

## THIS LITTLE LIGHT

[February 11, 2013](#) [1]

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Strategies for the new evangelization from the Synod of Bishops

The Synod of Bishops brought the church a new perspective and comprehensive strategy for the new evangelization. Even though there were many cautions at the synod about not making evangelization into a program, the overall thrust of the synod discussion pushed toward a very different, and potentially rich, pastoral approach to Catholic life today.

This approach has these major components: the background for pastoral action; the vision of God revealed by Jesus Christ; reception of the vision of Jesus through conversion and personal following; extension of the vision into one's closest daily relationships, notably the family; extension of the vision through involvement in small Christian (base) communities; transformation of the parish through conversion, discipleship and outreach; building partnerships through ecumenical connections and ecclesial movements; and finally, a renewed church.

### Rooted in Faith

Undoubtedly the drastic drop in the percentage of people regularly involved in church in the developed world is a main cause for the call for the new evangelization. Many theories might account for the diminishment of Catholic participation and fervor in the developed countries; the chief named culprit, however, is "secularism" with its many attendant "isms"—individualism, relativism and materialism. These qualities identify not only the broader developed world (and increasingly the developing world), but, more frighteningly, the lives of believers themselves. Pope Benedict XVI speaks openly about the "desert" of the modern world in which reference to God has become occluded.

The new evangelization, accordingly, invites modern people to rediscover God through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The heart of the new evangelization is this renewed personal experience of Jesus Christ in all his dimensions—in the Word, in sacrament, in community and in the poor. The synod often spoke of the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus as a result of his resurrection from the dead, in order to involve us personally in the reality of God.

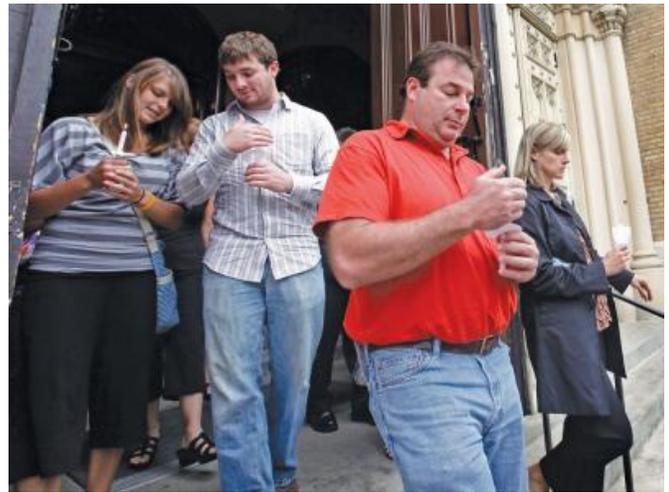
This all amounts to strategies of conversion—to call Catholics to deeper conversion and to help Catholics know that their lives are filled with experiences of conversion. The ministries of the Word, particularly those of the liturgy and prayer, bring believers into vivid contact with Jesus Christ. Strategies of conversion help Catholics see the forgiveness, healing, renewal and unconditional love that are part of their lived experience. This conversion happens through the Catholic experience of the Mass, other sacraments and daily prayer.

Catholics receive the renewed vision through their experience of Catholic life. The Word of God opens the vision; the celebration of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, deepens the vision of conversion in the Catholic heart. This calls for an attitude toward worship quite different from the routine of "getting the Mass done" in 45 or 50 minutes.

Often the synod participants spoke of the need for conversion on the part of bishops and clergy. This assertion might shock those outside and within the church—how can the church's own leaders not understand the kernel of their own faith experience? One synod participant spoke of how clergy can too easily become more like functionaries than missionaries—centered on the external needs of organization rather than the personal need of relationship with God.

Many synod fathers spoke of the need to focus on lay people, both in professional roles as catechists and in their ordinary lives, as witnesses to Christ. The new evangelization is inconceivable without catechists, lay people who instill the Word of God and elaborate it in church teaching—in personal and powerful ways—in the lives of the faithful. Synod participants saw the catechumenal process (the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) as one of the great gifts of the Second Vatican Council—a process of conversion and growth that should be a prime instance of the formation that happens in all catechetical processes.

This vision has to give rise to a range of spiritual involvements on a personal and parish level, all of which bring Catholics to a surer path of conversion. Local



churches and parishes can focus on the renewal experiences, prayer events, moments of adoration and prayer in the Spirit, together with retreats and parish missions that further this sense of conversion. Surely, too, regular daily prayer has to be a part of this experience of ongoing conversion and growing discipleship. It will take years to elaborate the implications of this direction toward conversion.

## **Family and Community**

Hardly a session of the synod went by without mention of the family. Synod fathers see parents and families as indispensable for the new evangelization. Referring to families as “domestic churches,” participants underlined the importance of the lived experience of faith and conversion in the family as a key element in the transmission of faith. Certainly, references to popular piety belong here. These are the spontaneous and deep devotions that often define a Catholic culture and the families within that culture, including Marian devotions, devotions to the saints and the Rosary.

While many participants acknowledged difficulties—competing pressures that stultify a sense of unity within families, broken homes, non-nuclear family clusters, as well as the need to personally accompany those who have suffered from divorce or separation—they also argued that these are hardly an argument against shared faith in the home; indeed, they urge it more.

Many bishops from developing nations insisted that small Christian communities (also called “base communities”) have become essential in the growth and maintenance of faith. They spoke of the way Catholics help reinforce the faith of others, become part of a larger support system and bring the experience of conversion into their relationships with neighbors. Parishes in developed countries might well ponder the gain that can accrue from such communities of faith.

In terms of organizing a congregation, small groups can accomplish what parishes, with their sometimes large and anonymous styles, often cannot—putting a personal face on the experience of Catholic life. Further, they can be the first points of outreach beyond the faithful, calling the ever-growing numbers of uninvolved people into some kind of faith relationship. If it is difficult for someone to make it to a parish church, it certainly is much easier for them to make it to a neighbor’s house or apartment.

These small groups, breaking open the word of God in more consistent and extended ways every time they meet, help believers experience the power of the word through reflection, discussion, personal sharing and common prayer. Making *lectio divina* a part of small group sharing can be a way to link Catholics to experiences of contemplation and adoration, as the Word leads them to fuller awareness and acceptance of God’s action in their lives.

## **Transforming the Parish**

Nearly every session at the synod referred to the parish as a central nucleus in Catholic life and renewal. Certainly, many commentators remark on the unique role that the parish has played in American life, being a force for community unity and organizing for generations of immigrants. But participants from every continent spoke of the parish’s central place in evangelization. If the Second Vatican Council underlined the importance and power of liturgy for Catholic life, it also thereby affirmed the centrality of the parish, where the Eucharist is celebrated in an open and regular way for a community of the faithful. Synod fathers urged the devout and expressive celebration of the Eucharist as a key value in the Catholic experience. They spoke about welcome and inclusion as part of one’s experience of the parish. Looking at Catholic life in relational terms, Catholics could see the parish as the main gathering community for the smaller communities of faith (families and small groups) that are part of the new evangelization.

Parishes should also embrace charity, the dramatic way in which the new evangelization receives its most compelling witness. If the Trinity is the experience of God’s superabundant love, then the Trinity guides us to reveal that love to all humankind. Synod fathers pointed to the works of Mother Theresa and other initiatives to feed the hungry and care for people in need as examples of how the reality of faith is revealed through charity. Jesus coupled his preaching with “miracles”—deeds of wonder that showed God’s liberating power and forgiveness to all, particularly those without much esteem in society.

The synod spoke often of the need to reach out to those who have no faith or who have become “tired” in their faith. Much of this work falls to parishes and other movements connected to parishes. No document received more attention than “On Evangelization in the Modern World,” an apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI, which spoke of evangelization as the essential mission of the church, the reason for its existence. While the new evangelization focuses particularly on those peoples who have already received the faith (rather than those who have not explicitly heard the Gospel), it recognizes that hard-and-fast categories cannot be laid down in a world as mobile as ours, a world where people shift their allegiances so often.

How parishes embody outreach beyond their members remains the major challenge for them. Parishes have some images to fall back on when they think of liturgy and catechesis (much as these images need to be infused with new life); few of them, however, have institutional images of reaching out beyond their own membership to those who have ceased practicing their faith or who might be ready to accept an invitation.

The synod did not see parishes and dioceses as working in isolation when it comes to the new evangelization. The prevailing notion of the synod was that, in effect, “we are all in this together”; there is no need for independent movements and parishes.

## **Broadening the Vision**

In addition, the synod was quite open to ecumenical and interfaith dimensions of the new evangelization. Many Protestant representatives attended the synod, universally speaking with joy and support about the move of the Catholic Church toward the new evangelization. Archbishop Rowan Williams, head of the Anglican Communion at the time, delivered one of the major addresses to the synod. He spoke about the importance of helping people relate to God through Jesus in the practice of contemplation.

Interreligious dialogue focused to a large extent on Islam and the need to share common beliefs and concerns and to grow in understanding of each other. Bishops from countries with large Muslim populations frequently noted the difficulty of being a Christian church in a society where conversion to Christianity is often a crime and inviting people to conversion can mean imprisonment.

Similarly, bishops from Asian countries reflected on the unique place of Christianity in the midst of religions that flourished long before the coming of Jesus Christ, the joint values that Catholics shared with these ancient faiths and the essential dialogical posture that Catholics must have when interacting with other believers.

The notion that the new evangelization began with the Second Vatican Council could be heard at various times during the synod. The grounding of the council's work in its four major constitutions—on liturgy, the church, revelation and the church in the modern world—provided an initial blueprint by which the church could express itself anew, in accord with its deepest tradition, to the modern world. The call to live faith boldly, while dialoguing with modern culture and all believers, hearkened back to the confidence that Pope John XXIII engendered when he asked that the ancient windows of the Catholic Church be opened up to let in more air.

The synod, then, looks for a renewed Catholic people, this time engaged in faith through their own experience, not just recipients of faith through a Catholic culture. The experience primarily turns on Jesus and the community of faith he began. As Catholics live in the world, they bring to that world the power of these relationships of faith, sharing them freely within their families and inviting others to participate in the joy of faith in Jesus Christ.

Should these goals and directions take root, the primary vision of the Catholic faith, the people of God who have encountered their savior in Jesus, can transform not only the billion plus who identify as Catholic, but, as importantly, many beyond the community of faith.

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