

The Year of Faith and the New Evangelization

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What's the relationship between the Year of Faith and the new evangelization? First, let's look at what faith is and why Pope Benedict XVI is directing our attention to it this year. Then, let's consider what the new evangelization is and how the two relate.

There are several dimensions to "faith." First of all, faith is a firm conviction, a knowledge, of things that are unseen to the biological eyes but no less real than the things we do see. The knowledge given by faith is infused into us in the sacrament of baptism and grows as we mature through contact with God's word in the multiple ways that evangelization and catechesis are carried out in the life of the church. For the adult, "faith comes by hearing" the word of God.

One important fruit of the Year of Faith would be a recovery of our confidence in the reliability and truthfulness of the word of God as it comes to us in Scripture, tradition, and the teaching of the church as articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Sometimes we forget the very high view of the authority and reliability of sacred Scripture that we hold as Catholics. As Vatican II states in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures (11).

Recovering our confidence in the truth of our faith is an important foundation for a renewed life of holiness in the church and a renewed impetus to evangelization.

Another dimension of faith is trust in and confidence in the person of Christ, believing he is who he says he is. Flowing from this is a relationship of surrender and obedience, trusting his word, trusting the guidance of his Spirit, trusting him — his goodness, his love, his power, his wisdom, his divine providence, his promises.

Obviously, unless we have a strong confidence in the truth of our faith and in the person who is at the center of our faith, our desire to tell others about Christ will not be strong. This is the link between faith and evangelization.

Since there is so much talk in the church today about evangelization and about the "new evangelization," it would be worthwhile to clarify these terms.

Evangelization, as understood in the Conciliar and post-Conciliar documents, sometimes has a very broad meaning, which includes all the implications of Christian conversion for the transformation of culture and the embodiment of Christian values in political and economic life. At the same time, the core meaning of evangelization is always clearly identified in the documents as conversion to Christ.

Starting with the documents of Vatican II, and continuing with the subsequent pontifical documents on evangelization, the contemporary magisterial documents have been remarkably consistent in insisting on the priority of direct proclamation with a view toward conversion.

In *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, Pope Paul VI accentuated this point when he said, "There can be no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom, and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God are not proclaimed" (EN, 22).

John Paul II then continued this emphasis on the priority of direct proclamation in the document explicitly devoted to the mission of lay people, *Christifidelis Laici* (The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People): "The 'good news' is directed to stirring a person to a conversion of heart and life and a clinging to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; to disposing a person to receive baptism and the Eucharist and to strengthen a person in the prospect and realization of new life according to the Spirit" (CL, 33).

And in a particularly challenging statement: "The proclamation of the word of God has *Christian conversion* (in original) as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his gospel through faith . . . Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple" (46).

Evangelization then, in its core, is about inviting people to faith in Jesus Christ and membership in his body, the church.

What then is the "new evangelization?"

In 1983, Pope John Paul II began to frequently refer to a "new evangelization." He made it clear that he wasn't calling for a new gospel, but a new effort, characterized by new



“ardor, methods, and expression,”¹ and directed in a new way, not only to those who had never heard the gospel before, the traditional “mission territories,” but now also to the lukewarm and de-Christianized traditionally Christian Western nations.

He distinguished “primary evangelization” directed towards those unfamiliar with the gospel, “pastoral care” directed towards those who were living as believers, and “new evangelization or re-evangelization” directed towards those from traditionally Christian culture or backgrounds “where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his gospel” (RM, 33).

THE URGENCY OF A NEW EVANGELIZATION

As John Paul II published his “vision or mission statement” for the Catholic Church as it entered the new millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Beginning of a New Millennium), he cited the collapse of Christian society as a primary reason for the need for a new evangelization.

To nourish ourselves with the word in order to be ‘servants of the word’ in the work of evangelization: this is surely a priority for the church at the dawn of the new millennium. Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a ‘Christian society’ which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on gospel values, is now gone. Today, we must courageously face a situation which is becoming increasingly diversified and demanding, in the context of ‘globalization’ and of the consequent new and uncertain mingling of peoples and cultures. Over the years, I have often repeated the summons to the new evangelization. I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the

impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardor of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16) (NMI, 40).

The collapse of Christian society is being experienced in the Catholic Church as a “wake-up call” to the need for a renewal of fervent faith, both for holiness and for evangelization, rooted in the continuing reality of Pentecost.

To sum up then: What’s “new” about the “new evangelization?”

The new evangelization is new in to whom it is addressed: baptized Catholics who are not living a life of faith in the Son of God. It is also new as regards the cultural situation to which it must address itself: a post-Christian society which resembles more closely the circumstances the early church had to face, a minority living in the midst of an aggressive pagan culture, than the relatively supportive society we’ve known until recently.

It is also new in who is expected to carry it out: all Catholic lay people!

We’re used to thinking of mission or evangelization as something that only the “professionals” in the church do, and perhaps even only in “foreign countries” where the gospel has not been preached. One of the main emphases of Vatican II and subsequent post-Conciliar documents is the essential role of the laity in carrying out the mission of the church.

The role of the “professionals” is not to carry out the mission of the church all by themselves but to activate baptized Catholics into lives of holiness and mission.

There has been a tendency, however, in Post-Vatican II Catholicism to drift into an understanding of this call to lay mission that diverges significantly from what the documents

1. John Paul II, “The Task of the Latin American Bishop,” *Origins* 12 (March 24, 1983): 659-62.

actually say. On the one hand, there has been a tendency to interpret the call to apostolate as a call to “power sharing” and to assign roles to lay people within the church that aren’t really evangelistic. A lot of the focus has been, and continues to be, on lay people becoming “active” within the church, i.e. doing readings at Mass, becoming “extraordinary” ministers of the Eucharist, joining parish councils, serving on committees, etc. In reaction to this, there has been a more recent corrective in an attempt to keep the roles of priests and laity distinct that points out that the specific nature of the lay apostolate (“apostolate” is a term normally used in these documents in a sense equivalent to “mission”) is “secular” and should focus on the influence on culture and politics through promoting Christian values. This emphasis on the secular quality of lay mission is usually silent about the responsibility to directly speak to people about Christ, with a view towards conversion.

The actual documents, however, could not be clearer, and more balanced on these points.

The *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People* identifies three fields of lay participation in the mission of the church. 1. The mission of evangelization and sanctification. 2. The mission of renewing the temporal order. 3. The mission of mercy and charity. And while this document, and others, identifies the lay person’s unique presence in the secular order as irreplaceable, it goes on to make some remarkable statements about the priority of direct evangelization precisely in the secular environments which laypersons inhabit.

The church’s mission is concerned with the salvation of men; and men win salvation through the grace of Christ and faith in him. The apostolate of the church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ... Laymen have countless opportunities

for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God... This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them towards the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, and incite them to a more fervent life...(AA, 6).

The documents make clear that even if a layperson’s primary field of mission is in the political, economic, or social sphere or in doing works of charity, he or she continues to have an obligation to directly proclaim Christ by word, with a view towards leading others to conversion or deeper faith.

And the “especially urgent invitation” that the Council has issued to the lay faithful is finding a response. Often, “repressed and buried” Christian powers are coming to life (CL, 2, 23). “The commitment of the laity to the work of evangelization is changing ecclesial life... Above all, there is a new awareness that *missionary activity is a matter for all Christians* (in original), for all dioceses and parishes, church institutions and associations” (RM, 2).

Let’s pray that the Year of Faith becomes a time of grace that draws many baptized Catholics into a more committed relationship to Jesus and leads them to a more wholehearted commitment to participate with Jesus in his ongoing mission of “seeking and saving those who are lost.”

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