

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

A Look at the Growing Range of Reference

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A LEITMOTIF in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II was the concept of the new evangelization. How this idea is appropriated in the wider Church will have a decisive influence on the shape of pastoral practice in many Western countries. Preliminary to any discussion of its impact and value is some discussion of the contours of the new evangelization. For Pope John Paul II, the new current phase of evangelization was not new in the sense of being an innovation that moved beyond the Church's traditional mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all nations. Rather, a new sense of evangelization emerged from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and in the social reality of many countries such as Australia. Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) identified three elements in the Church's commitment to evangelization. The first was the essential missionary focus of the Church on proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to those who have not heard it. This remains the proper, or classical, sense of the term. The second element focused on those with strong Christian affiliation who were 'fervent in their faith and Christian living.' (RM 33.2). However, there was a third, intermediary element, and it is from here that the new evangelization takes its meaning.

Particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a 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...in this case what is needed is a 'new evangelization' or a 're-evangelization.' (*Redemptoris Missio*, 33.3)

The New Evangelization and Synodal Conferences

While the phrase 'the new evangelization' can be described with specific reference to John Paul II's major writings and addresses, this paper will concentrate on its growing range of reference in wider contemporary Catholic discourse.

In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, (TMA) John Paul proposed a special assembly of the synod of bishops for each of the five continents to prepare for the new millennium. At these synods, 'the theme underlying them all is *evangelization* or rather the *new evangelization*.' (TMA 21). These synods were convoked in Europe, America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. A brief comment on three of these documents will give a sense of the centrality of the new evangelization as an analytical tool in a number of cultural contexts.

In many ways, the preeminent audience for the new evangelization is Europe, especially Western Europe. Dziwisz, John Paul's secretary for over forty years, on page 159 of his account of working with the pontiff, *A Life with Karol: My Forty-Year Friendship with the Man Who Became Pope*, remarked on the origins of the new evangelization in John Paul's thought: 'The idea came to him when he noticed—especially during trips—that there was an urgent need to reinvigorate Churches in old Christian countries. He thought this was particularly true of Europe.' In *Ecclesia in Europa*, (EE), written after the European Bishops' Synod in 1999, John Paul II identified that 'Jesus Christ is our hope', (EE, 6). This again underlined the indivisibility with which

Christ and evangelization are spoken of. The situation of the Church in Europe was described in terms that are widely used in European sociology of religion, namely, loss of memory:

I would like to mention in a particular way *the loss of Europe's Christian memory and heritage*, accompanied by a kind of practical agnosticism and religious indifference whereby many Europeans give the impression of living without spiritual roots and somewhat like heirs who have squandered a patrimony entrusted to them by history. (EE 7)

This is the context into which the new evangelization must enter.

The consequences of this loss of memory are manifold. Some of these are described as: fear of the future, existential fragmentation, a feeling of loneliness, increased weakening of interpersonal solidarity, and perhaps most significantly, an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ. The answer to these problems is a return to Christ, 'our hope.' This should be expressed in a variety of ways, notably through his presence in strong Christian communities and through the witness of holy men and women.

The document also identified the intimate connection between Christ and the Church. Jesus Christ was described as being alive in his Church. This point was made strongly to counteract the view that the Church is an unnecessary mediator between God and man. Although this point was made, in different forms, at the Reformation, in the modern European context the view that the Church is an unnecessary mediator between God and man is seen as arising out of a heightened personalism that feeds off the fragmentation of culture in many European countries.

In *Ecclesia in America*, (EA), John Paul II recognizes the religious ambience of the Americas, which can be contrasted with the old world of Europe:

A distinctive feature of America is an intense popular piety, deeply rooted in the various nations. It is found at all levels and in all sectors of society, and it has special importance as a

place of encounter with Christ for all those who in poverty of spirit and humility of heart are sincerely searching for God. (EA 16)

Evangelization was, nonetheless, also proposed as the fundamental framework for understanding the role of the Church in America. John Paul II reiterated the task of the new evangelization, to transform not just individuals but whole cultures: '[new evangelization involves a] clearly conceived, serious and well-organized effort to evangelize the culture', (EA 70). This evangelization of culture, however, has at its root a transformative encounter with Christ, which then leads to an 'impulse' to communicate this to others:

An encounter with the Lord brings about a profound transformation in all who do not close themselves off from him. The first impulse coming from this transformation is to communicate to others the richness discovered in the experience of the encounter. (EA 68)

Ecclesia in Oceania (EO) was a significant document, an Apostolic Exhortation, which specifically addressed the Church in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, and surrounding regions. The concept of new evangelization was prominent in the document, and was first raised in the following terms:

When Christians live the life of Christ with deeper faith, their hope grows stronger and their charity more radiant. That was the goal of the Synod, and it is the goal of the new evangelization to which the Spirit is summoning the whole Church. (EO 8)

The goals of the Synod and those of the new evangelization are seen as identical. The imperatives of the new evangelization have increasingly moved to the centre of Catholic discourse. For instance, *Ecclesia in Oceania* clearly acknowledged that the missionary efforts of the Church in the past were largely the domain of missionary priests and religious. While these efforts are appreciated, what is needed now is a new kind of evangelization: 'The call to mission is addressed to every member of the Church. The whole Church is missionary, for her missionary activity ... is an essential part of her vocation', (EO 13). There

is no distinction made between who is to conduct this missionary work. Indeed, this work is seen as the responsibility of all the faithful in the light of the new situations affecting the life of the Church.

In countries such as Australia, the challenges facing the Church are especially acute. These ‘are experienced by all the local Churches in Oceania, but with particular force by those in societies most powerfully affected by secularization, individualism and consumerism’, (EO 18). In these environments, however, the Church needs to be mindful of its primary evangelical focus—to proclaim Christ.

General Directory of Catechesis

Moving now to some other documents which address the new evangelization, The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) was produced by the Congregation for the Clergy in 1997 as a revision of the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory*. The 1997 *General Directory* sought to balance the contextualization of catechesis in evangelization as envisaged by *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the appropriation of the content of the faith as presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It appealed to writings of Pope John Paul II in its content. As a ‘general’ directory, it contained within its scope not only the formation of new generations of Christians, but also the activity of the Church in every region in which it had an institutional presence. In this regard, it recognized that the Church’s mission needed to adapt to different cultural settings if it is to be effective. The new evangelization is integral to the process of catechesis, as John Paul II had repeatedly emphasized. The new evangelization takes on a special urgency especially in countries under a strong secular influence:

These concrete situations of the Christian faith call urgently on the sower to develop a *new evangelization* especially in those Churches of long-standing Christian tradition where secularism has made greater inroads. In this new context of evangelization, missionary procla-

mation and catechesis, especially of the young and of adults, is an evident priority. (GDC 26)

The *General Directory* recognized the universal call to evangelize, but it laid particular emphasis on the role of lay catechists. They do not replace priests or religious, but they do have an indispensable role as agents of the new evangelization. Given the complexity of missionary activity, clear distinctions related to precise roles are not always possible. Nonetheless, the *General Directory* restated the threefold distinction used in *Redemptoris Missio* to identify the targets of missionary activity. The goal of new evangelization remains, however, a profound experience of conversion and not just exterior conformity. Thus, ‘primary proclamation and basic catechesis are priorities’, (GDC 58).

The New Evangelization and Pope Benedict XVI

Pope Benedict XVI, both before and after his election as the successor of John Paul II, has referred to the new evangelization in a manner which indicates his familiarity with and support of his predecessor’s teaching on this point. The most substantial treatment of new evangelization in the writings of Cardinal Ratzinger was in an address given in 2000 on the occasion of the Jubilee of Catechists. He began by stressing the difficulties inherent in the new evangelization aimed as it is at highly secular cultures that have, in many instances, lost all reference to the divine and transcendent in life. Such an acknowledgment makes the proclamation of the Gospel a struggle, given the indifference and ignorance of many in regard to the Christian message. Agents of the new evangelization cannot expect that their labors will yield a substantial harvest at the beginning. Ratzinger quoted an old proverb, ‘Success is not one of the names of God.’ This idea is repeated in *Spe Salvi* where Benedict, in his second Encyclical, proposed that the Christian virtue of hope does not equate to human progress or an unfounded optimism. Hope is not to be measured by worldly suc-

cess but needs to be seen in a more eschatological sense. The course of the new evangelization, according to Ratzinger, derives from the close connection of the evangelist to the person of Christ, through frequent prayer and a rich sacramental life. Only on this basis can the evangelist move to proclaim the Gospel as a personal witness.

Bearing in mind that the pontificate of Benedict XVI is still, relatively speaking, in its early stages, the number of substantial documents (such as Apostolic Exhortations or Encyclicals) that have been written has been comparatively small. Nevertheless, Benedict referred to the 'new evangelization' in his address for World Youth Day 2008, where he reiterated the point made in *Ecclesia in Oceania*:

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church in Oceania is preparing for a new evangelization of peoples who today are hungering for Christ.... A new evangelization is the first priority for the Church in Oceania.(6)

In an address to the Diocese of Rome, Benedict expressed his conviction in the following words: 'If faith is truly the joy of having discovered truth and love, we inevitably feel the desire to transmit it, to communicate it to others. The new evangelization to which our beloved Pope John Paul II called us passes mainly through this process.'

Benedict likewise endorsed other dimensions of the new evangelization as enunciated by John Paul II. In answer to a question about how to bring about the new evangelization, Benedict's response was twofold: first, by proclaiming Christ clearly and unambiguously, and second, by living in an evangelical fashion. In a 2006 address to diocesan clergy of

Albano, Benedict recognized the three-fold distinction found in *Redemptoris Missio*, and so spoke of new evangelization as aimed at those with 'reduced' faith as opposed to the continuous evangelization of those associated with parishes.

Concluding Comments

The new evangelization was a central theme of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. It seems likely to remain a critical part of Catholic discourse in the future. In John Paul II's thinking, the new evangelization is one of the clear fruits of the Council, a path that can be traced from *Ad Gentes* to *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to his own writings.

The new evangelization recognizes that the missionary outreach of the Church takes place in a variety of contexts. Some of the newest and most challenging of these are cultures with a Christian heritage in which many baptized Catholics have either a loose connection with the faith community or have moved away completely. In addressing the practical challenges of the new evangelization there must be openness to new methods and processes to engage the changed societal circumstances in many countries.

The new evangelization as envisaged by John Paul II is a demanding task. It sets as its goal much more than a passive and loose identification with Christ or with the Church. One way of refining these points is to conceive of the new evangelization as revolving around two fundamental points. The first is an emphasis on an ever deepening, personal relationship with Christ; the second is a desire to bring others into communion with Christ.

FURTHER READING

Pope John Paul II, 'Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*', in J. Michael Miller, (Ed), *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*. (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc, 1996).
 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*. (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1999), 16.
 Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Oceania*. (Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publi-

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 Joseph Ratzinger, 'Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers', 12 December 2000. Obtained on 12/10/2007 from Zenit News Service at www.zenit.org/article-17125?l=english