that the new evangelization is new in its “ardor, method, and expression;”<sup>3</sup> the message of the good news of Christ remains

unchanged. The propositions look to the rich heritage of catechesis and evangelization to re-vision how the church will move forward in light of the new evangelization.

The intertwined nature of the propositions cannot be denied; however, two propositions, when isolated, draw attention to catechesis that is both evangelizing and inculturated; such catechesis is attentive to the challenges the gospel faces with respect to modern man and present day culture.

## CONVERSION

The first of these two is Proposition 9: “New Evangelization and Initial Proclamation” which calls for attentiveness to preaching the gospel in such a manner that seeks to bring about conversion. This lengthy proposition encompasses the kerygmatic nature of the initial encounter with the gospel, and calls for continuity with catechesis which will move individuals more deeply into the mysteries of faith.

The foundation of all initial proclamation, the kerygmatic dimension, the good news, makes prominent an explicit announcement of salvation. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (*1 Cor* 15:3-5).

The first proclamation is where the kerygma, the message of salvation of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, is proclaimed with great spiritual power to the point of bringing about repentance of sin, conversion of heart, and a decision of faith. At the same time, there has to be continuity between the first proclamation and catechesis, which instructs us in the deposit of the faith.

We consider it necessary that there be a Pastoral Plan of Initial Proclamation, teaching a living encounter with Jesus Christ. This pastoral document would provide the first elements for the catechetical process, enabling its insertion into the lives of the parish communities.

The Synod Fathers proposed that guidelines of the initial proclamation of the kerygma be written to include:

1. Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, June 28, 2012.

2. The entire list of proposals as presented by the Holy See Press Office in the working document: *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, can be found at: [http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino\\_25\\_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02\\_inglese/b33\\_02.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html)

3. John Paul II, Address to CELAM (Opening Address of the Nineteenth General Assembly of CELAM, 9 March 1983, Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition 16/780 (18 April 1983), no. 9.

- \* Systematic teaching on the kerygma in Scripture and Tradition of the Catholic Church;
- \* Teachings and quotations from the missionary saints and martyrs in our Catholic history that would assist us in our pastoral challenges of today; and
- \* Qualities and guidelines for the formation of Catholic evangelizers today.

Of particular interest is the importance given to the teachings of the missionary saints as models of kerygmatic proclamation. All in the church today are “called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties.”<sup>4</sup> The Synod Fathers remind us, as did the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, that we have before us a “great cloud of witnesses.”<sup>5</sup> It is the witness of the saints, of the church, those men and women who have assimilated the qualities of kerygma, inculturation and personal holiness, who provide an ideal model for men and women today who seek to live out their Baptismal call to “go and make disciples.”<sup>6</sup>

## INCULTURATION

Proposition 5: “The New Evangelization and Inculturation” builds upon Proposition 9. Here, the Synod Fathers present both a personal call to holiness and a missionary heart to make an “actual effort” to share the faith on the part of every member of the church:

Jesus offers the gift of the Holy Spirit and reveals to us the love of the Father. The New Evangelization is a time of awakening, of new encouragement and new witness that Jesus Christ is the center of our faith and daily life. It calls on every member of the Church to a renewal of faith and an actual effort to share it. It also requires discerning the signs of the times in the world that impacts the ministry of the Church and in the different particular Churches in their proper territories. Among these signs one needs to recognize certainly a growing awareness of people to the changing circumstances of life today.

Furthermore it calls the Church to reach out to those who are far from God and the Christian community to invite them to once again hear the word of God in order to encounter the Lord Jesus in a new and profound way.<sup>7</sup>

For the modern mind, this proposition may seem to offer a new vision and scope of discipleship; in reality, it provides the paradigm for how to live life as a devout follower of Christ as

ancient as the church. Evangelization is the responsibility and the very vocation of the church — a truth reiterated by Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, when he said, “She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.”<sup>8</sup>

Catholicism, steeped in stories, pre-eminently the story of salvation, also treasures the lives of saints, the stories of martyrs and missionaries who lived and died for Christ. This storytelling is not merely an exercise in re-telling tales of the past, but also a means of sparking the imagination, opening the mind to new possibilities and outcomes. For the Christian people, the cult of saints presents individuals whose lives portray religious truths which transcend time and culture, and as such, they have served as a source of inspiration since the earliest of the church.

In his collection of essays, *The Common Man*, G.K. Chesterton writes, “The first use of good literature is that it prevents a man from being merely modern.”<sup>9</sup> The notion of modernity to have the newest “model” is not particularly helpful in hagiography; it is the enduring value of the text, particularly the life lived as an imitator of Christ that allows it to be unceasingly new. Chesterton goes on, “Literature, classic and enduring literature, does its best work in reminding us perpetually of the whole round of truth and balancing other and older ideas against the ideas to which we might for a moment be prone.”<sup>10</sup> The Synod Fathers drew from this insight in Proposition 9 when they called Catholic evangelizers today to include in a compendium for the initial proclamation of the kerygma, the “teachings and quotations from the missionary saints and martyrs in our Catholic history that would assist us in our pastoral challenges of today.”

Many of the notable saints of North America — St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, St. Isaac Jogues, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, St. John Neumann, St. Katharine Drexel, St. Mother Théodore Guérin, St. Damien of Molokai, and Blessed Junípero Serra — reflect paths of holiness that are at the same time both very human and very extraordinary. Their lives are not marked by radical asceticism, distancing them from culture. Rather, theirs were lives that engaged the world and sought to transform it from within. Many came to America as missionaries; others born in America were moved by a deep personal faith to share the gospel with those whom they lived among but who were culturally different. Some of these saintly men and women were martyrs; just as many lived long lives in service to the Lord and all his people. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out that the saints lived lives of heroic virtue and

4. Vatican Council II, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” 37.

5. Heb 12:1.

6. Mt 28:19.

7. *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, [http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino\\_25\\_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02\\_inglese/b33\\_02.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html), #5.

8. Paul, VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

9. G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York : Sheed & Ward, 1950), 22.

10. *Ibid*, 22.



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distinguishes them as sources and models of renewal for the church.<sup>11</sup> In these men and women the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love were lived in an exemplary way. Through the contemplation of God, both St. Elizabeth Seton and St. Katherine Drexel were moved to great acts. Mother Seton was acutely aware of the need for contemplation (of God) in her life of saintly service: “He is my guide, my friend, and supporter — with such a guide can I fear, with such a friend shall I not be satisfied, with such a supporter can I fall?”<sup>12</sup> Of Mother Drexel it was observed: “The driving power of Mother Katharine Drexel was her love for the Blessed Sacrament. It formed her inner life of prayer which made possible her outer life of continuous service.”<sup>13</sup> Their lives manifest real vitality; St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, who lived and worked among the Potawatomie Indians, was known by the Native name “Woman Who Prays Always.” Wherever these saints went, the people to whom they proposed the gospel were moved as much by their actions, as by their words.

The early martyrs of the church were persecuted not so much because they worshipped Christ, but because they refused to worship the gods of the prevailing culture. This confluence of faith and life leads to the importance of inculturation. By its very nature, inculturation is attentive to the three-fold nature of the new evangelization and its focus in serving, not dominating, individuals *and* entire cultures, through life-long

evangelization of those who have never heard the gospel before, those who have heard and fallen away (re-evangelization) and finally those who have heard and seek ongoing conversion.<sup>14</sup> Pope John Paul II elucidated, “Conversion is a goal which is never fully attained: on the path which the disciple is called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, conversion is a lifelong task.”<sup>15</sup> Conversion of heart has implications that reach far beyond the traditional notion of evangelization which brings the gospel to foreign lands. This is a radical understanding of evangelization: evangelization for everyone, by everyone, *and* as a life-long transformative process.

### SAINTLY EXAMPLES

St. Paul leads the way in the art of inculturation when at the Areopagus he proclaimed, “You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious. For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’ What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.”<sup>16</sup> St. Paul reminded the Athenians that despite their worship of an “Unknown God,” there was an inherently social character to religious beliefs and behaviors that bind that culture together. As such, inculturation calls not for a blind acceptance or rejection of the world and/or a culture’s religious practices; rather, inculturation requires giving

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11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 828.

12. Joseph I. Dirvin, Archives of St. Joseph’s Provincial House, III, ii.

13. Katherine Burton, *The Golden Door: The Life of Katharine Drexel*, (New York, NY: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1957), 309.

14. The differentiation of the three-fold nature of evangelization is outlined in *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

15. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, (January 22, 1999) 28.[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_exh\\_22011999\\_ecclesia-in-america\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jpii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america_en.html) (accessed March 12, 2009).

16. Acts 17:22-23.

value to what is positive in any given culture and purifying what is not. Inculturation of the gospel calls for purifying elements of a culture that keep persons from living to their full dignity as persons made in the image and likeness of God as revealed in Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the process or inculturation quite poetically when it says:

By her very mission, the Church...travels the same journey as all humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world: she is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God. Missionary endeavor requires *patience*. It begins with the proclamation of the Gospel to peoples and groups who do not yet believe in Christ, continues with the establishment of Christian communities that are a sign of God's presence in the world, and leads to the foundation of local churches. It must involve a process of inculturation if the Gospel is to take flesh in each people's culture. There will be times of defeat. With regard to individuals, groups, and peoples it is only by degrees that [the church] touches and penetrates them, and so receives them into a fullness which is Catholic.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from St. Paul, many missionary saints have been practitioners of inculturation. Among the earliest are Sts. Cyril and Methodius and Patrick, all of whom introduced the gospel into the culture to transform and give life to, not to destroy, the existing culture. The success of these great saints is well documented as is the prayer and preparation that inspired their mission.

Such transformative work requires preparation. Blessed John Paul II lauded the Slavic saints Cyril and Methodius as missionaries of inculturation: "They had in fact prepared well for the task entrusted to them: they took with them the texts of the Sacred Scriptures needed for celebrating the Sacred Liturgy, which they had prepared and translated into the Old Slavonic language and written in a new alphabet, devised by Constantine the Philosopher and perfectly adapted to the sounds of that language."<sup>18</sup> By their conscientious translation of the Slavic language, these two saints modeled hospitality and welcome by making the liturgy and Sacred Scripture more readily accessible to the native people. Through their efforts, the gospel was incarnated in the culture. Furthermore, the contribution of an alphabet for the Slavonic language enriched the culture and literature of all the Slav nations.

St. Patrick, whose life has taken on such legendary status, is often deprived of its transformative power. His feast day has become a celebration disconnected from Patrick's great love for Christ and the people of Ireland. However, the missionary

activity of this good and holy man came through providential preparation, in part, from his years of prayer when he was living a life of slavery in the service of cruel master in Ireland. Despite such circumstances, or perhaps because of them, Patrick felt the love of God and drew more deeply into this relationship through prayer. Ultimately, led by an angel to freedom and return to his homeland, Patrick found himself called to the service of *God* in the *sacred ministry* of the priesthood in the country of his imprisonment. His widespread renowned learning came to the fore, but it was his life of virtue and love for the people of Ireland that allowed him to transform pagan rituals through the power of paschal mystery and thus bring about the conversion of a nation. Showing a sensibility of "new evangelization," Patrick as bishop continued to meet the needs of the faithful, wherever they were in their encounter with Christ, as he strengthened them in knowledge of the *faith*, instructing chieftains alongside their tribes, modeling lived practice of *virtue*, comforting the *faithful* in their difficulties and helped organizing parishes and appointing priests to carry on the mission to "Go therefore and make disciples." His trajectory from prayer, to study, to gospel truths well lived and shared with others transformed a nation. These three men are just three examples of saints who were "pioneers in territory."<sup>19</sup>

The author of the "Letter to the Hebrews" exhorts the community to actively engage in hagiographical activity (while not labeling it as such): "Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."<sup>20</sup> The wisdom of these propositions calls the Catholic evangelizer today to remain attentive to the reality that he or she is "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses"<sup>21</sup> and should "rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith."<sup>22</sup> Drawing on the strength and beauty of these lives of witness, we can become more attentive to the needs of those around us and see the countless opportunities for conversion and the growth of faith. This is not a new insight, but one which we need to keep at the forefront of evangelizing efforts. Pope Paul VI affirmed this when he said, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."<sup>23</sup>

It is essential that the disciple today who seeks to transform persons and cultures recalls that it is Christ and the paschal mystery that animated all that the saints did. In his book,

17. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 854.

18. Pope John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 5.

19. *Ibid.*, 21.

20. Heb 13:7-8.

21. Heb 12:1

22. Heb 12:2

23. Pope Paul VI, *Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis* (2 October 1974): *AAS* 66 (1974), p. 568.

*The Meaning of Saints*, Lawrence Cunningham calls attention to the genre of hagiography and admonishes, “Over the centuries, the genre devolved and became overly steeped in legend; as a result, it lost much of its transformative power and became a source of piety not necessarily rooted in Christ.” Cunningham says of this shift, “Inevitably, fact, fiction, pious elaborations, and folklore became part and parcel of this literary tradition.”<sup>24</sup> The focus of the story no longer spoke of the life of the saint as *imitator Christi*, but to the miraculous and the spectacular, or was written merely to serve the cause of canonization of the individual. The Catholic evangelizer today is well-served to recall that, first and foremost, a deep, abiding relationship with Jesus Christ must be at the heart of all efforts to share the truth of God in love.

### UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Grande Munus* (1880), lauding Sts. Cyril and Methodius, begins by recalling the commission to “go and make disciples of all nations”<sup>25</sup> when he says, “The great duty of spreading the Christian name was entrusted in a special way to Peter, the head of the apostles, and to his successors. It urges the popes to send messengers of the Gospel to the various peoples of the earth, as the affairs of the merciful God demand.”<sup>26</sup> The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the dignity of the all the baptized and their commission to be evangelizers of the gospel in the world. Blessed John Paul II in his encyclical on the *Slavorum Apostoli*, on the 100th anniversary of *Grande Munus*, speaks the vision of the Council calling all to their missionary role: “All individuals, all nations, cultures and civilizations have their own part to play and their own place in God’s mysterious plan and in the universal history of salvation.”<sup>27</sup>

This universal call to holiness imbues all the baptized with a unique opportunity to bring the gospel to their particular place in the world: whether it be in family, work, or community, the lay faithful have a privileged opportunity to transform the culture from within. The Second Vatican Council Decree, *Ad Gentes* (On the Mission of the Church) states the following:

In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows. At the same time, however, let them look to the profound changes which are taking

place among nations, and let them exert themselves to keep modern man, intent as he is on the science and technology of today’s world from becoming a stranger to things divine; rather, let them awaken in him a yearning for that truth and charity which God has revealed.<sup>28</sup>

All efforts to share the faith must be rooted in a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ on the part of the evangelizer, presenting the truths of the faith articulated in the creed, specifically the Trinity. At the same time, the evangelizer must read the “signs of the times” so the he or she can make intelligible the gospel to each generation and speak to the perennial questions of life in such a manner that they take root in individuals and cultures.<sup>29</sup>

A German missionary monk and martyr, St. Boniface was known for his excellence as a teacher. At the same time, he had a great missionary zeal; therefore, Pope Gregory II sent Boniface to go preach the word to pagan people in Northern and Central Europe. Having little trouble with dialects, which resembled his own native Anglo-Saxon, Boniface proved himself to be an effective missionary. Pope Pius XII points to the strength that served to undergird his missionary zeal: “Without a doubt he drew it from divine grace, which he ever sought in humble, persevering and fervent prayer. So strongly was he driven by love of God that his one aim was an ever closer union with Him, an ever lengthier converse with Him; his prime purpose was to preach God’s glory to unknown tribes, and to bring them to Him in reverence and love. He could surely repeat with every right that phrase of St. Paul’s: ‘With us, Christ’s love is a compelling motive.’”<sup>30</sup>

One great beauty that comes from this holistic stance toward evangelization modeled by the saints is that the evangelizers themselves are evangelized. Moved by such a compelling motive — Christ’s love — the Catholic evangelizer today can be a model of inculturation, introducing the beauty and riches of the gospel into all cultures and bringing these cultures into the life of the church, while growing ever more deeply in relationship and knowledge of Christ him/herself. Evangelization may take the form of being the first to proclaim the gospel; however, evangelization more often takes the form of kindling anew an awareness of Jesus. United with Christ and moved by the Holy Spirit, disciples as witnesses are able to be flexible in ardor, method, and expression in the sharing of our faith, while maintaining the gospel truths that alone can truly transform humanity. ■

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24. Cunningham, “Saints” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 926.

25. Mt 28:19

26. Pope Leo XIII, *Grande Munus*, 1.

27. Pope John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 19.

28. Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, 11.

29. cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4

30. Pope Pius XII, *Ecclesia Fastos*, 27.