

# A Meditation on the New Evangelization and the Year of Faith

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## **The mission is “of God”**

The expression *Porta Fidei* can be traced to a passage from Acts of the Apostles (Acts 14:27). Paul and Barnabas, returning from a long missionary journey, tell the mother Church of Antioch all God had done and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles! And “God who acts in the mission and uses the apostles is the God who opens the door of faith”! Paul and Barnabas are spectators of “how” God enters the hearts and minds of the people and opens them up to Jesus Christ. Every generation of Christians must identify “how” God communicates himself to humanity, the “manner” in which it is shown in the lives of people, and then choose the “forms” more appropriate to communicate the Gospel and transmitting the faith.

The content of the Gospel is always the same, although people, their contexts, cultures and life situations will vary. Blessed Pope John XXIII, at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, asked the Council Fathers to take a “leap forward” in both “doctrinal dissemination” and “formation of conscience”. He identified this as “The deposit of faith, namely the truths contained in doctrine and other forms in which they are expressed” (11 October 1962).

## **The origins of the new evangelization**

One can understand the insistence with which Blessed Pope John Paul II spoke of a “new evangelization”. Historically, the first articulation of the need for a new evangelization came in 1979 by Pope John Paul II at a visit to Nowa Huta, Poland. Subsequently, the Holy Father

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<sup>1</sup> This is a meditation that Nicola Albanesi (Visitor, Province of Rome), on the Year of Faith (11 October 2012 - 24 November 2013), begun on the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council in the light of the Synod of Bishops on “The New Evangelization for The Transmission of the Christian faith” (7-28 October 2012).

spoke more at length formally in an address on March 9, 1983 during his visit to Haiti, where he spoke to CELAM conference to celebrate the fifth centenary of the evangelization of Latin America. This centenary, said the Pope, must not just be oriented as a *'re-evangelization'* but a *'new evangelization'*, "*new in its ardor, methods, and in its expressions*". Its purpose is not to evangelize again, but to do so in a "new form".

Pope John Paul II further developed these ideas while visiting Salto, Uruguay on May 9, 1988. What would be characteristic of the 'newness' of this project is the zeal for Jesus Christ which it would be expressed as a unity "that changes hearts". A key approach for this 'new method' of evangelization is to challenge every member of the Church to become a promoter of evangelization by living it in regular, daily discipleship. In this new expression of evangelization, if one is listening to what the Lord Jesus teaches, then a commitment to justice and human promotion will always accompany the action of evangelization. The "newness" of the "new evangelization" therefore lies in enthusiasm and methods (St. Vincent would them zeal and creative love) and is expressed as a new language of love which St. Vincent would as akin to the Vincentian virtues of humility, simplicity, and meekness.

It has evolved to the actions of his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, who, on September 10, 2010 created the Pontifical Council to Promote the New Evangelization, entrusted with the task of "providing adequate responses for the whole Church, regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit, to present to the contemporary world a missionary zeal for a new evangelization".

## **The Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization**

The *Instrumentum Laboris*, a preparatory document of the Synod of Bishops on new evangelization, assert that its purpose is he "transmission of the faith". It states that the Church transmits the faith which "she herself lives" by listening to the word in the liturgy, the sacraments and the Christian life. The Creed we profess is the "record" of faith but charity is clearly the privileged language of the faith: "Love is the language of the new evangelization than words is expressed in works of community, of closeness and helping people in spiritual and material needs". In other words, it is about sharing, closeness and help, especially to the marginalized.

All this must be done "in our time". That phrase is taken from the opening line of the Vatican II document "*Nostra Aetate*" dealing with the Church's relationship to non-Christian religions. However, this expression synthesizes the "mission" of the Church according to the mindset of the Council. The mission must take place "in our time";

otherwise, it lacks currency and relevance. Missionaries today should be contemporary and attuned to these times, using methods of evangelization that encompass preaching and catechesis. It employs a language of expressing faith, so people may communicate and feel, act, and live in a manner of solidarity with the poor.

### **The proclamation of the Year of Faith**

However, for many years, we have talked about a crisis of faith. The crisis facing the West now is that of how to act and live as people of faith. It seems we have lost the ability to think of ourselves as a Christian community, and specifically, in the use of both language and how to perceive Christian values as a guide for ethical choices. Even in traditional forms and associations, a crisis is still present for in the Church. Faced with this crisis situation, Pope Benedict XVI invites us to enter *Porta Fidei*, the “door of faith”.

Practically speaking, it means coming into contact with Christ. Interestingly, the Pope insists the year of faith is not so much about the need for a renewal of the Church, as much as the beauty of the encounter with Christ. This encounter needs to be available to all, and with this new opportunity to meet Jesus comes the call to be a missionary. Faced with this crisis of faith, the Church is called upon to respond by evangelization by proclaiming the Gospel as its true source. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the true strength of the Church, is no longer perceived as such in the consciousness of many Christians.

### **The invitation to faith addressed in particular to the younger generation**

Today, it is urgent that to continue the mission of the Church, we find new ways and a new language to speak of Jesus and God, and to give people the opportunity to engage in an ecclesial experience of the Catholic faith. Young people in particular have a thirst for spirituality, but cannot always articulate their spiritual needs which can be unspoken. There is need to help them express their needs and deep aspirations, and to give them a way of engaging the language and Christian culture to help them understand and interpret fundamental questions of existence. The Church must “Be Christ” to young people by talking to them, making an effort to listen to them, accompanying them in their paths of human and spiritual growth, and supporting them in times of difficulty. Young people trust those who they find reliable. And trust comes from personal relationship that are lived and cultivated.

The Church can give them a taste of God, educating them to the beauty of a life of faith. In the face of disappointment and disillusion-

ment of the many economic, political, social, and personal obstacles to living a full life in today's world, the Church must assist the young so, in the words of Jesus, they may have "abundant life". This can be done by showing them viable ways to live the Christian faith as members of the Church.

### **Over a new vision of charity**

Of all the ways in which the faith can be expressed, the best is that of charity (1 Cor. 13). Unfortunately, the Church's commitment to charity is not always seen as evangelization in itself. Compared to priority given commitments to areas such as mission, catechesis, and liturgy, works of charity and service can appear relegated to the private sphere, the task of individual members, or be seen as the responsibility of some particular group. It is clear that, from a Christian perspective, love only serves to strengthen the credibility of the work of evangelization, making it greater than that just a moral commitment of the individual, or at most, a practice of the Catholic social doctrine. An example of the link between evangelization and works of charity is seen in many parishes where their works of charity and service are parallel to its pastoral work. The challenge today for both the Church and the parish is to foster links between service and evangelization, and with those who serve and are served as members of the one Body of Christ.

Therefore, it is necessary to overcome the idea that charity and service are peripheral but rather, to see it as a place for pastoral activity of the Church, as envisioned by St. Vincent. Charity and service are not merely ways to evangelization, or promote good human behavior. It is so much more: a pathway to a deeper connection with Christ in the poor, and with the poor in Christ. Evangelization without charity can make the quest for faith seem like an abstract search, the fruit of faith disembodied 'spiritualist' way. Promoting charity and service without the context of the Church's rich faith tradition would make it into a type of social action, philanthropy, or solidarity but lose out on the crucial ecclesial and salvific dimensions necessary for the new evangelization.

### **The Vincentian Way**

The path to the Vincentian charism is that the Gospel: a charity which evangelizes. At a time when so many believe that love exists in and for itself, the proclamation of the love of God is best expressed in the Gospel. The Gospel shows us that God favors the poor. Due to their particular conditions of life, such as poverty, discrimination, and being

marginalized, it is harder for those living in poverty to feel loved and to open themselves to the love of God and neighbor. They need the support of the Church as Body of Christ to give and return love, and to see their lives as worth living.

According to St. Vincent's writings and actions, mission and charity are the two parallel, but complementary roads the Church travels on the road to evangelization. "New evangelization" needs to unite the mission of the Church with love of God and neighbor; to see them indissolubly united. It is a mission that is charity and charity that is mission! This path is long and winding, it takes time and effort, much personal energy, and great vision. The new evangelization is a difficult, but exciting task. It continues the mission of Jesus who spoke and acted lovingly and unconditionally to all people.

### ***Quick References***

#### **Two classics on this theme:**

- R. BLÁZQUEZ, *Iniciación cristiana y nueva evangelización*, Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao 1991 (trad. en. *Woe to Me if I do not Preach the Gospel! Christian Initiation and the New Evangelization*, Graphite, Naples 1997);
- J.-M. LUSTIGER, *Comment Dieu ouvre la porte de la foi*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2004 (trad. en. *God Opens a Door of Faith*, St. Paul, Cinisello Balsamo [Milan] 2006).

#### **Two current contributions:**

- R. CANTALAMESSA, *Like the Wake of a Ship. Horizons for a New Evangelization*, St. Paul, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2012;
- R. FISICHELLA, *The New Evangelization*, Mondadori, Milan 2012.