

A New "Ready, Set, Go Evangelize!"

On June 28, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI announced, "I have decided to create a new organism, in the form of a pontifical council, with the principal task of promoting a renewed evangelization in the countries where the first proclamation of faith has already resounded... but which are living through a progressive secularization of society and a kind of 'eclipse of the sense of God.'" [VATICAN CITY, Catholic News Service]. His decision reinforces the call to a 'new evangelization' as emphasized in *A Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization* (2007), which says, "New evangelization' designates pastoral outreach to those who no longer practice the Christian faith." [Section 12] This new initiative, spearheaded by a pontifical council, is no small thing. The last pontifical council formed by a pope was 25 years ago, when Pope John Paul II created The Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry. Such a council which is a department of the Roman Curia, assists the pope in a particular field of competency, so that the mission of Christ may be carried out most effectively.

This call for "new evangelization" is not in itself new. As early as 1983, Pope John Paul II appealed to the whole church by saying, "...The moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to **a new evangelization** (*emphasis ours*) and to the *mission ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples." [*Mission of the Redeemer*, 3] What is "new" is the focus on both re-evangelizing unchurched and inactive Catholics ("new evangelization"), as well as increased missionary work with those whom have neither heard of Jesus Christ, nor been invited into to a life-giving relationship with him in the Catholic Church (*mission ad gentes*—"to the nations").

The document, "The Task of the Latin American bishops" [*Origins* 12, March 24, 1983 p. 659-662] also concludes that we do not have a new message to proclaim. "Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme is always the one gospel given in Jesus Christ." But we do need a new inner fire of the Holy Spirit, new ways of reaching out, and of bringing Jesus alive to those who have experienced an "eclipse of the sense of God," who may have never heard the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. "...The present time is instead marked by a formidable challenge to undertake a 'new evangelization,' a proclamation of the Gospel which is always new and always the bearer of new things, an evangelization which must be new in its ardor, methods and expression." [Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, 106]

Building on these insights and those offered by Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, CSB, and other commentators, some features of this "New Evangelization" are listed below:

- **Discerning**—The Spirit of God is working in the world and in the heart of each unchurched and inactive Christian. Through Baptism, he or she is already our brother or sister in Christ. With the patient love of Jesus, we look for signs of how the Spirit is moving that person's life, affirming those signs as part of God's call to them. We also seek to discern what gifts of the Faith they may be open to receiving at this time. Then we share some part of these gifts (Gospel message, catechesis, Sacraments, tradition or Church teaching) as invitations to come follow Jesus more deeply. This presupposes that we ourselves are studying and being transformed by scripture and our Catholic Faith in an ongoing way.*

- **Missionary Witness**—Because of the wide disaffection with Christianity and the Church in our culture, we must live as missionaries or messengers—sent by Christ and the Church to live our faith out-loud in our family, neighborhood, parish, workplace, and community. Our Baptismal call is to encounter Jesus Christ in our daily lives and to share the unconditional love of God by serving others. This silent witness is critical in evangelizing. Pope Benedict XVI, during “World Youth Day in Cologne,” Germany [August 18, 2005] exhorted, “...The Church needs genuine witnesses for the new evangelization: men and women whose lives have been transformed by meeting Jesus and who are capable of communicating this experience to others. **In short, the Church needs saints**, who are called to holiness and holy people alone can renew humanity.”
- **Proclaim Christ**—Experience has shown us that such loving presence and service alone does not necessarily bring people back to Christ and the Church. We must find the words to share our personal faith stories with others—how Jesus has touched our lives and changed us, how the love of the Christian community has made us whole—and invite our family, friends and acquaintances to join us in the Catholic Church. “I have often repeated the call for a new evangelization during these years. I repeat it again in order to emphasize that we must renew that original impulse and allow ourselves to be filled with the zeal of the apostolic preaching after Pentecost. We must awaken in ourselves those sentiments of St. Paul who exclaimed: 'Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16).” [Pope John Paul II, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, 40]
- **Urgency**— With Sunday Mass participation at only 23% of Catholics in the United States, an appropriate “haste” to evangelize in new ways seems warranted. There are dioceses in our country with less than 15% of Catholics at Sunday Mass. And some studies on church participation advise that Sunday Mass attendance will continue to drop 1% per year at least through 2020. Our model for this urgency is the Blessed Virgin who conceived Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and then “set out and traveled to the hill country in haste” to bring him to her cousin Elizabeth. (Lk.1. 39f)
- **Boldness**—It will take more than “business as usual” for us to evangelize those who no longer follow Jesus. We need a “holy audacity,” a “holy madness.” We need to surrender more completely to the person of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization, asking that we be filled and empowered for this mission with all the spiritual gifts. Let us imitate Ss. Peter and John, who when they were arrested in Jerusalem and ordered not to speak of Jesus gathered with the early Christian community in Jerusalem to pray for boldness, “And as they prayed, the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31)
- **Solidarity**—When we face opposition to and misunderstanding about our mission of evangelization in everyday life, we are not alone. Jesus reminds us, “And behold, I am with you always....” (Mt. 28:20) We are united with St. Paul, all the saints living and dead, to whom the Lord says, "Do not be afraid. Go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you. No one will attack and harm you, for I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9-10)
- **Evangelize Culture**—Culture has been spoken of as the national background, community, neighborhood, work, family, with all the joy, hope, grief, and anguish of those around us.

“The new evangelization calls for a clearly conceived, serious, and well organized effort to evangelize culture. The Son of God, by taking upon Himself our human nature, became incarnate within a particular people, even though His redemptive death brought redemption to all people, of every culture, race and condition. The gift of His Spirit and His love are meant for each and every people and culture, in order to bring them all into unity after the perfect unity existing in the Triune God” [Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 70]. We are called to transform the society around us by promoting Gospel values of justice and peace, validating cultural elements that affirm these values and challenging those that oppose them. Among the many ways of transforming culture are evangelizing parish projects, programs, social justice initiatives, lay movements, small Christian communities, large gatherings, and use of the media (TV, radio, Internet, social networking, etc.).

The gulf between daily life and faith in our country has grown exponentially over the past two generations. So we are called to bridge this gulf with a missionary evangelization as exciting, dangerous, challenging, and humbling as if we are being sent to bring the Gospel of Jesus across the galaxy to planets light-years away. One thing is certain—we are not in control of the results. The Holy Spirit is! “The Spirit is present in the Church and he is the guide in mission to the nations. It is comforting to know that not we, but He is the principal agent of mission. This fills us with peace, joy, hope and courage. It is not the results that must concern the missionary, because they are in God’s hands: he or she must work with all his resources and let the Lord work” [Pope John Paul II, “Message for World Mission Sunday 1998,” 4]

Small Group or Ministry Sharing (3 or 4 people—20 mins.)

1. Describe a family member, friend, or acquaintance that has had an “eclipse of the sense of God” in their lives (without including names or confessional details). Why did you pick that person?
2. Which two features of the “New Evangelization” have you heard the most about in the past and in what context?
3. Which one of the seven features mentioned is most challenging for you to embrace in your own life?
4. Is your group or ministry more concerned with “business as usual” or “boldness” in speaking about Jesus Christ? Why? What first step could be taken to move forward?

Take an Evangelization Challenge:

Learn how to more effectively reach inactive Catholics. Explore six keys for developing a new model of everyday missionary outreach that goes beyond programs and relies on God's presence in each person's journey of faith. Sign up as a group for “**Keys to Reaching Inactive Catholics**” training from www.pncea.org. Go to: <http://www.pncea.org/events/keystoreachinginactivecatholics.aspx>.

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