

THE YEAR OF FAITH

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The Call to a New Evangelization

What does it say to us as members of the
Congregation of the Mission?

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1. The Call to a New Evangelization

In October 2012, 300 bishops from all over the world (accompanied by our Superior General!) joined Pope Benedict XVI in a Synod on the New Evangelization. The theme was not a new one.

Forty-five years ago, in 1968, the Medellín document, which had dramatic effects in Latin America, called for a re-evangelization of human existence¹. It envisioned a Latin American church that would be an evangelizer of the poor, committed to living in solidarity with them². The final document at Puebla, in 1979, continued this analysis of a renewed evangelization³. In 1992, the document of Santo Domingo, building on the experience of two decades, provided an extensive development of the contents of a “New Evangelization”⁴. By the time of Aparecida (2007), the term “New Evangelization” was taken for granted⁵.

Almost all commentators agree that Paul VI, while not using the term “new evangelization”, is one of its principal architects. Here is the description of evangelization that he used in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*⁶:

¹ MEDELLÍN, VIII, 8.

² MEDELLÍN, XIV, 8.

³ PUEBLA, 340f.

⁴ SANTO DOMINGO, *Conclusions*, 23 ff.

⁵ Aparecida, “Message to the Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean”, 3.

⁶ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 24.

Evangelization is a complex process made up of varied elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner-adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative. These elements may appear to be contradictory, indeed mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complementary and mutually enriching. Each must always be seen in relationship with the others.

In the documents of the Church in the years following *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, there are some emphases that are quite new. Not that they never existed before: we can find most of them, at least in some form, in Fathers of the Church. But as the Church interfaced with contemporary societies and cultures, there was a new emphasis on:

- the preferential option for the poor;
- the effects of sin on social structures;
- the systemic aspects of justice and injustice;
- life issues (war, peace-making, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment);
- the erosion of family structures and sexual morality;
- integral liberation;
- and ecology.

Because *Evangelii Nuntiandi* was still fresh in the air as our Constitutions of 1984 were being prepared, it had a great influence on them. In fact, it is one of the few documents that our Constitutions cite specifically⁷. The Constitutions, as one might expect, cite St. Vincent, the Bible, and the Code of Canon Law, but they also cite *Evangelii Nuntiandi* three times:

C10 cites EN 14. The Constitutions apply to the Congregation of the Mission the statement that Paul VI applied to the Church, saying that “evangelizing is to be considered (our) own grace and vocation, and expresses (our) deepest identity”.

C11 cites EN 23. This article of the Constitutions affirms that the Congregation’s work of Evangelization in word and action should strive for this: that all should be faithful to “the kingdom, that is to say, the new world, the new order, the new manner of being, of living, of living in community, which the Gospel inaugurates”.

C16 cites EN 53. This article of the Constitutions states: “Among the apostolic works of the Congregation, the foreign missions and missions to people in a similar state of evangelization have an hon-

⁷ *Constitutions* 10, 11, 16.

ored placed. In building up a new ecclesial community, missionaries should pay special attention to the 'seeds of the word' which may be found in the cultural and religious practices of the people".

I limit myself here to the Constitutions. The *Ratio Missionum* explicitly cites articles 9, 20, 27 and 62 of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and contains many other allusions to the document.

To me, it is fascinating to analyze how strongly *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the terminology of the New Evangelization have influenced not only our Constitutions, but also other official documents of the Congregation of the Mission in recent years. Our documents, over the course of the last 30 years, contain a number of significantly new accents on:

- Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor;
- the link between evangelization and action for justice;
- searching out the causes of poverty and finding concrete solutions;
- specializing in the Church's social teaching;
- investigating the new forms of poverty;
- being evangelized by the poor;
- the poor as not merely the object of evangelization, but its subject;
- forming basic Christian communities;
- and the need for a global world view.

2. The call to a New Evangelization: What does it say to us, the members of the Congregation of the Mission, at the beginning of 2013?

The Synod, in its final message of October 26, 2012, presents a brief outline of what the New Evangelization asks of us. Paragraph 6 speaks of "an evangelization that is 'new in its ardor, in its methods, and in its expression' (John Paul II, Discourse at the XIX Assembly of CELAM, Port-au-Prince, March 9, 1983, n. 3)". Paragraph 12 in the final message adds: "(The second) symbol of the authenticity of the New Evangelization (is) the face of the poor. Placing ourselves side-by-side with those who are wounded by life is not only a social exercise, but above all, a spiritual act because it is Christ's face that shines in the face of the poor: 'Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25:40). We must recognize the privileged place of the poor in our communities, a place that does not exclude anyone but wants to reflect how Jesus bound himself to them. The presence of the poor in our communities is mysteriously powerful. It changes

persons more than a discourse does, it teaches fidelity, it makes us understand the fragility of life, it asks for prayer. In short, it brings us to Christ". This assertion of the Synod sounds wonderfully "Vincentian" to me!

In this part of the article, I would like to do two things. First, I will choose five phrases from the propositions approved by the recent Synod. I encourage you to meditate on them and chew over them. Usually, the propositions of a Synod are secret, but this time Pope Benedict XVI approved their publication. So, let's use them. Secondly, I will suggest what each of these phrases might say to the Congregation of the Mission today.

PROPOSITION 36:

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

The principal agent of evangelization is the Holy Spirit, who opens hearts and converts them to God. The experience of encountering the Lord Jesus, made possible by the Spirit, which introduces one into the Trinitarian life, welcomed in a spirit of adoration, supplication and of praise, must be fundamental to every aspect of the New Evangelization. This is the "contemplative dimension" of the New Evangelization which is nourished continually through prayer, beginning with the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, source and summit of the life of the Church.

Therefore, we propose that prayer be encouraged and taught from infancy. Children and youth should be educated in the family and in schools to recognize the presence of God in their lives, to praise Him, to give thanks for the gifts received from Him, and to ask that the Holy Spirit guide them.

One of the most popular talks given at the Synod was that of Rowan Williams, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury. He emphasized the contemplative dimension of the Church's mission of evangelization. He stated: "Contemplation is an intrinsic element in this transforming process. To learn to look to God without regard for my own instant satisfaction, to learn to scrutinize and to relativize the cravings and fantasies that arise in me – this is to allow God to be God, and thus to allow the prayer of Christ, God's own relation to God, to come alive in me". Williams concluded: "That simply reminds us that evangelization is always an overflow of something else – the disciples' journey to maturity in Christ, a journey not organized by the ambitious ego but the result of the prompting and drawing of the Spirit in us. In our consideration of how we are once again to make the Gospel compellingly attractive to men and women of our age, I hope we never lose

sight of what makes it compelling to ourselves, to each one of us in our diverse ministries”.

Are we “contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer”, as Article 42 of our Constitutions calls us to be? Do we teach people to pray? Do we form others first to be ardent disciples so that they can then also be missionaries who are on fire?

PROPOSITION 7:

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION AS A PERMANENT MISSIONARY DIMENSION OF THE CHURCH

It is proposed that the Church proclaim the permanent world-wide missionary dimension of her mission in order to encourage all the particular Churches to evangelize... Such a world-wide mission will respond to the action of the Holy Spirit, as in a new Pentecost, through a call issued by the Roman Pontiff, who invites all faithful to visit all families and bring the life of Christ to all human situations.

I want to underline three points here. The proposition says that:

- a) The Church’s mission is permanent and global. Article 12 of our Constitutions calls us (C 12, 5°) to be ready “to go to any part of the world, according to the example of the first missionaries of the Congregation”.
- b) All the faithful have a missionary vocation. The first article of our Constitutions calls (C 1, 3°) “the members individually and collectively... to help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor”.
- c) I find it very interesting that the proposition invites all the faithful to visit all families. Home visits are a part of our Family’s tradition. The Daughters of Charity, from the beginning, visited the sick poor in their homes. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, right up to the present, sends its members to visit the homes of the poor. They go two by two.

PROPOSITION 31:

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION AND THE OPTION FOR THE POOR

Pope Benedict XVI teaches: “Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. ‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40). Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 15).

Today there are new poor and new faces of poverty: the hungry, the homeless, the sick and abandoned, drug addicts, migrants and the marginalized, political and environmental refugees, the indigenous peoples. The current economic crisis seriously affects the poor. Among the poorest in contemporary society are the victims of grievous loss of respect for the inviolable dignity of innocent human life. The preferential option for the poor leads us to seek out the poor and to work on their behalf so that they may feel at home in the Church. They are both recipients and actors in the New Evangelization.

The Church's accent today on a "preferential option for the poor" is surely an invitation to renew our own vocation. Note three emphases of Proposition 31:

1. It underlines the identification of Jesus with those in need. Basically, love of God and love of neighbor go together, as St. Vincent frequently emphasized.
2. The proposition highlights the new poor and the new forms of poverty.
3. It states, as do many of our own Vincentian documents, that the poor are not only the objects of evangelization, but also its agents.

That brings us to the next proposition on which I'd like to reflect with you, Proposition 47.

PROPOSITION 47:

FORMATION OF EVANGELIZERS

This Synod considers that it is necessary to establish formation centers for the New Evangelization, where lay people learn how to speak of the person of Christ in a persuasive manner adapted to our time and to specific groups of people (young people, agnostics, the elderly and so forth).

As you know, the formation of evangelizers is also an integral part of our vocation to follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. The first Article of our Constitutions says it very clearly (CR I, 2°). St. Vincent, too, says it clearly when he states: "In fact, by reason of our foundation, we are held, almost in equal measure, to carry out both the first and the second tasks (that is, evangelization of the poor and formation work)" (CR XI, 12). On other occasions, he even goes so far as to say that "we are equally obliged" to formation work and to preaching (SV VII, 561).

I'd like to thank you for all the work that you have done in the revision of the *Ratio Formationis* of the Congregation. I know how hard you, as well as the members of the Commission, have labored on this revision. I'm eager to see the final product.

Note, in Proposition 47, that the accent is placed on the formation of *lay evangelizers*. The proposition urges us to help them to learn to speak of the person of Christ in a convincing and enthusiastic way. In other words, it asks that they be *ardent*.

PROPOSITION 18:

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION AND THE USE OF THE MEDIA

The use of means of social communication has an important role to play in order to reach every person with the message of salvation. In this field, especially in the world of electronic communications, it is necessary that convinced Christians be formed, prepared and made capable to transmit faithfully the content of the faith and of Christian morality. They should have the ability to use well the languages and the instruments of today that are available for communication in the global village. The most effective form of this communication of the faith remains the sharing of the testimony of life, without which none of the "media" efforts will result in an effective transmission of the Gospel. Education in the wise and constructive use of social media is an important means to be utilized in the New Evangelization.

Proposition 18 emphasizes the use of the media in the New Evangelization, in particular the use of online media. If we look at Proposition 18 together with Proposition 51 on Youth, the emphasis of the Synod is quite strong. The Synodal fathers recognize that one of the signs of the times is that the young, for better or for worse, are online much of the time. In a way, the young are the indigenous people of the online world. We are the "immigrants" in that world. Online language is a language that we have acquired, but will always speak with an accent. The young, on the other hand, learned it as their native tongue. As a result, in the New Evangelization, we really *need* the young. We must encourage them to know and love Christ, and to communicate to others their enthusiasm for Christ. In doing so, they will use a language that they themselves know quite well, a language that we are handicapped in using.

May I suggest to you, that this emphasis of the Synod on youth is a topic that merits much reflection, discussion, and concretization?

There are so many other things that we might be able to say about the Synod. Its emphasis on *Lectio Divina* and its frequent citation of