



A Primer on the Theology of Evangelization: Implications for the United States

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The Situation of Belief in America

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14). Every theological reflection on evangelization begins with the person of Jesus Christ. He is the goal and the subject of evangelization. Any attempt to discuss ministry, pastoral initiatives, catechesis and education, or vocations apart from Jesus leads to pluralism, syncretism, and a man-centered Gospel. How the Word of God comes to us, in the person of Jesus Christ and through his Church, is the study of evangelization.

Any theological reflection on evangelization must also consider the realities of where the Church finds herself. The Incarnation of the Word took place in a specific time and place. The life and teachings of Jesus had a purposeful and intended impact on the culture of his time as it is supposed to today. Inculturation is the Church’s effort to incarnate the entire Gospel of Christ into the cultures of the world whereby people can live the Gospel

within the culture they live.

Evangelization prepares both the culture and the person to receive, believe, and live the Gospel.

The ability “to believe” in what God gives to us in Jesus is at the heart of evangelization. The Scriptures reveal how people struggled to believe, a reality we see again today (Jn 6:60f.; Jn 11:21f.). One can observe in today’s American society how the meaning of “belief” is narrowly defined as a personal opinion. Some might say that “to believe” in something or someone is simply a personal choice; it has no real collective or universal value.

The radical influence of secularism that bans from public discussion any claim to universal truth or a recognition of universal moral principles has led to a climate in which “belief” is understood to be so personal that when believers proclaim fidelity to revealed truth, those beliefs are seen as sectarian, having no proper place in the wider community. It is no wonder that when Catholics commit themselves to living the Gospel of Christ in complete

obedience to the teachings of the Church, and then attempt to live their faith in the public square, Catholics are accused of forcing their beliefs on others.

This radical secularism has questioned the purpose and definition of marriage, the dignity of human life from natural conception to natural death, and even the existence of God. The secularist explains that religion might be something good for society if it makes people feel good. Secularists have driven this agenda in such a way that morality itself has been reduced to sectarian belief.

In some ways, we have reached a point that when anyone claims a definitive belief they are automatically dismissed as being out of touch with reality, uneducated and sentimental, or intolerant of others.

It is no surprise that young people are asking—can anyone really believe in anything?

A Springtime for the Church in the United States

Nearly twenty years ago, Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote that we should not be discouraged by these forces. Rather, we should discern the situation as an opportunity. “We are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism. But this feeling is unjustified. . . . God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs” (John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate* [*Redemptoris Missio*], no. 86, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html).

In the midst of social chaos, political uncertainty, and economic instability, we find multitudes of Catholics all over the United States who are faithful to the Gospel, who worship God weekly and daily at Holy Mass, who are serious about their catechetical formation, and who are proud to be Catholic and American. We see young Catholic families embracing popular piety and making their homes, homes of prayer. An increase of priestly vocations undoubtedly brings us much hope.

The springtime for the Church’s evangelizing mission involves clarity of what we know to be sin and evil. While evil is permitted in this stage of God’s design, it does not originate with God. Sin results when man abuses his freedom. “To believe” can be difficult when man finds himself enslaved in sin. But, it is precisely in these moments that the Church’s evangelizing mission makes the most sense.

The fact that evil exists should not discourage Catholics. We look to Jesus who confronted evil directly in death itself. Our understanding of Jesus’ conquering death is at the heart of Christianity. In the United States today, we see a society poisoned by so many sins—many that have become legal rights. In this context, Catholics should be eager in wanting to share the truth, because we possess it. People are thirsting for the truth, and Catholics ought to be eager to provide it.

Evangelization, however, presumes Catholics want to share the truth. It presumes that Catholics know what the truth is and what God’s message is for us.

The Self-Communication of God

The message of evangelization is none other than God. A theological principle of evangelization is that God wants to be known and can be known. “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 27). To be human is to search for God, the ultimate truth. This search is common to every human being.

The first communication of God to humanity is found within humanity itself, in our very existence. The fact that every person desires truth and that every human being desires the ultimate experience of life is a foundational principle for any human community. When we speak about evangelization, the Church acknowledges this reality in such a way that we can discern together a common ground where the discussion about God can begin, a discussion that begins with what all peoples have already experienced. “The Church is expressing her confidence in the possibility of speaking about him to all men with all men, and therefore of dialogue with other religions, with philosophy and science, as well as with unbelievers and atheists” (CCC, no. 39).

Pope Benedict XVI refers to the “courtyard of the Gentiles” as an evangelizing moment for Catholics to engage those who are seeking God but are not yet believers (Pope Benedict XVI,

Discourse to the Roman Curia, December 21, 2009,

www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091221_curia-auguri_en.html). Pope John Paul II addresses this in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* when he teaches us about the relationship between faith and reason and the ability for even nonbelievers to recognize the universality of principles, even moral principles (John Paul II, *On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason* [*Fides et Ratio*] [FR], www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html).

But the communication of God moves beyond this idea of the common search for truth. Our languages, customs, institutions, sciences, philosophies, literature, and music are just the initial experiences of the search. We are given the supernatural virtue of faith that allows us to witness, experience, and believe the ways in which God has definitively revealed himself to us. The supernatural gift of faith permits us to experience God in ways that reason alone cannot. Faith allows us to understand what God intends for us.

The Second Vatican Council explained that “it pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will, which was that people can draw near to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature” (Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* [*Dei Verbum*] [DV], no. 2, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*,

ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]).

God has revealed his will to us in stages, beginning with our creation and the creation of the world. Then he spoke to us through the prophets, to the chosen people of the first covenant, through the Law, and then finally in his own person, in Jesus Christ. This whole event is called the “Economy of Divine Revelation.” We often associate the word “economy” with investments and markets. When people invest or spend their money, they expect something back in return. God invests himself in us, and the return is our salvation, to share his life. Likewise, we respond to God. This is called the “act of faith.” By following and living the Gospel, we invest our lives into revealed truth, and our return is the Kingdom of God, our salvation.

Proclaiming the Mystery of Faith

Evangelization is about proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Evangelization also helps people understand the act of faith, how to be free in encountering the truth as revealed by God. Faith allows us to experience the “mystery” of God. However, the word “mystery” does not mean that faith cannot explain what we believe.

“Mystery,” which comes from the Greek, refers to realities that humans are capable of grasping and knowing beyond what “reason” can explain; it encompasses a knowledge of realities that are not in conflict with reason. For example, certain experiences—a mother’s love for her child, a husband’s love for his wife, the patriotism of a countryman, the loyalty of

friendships—cannot be proven by any scientific measure, yet they are not in conflict with reason; quite the opposite: these experiences are “reasonable.”

As Catholics we proclaim something “reasonable” to the world: The Gospel, Jesus Christ, and the Triune God are indeed mysterious, but they are not inaccessible. The supernatural gift of faith and the natural capacity of reason, as Pope John Paul II wrote, “are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (FR, opening line).

The relenting secularistic forces in American society have convinced too many that faith is not a form of knowledge, but rather a personal act of sentimentalism. Evangelization is the Church’s mission to make present and tangible everything that God has given to us in Christ.

But What Is Evangelization?

Shortly after the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI convened the Synod of Bishops (1974) to discern and understand precisely what we Catholics mean by “evangelization.” The term, although as ancient as the Church, was ambiguous for many and even today does not always speak to a Catholic’s sense of mission.

Is evangelization something we do for non-Christians? Is it an activity directed at Christians who are not Catholic? Can we use the word when referring to Catholics who have left the Church? Is there such a thing as evangelizing practicing Catholics? Is evangelization something you do for people or for the society around them? What do we mean by “to evangelize?”

The 1974 Synod of Bishops and Pope Paul VI’s post-synodal exhortation

Evangelii Nuntiandi gave the Church sound theological principles and identified evangelization as *the* mission of the Church (see Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World* [*Evangelii Nuntiandi*] [EN], www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html). Slowly but surely, Catholics are becoming more comfortable with the word.

The bottom line is that evangelization is the experience by which one comes to know and love Jesus Christ in all the ways that God has made this possible—knowing and loving Christ in the Eucharist, in the Mass, in the Sacred Scriptures, and in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. The believer then shares this relationship with Christ and his Church with others. Sharing this faith by how we live (witness) and what we say (preaching) puts evangelization into action.

Transmitting the Gospel of Christ

“The words you gave me I have given to them, and they accepted them” (Jn 17:8). Evangelization means passing on what Jesus Christ has given to the Church. All of the baptized share in the mission of the Church but each according to his or her own responsibility and vocation.

A real spirit of humility embodies the believers who truly want to hand onto others what they have received. The Church uses the expression the Deposit of Faith. The words and deeds of Jesus constitute the Gospel. The Gospel comes to us from two different but inseparable means: Sacred

Scripture and living Tradition. Both form the Deposit of Faith. The bishops in union with the pope constitute the Magisterium of the Church, which has the duty of authentically interpreting the Gospel of Christ and handing on this Deposit of Faith in its entirety.

The challenge for Christians today is receiving the authentic interpretation of the Gospel by the Magisterium. St. Paul writes about “obedience” as a requirement for evangelization (Rom 16:26; 2 Cor 10:5-6). Without obedience, people follow their own interpretation, resulting in false doctrines or practices never envisioned by Jesus Christ.

Avoiding Syncretism and Theological Pluralism

Evangelization must be grounded in sound theological principles, otherwise evangelization becomes something other than the mission of the Church. Syncretism is the false notion that, if someone claims faith in Jesus Christ, not all doctrine or morality is applicable. Syncretism also could be an attempt to get everyone to collaborate on some aspects of faith while compromising other aspects for the good of the order.

Similarly, theological pluralism permits the wide range of beliefs for a supposed higher belief. Diversity of beliefs is fine as long as they do not affect my own beliefs. We often even see this misplaced thinking within the Church.

Theological Principles of Evangelization

One can identify four foundational theological principles required for a complete, authentic evangelization.

1. Soteriological Principle: God desires all to be saved and reach the full knowledge of truth (1 Tm 2:2-4). Salvation of souls is the goal of evangelization. Sin can never be tolerated for any supposed good. Evangelization will never be complete if one does not turn away from sin completely and be faithful to the Gospel. Conversion and transformation, the pursuit of holiness, to be a saint—this is the vocation of all men. One must avoid any pluralistic or syncretic notion that some sins are acceptable.

2. Christological Principle: Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God. There is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Evangelization preaches Christ, for he is the Kingdom of God, he is the Gospel. Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Redeemer of man, there is no other. The catechetical dimension of evangelization is constantly introducing believers to the mystery of Christ as experienced in the sacred liturgy, the Eucharist, the sacraments, Sacred Scripture, and prayer. One must avoid any pluralistic or syncretic notion that there may be one Jesus but many Christs or false notions that repute the divinity of Jesus Christ.

3. Ecclesiological Principle: Jesus Christ established the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as the definitive means to experience God and to achieve salvation. It is only the Church that possesses all that is necessary for the salvation of souls. Evangelization draws everyone closer to God through the Church. Christ cannot be separated from the Church, for the Church is the Body of Christ. One must avoid any pluralistic or syncretic notion that one can believe in Jesus Christ and be saved apart from the Church.

4. Anthropological Principle: Evangelization is the means by which men and women truly become themselves. Created in the image and likeness of God, every person has a dignity originating in God himself or herself. Every person has been endowed with charisms and gifts that are to be used in building up the Church and manifesting the Kingdom of God. Evangelization confirms the duties, rights, and obligations of every person united to the Body of Christ. Evangelization seeks to protect those rights and to promote them in every society and culture. Syncretism and pluralism convince people that their pursuit of happiness takes priority over the universal moral norms of the Gospel, thereby diminishing one's ability to truly be free by living the Gospel and rejecting sin.

Conclusion

The Church in the United States has been a blessing to America. Catholics who faithfully live the Gospel transform culture into what God intends it to be: the venue where each person discovers his or her vocation. In doing so, each person becomes a positive contributor in the promotion of an authentic humanism where no one is left behind and where no sin takes the rights of another away.

Where brokenness has existed, Catholics in the United States have taken the lead by institutionalizing the charisms of the Holy Spirit in such a way that the poor, the disadvantaged, the elderly, those imprisoned, the hospitalized, and the homeless have been ministered to from a genuine love of God embodied in faith communities.

Today, the United States needs the Catholic Church more than ever. The dialogue the Church has with American culture is indeed called “evangelization.” Catholics want to support and promote the excellent ideals of culture while purifying the sins that have wreaked havoc on our children, families, marriages, and institutions.

The New Evangelization called for by Blessed Pope John Paul II and renewed by Pope Benedict XVI challenges American Catholics to be

protagonists and leaders in the formation of a true, just, and authentic American culture: a culture envisioned by our forefathers and ordained by God Himself.

God Bless America!

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