

AN INTEGRAL VIEW OF EVANGELIZATION

Exploring the Mission of the Church Today

Evangelization, for many Catholics, is a relatively new term. The Second Vatican Council and recent popes [Paul VI, John Paul II, and Francis] have placed evangelization at the center of the Church's identity and mission; without doubt, they have gifted the Church with a rich understanding of the theology and praxis of evangelization. In presenting key insights from each pope, this piece consciously limits itself to *one pivotal document* on mission and evangelization authored by each pope [elements from John Paul II's *Ecclesia in Asia* could have validly been included]. This presentation treats Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), and Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG); it elucidates pivotal insights as to the nature and scope of missionary evangelization.

Additional insight can be drawn from two documents issued by the Secretariat for Non-Christians (founded in 1964 by Paul VI and renamed in 1988 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: PCID). On Pentecost Sunday, 1984, the Secretariat promulgated the document entitled: "The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission" (DM). Hidden in this little-known work on the interrelationship between dialogue and mission is a pivotal statement. This source affirms that mission and evangelization are understood "in the consciousness of the Church as a single but complex and articulated reality" (13).

On Pentecost Sunday, 1991, the PCID in conjunction with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples presented the document: "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (DP). Once again, the evangelizing mission of the Church is understood as a "single but complex and articulated reality" (2). Both documents (DM and DP) emphasize the unity and integral nature of evangelization, while at the same time affirming that evangelization necessarily comprises many dimensions. Though evangelization is a complex reality, this multi-faceted concept can be explained and articulated—all at the service of better fulfilling the Church's missionary mandate.

Naming the Elements comprising Evangelization. Despite the lengthy and complex titles of the 1984 and 1991 documents just mentioned, these two sources have added considerable clarity to a Catholic understanding of missionary evangelization. The clarity results from the fact that "principal elements" are specifically named. Thus, mission and evangelization are composed of: ► presence and witness; ► commitment to social development and human liberation; ► interreligious dialogue; ► proclamation and catechesis; and ► liturgical life, prayer and contemplation (cf. DM 13 and DP 2). In a word, the one evangelizing mission of the Church is comprised of several component elements and authentic forms. This is integral or holistic evangelization; this is—in compact expression—the wide view of evangelization promoted by Paul VI, John Paul II, and Francis in EN, RM, and EG. Appropriate references to these three pivotal documents will be highlighted throughout this entire presentation

This five-point vision has served the Church well over the past decades; this approach takes the thought of three popes and two Church documents and expresses it in a manner that ordinary Catholics can readily grasp and appreciate. At the same time, it does not do violence to the richness

and complexity of missionary evangelization. One easily perceives that the thought expressed in EN, RM, and EG is adequately captured in this five-point schema; in turn, employing this helpful schema enables a smooth maneuvering through lengthy papal documents. Viewing evangelization through its various essential dimensions results in clarity, insight, and proper integration. This is a Catholic vision of evangelization.

As the vision of “integral evangelization” is explored, a simple description or definition can prove helpful. Paul VI has written that “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity” (EN 18). The pope is asserting that the Gospel and its values are to affect all aspects of human life. Yes, the Good News is to transform economics, politics, culture, personal and social relationships, education, etc. It is, therefore, a false dichotomy to limit faith and mission to only the “spiritual” aspects of life, while holding that civil society is supposed to deal with life’s “material” realities. Again, note the comprehensiveness of Paul VI’s vision; the Gospel is to transform “all strata of humanity.” Our discussion now turns to exploring the five key dimensions of holistic evangelization. The specific area is presented and explained; specific references to the insights of the popes in EN, RM, and EG are provided. Then, the text shows how this particular dimension of evangelization is present in ministry of Jesus and in the life of Mary.

Christian Presence and Witness of Life. According to Paul VI, one’s “life-style” forms the “initial act of evangelization” (EN 21). Daily activities, living together in harmony, lives as individuals of integrity, duties in the community—all these are to be a basic “faith-witness” that demonstrates how Christian living is shaped by Christian faith and values. Through this wordless witness, “Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live” (EN 21). And, in today’s world, people desire and respect authentic witnesses (cf. EN 41; RM 11, 42; EG 14, 20, 119-121, 149-151). Paul VI wrote: “Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (EN 41; cf. RM 42). Indeed, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentic Christian life; the power of daily good example is clearly understood by dedicated parents! Saint Francis of Assisi is supposed to have told his followers: “Preach the Gospel always, use words if necessary.” In Asia, Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, known for her loving and selfless care of the poorest of the poor, is an “icon” of Christian presence, life, and service.

A brief glance at the life and ministry of Jesus reveals his authentic witness of life and compassionate presence among the people. Evangelists Luke and Matthew record how Jesus obediently lived his life with Mary and Joseph in Nazareth (cf. Lk 2:51-52; Mt 2:23; Mt 13:53-58). There are countless Gospel scenes portraying Jesus’ accompaniment with his disciples, friends, sinners, lepers, women, and outcasts; today this is popularly expressed by noting his solidarity with the “little, least, lost, lonely, and last.” His life-style proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom. Similarly, Mary’s life shows her as a “witness of faith” in the many events of her daily life, portrayed in the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), the flight into Egypt (Mt. 2:13-18), with Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:41-50), at home in Nazareth (Lk 2:51-52), and on Calvary (Jn 19:25).

Commitment to Social Development and Human Liberation. Community living as good neighbors based on faith convictions should naturally issue in genuine “service of humanity.” This means caring for the most unfortunate and needy, witnessing to justice, defending the integrity of creation; this dimension of evangelization includes the whole area of social concerns,

encompassing peace-building, education initiatives, health services (particularly during times of crisis), caring for refugees and migrants, defending the unborn as well as the aged, promoting family life and good government. Undoubtedly, this area of human development and human solidarity is a vast area of the Church's evangelizing mission (cf. EN 18-19, 29-33; RM 58-60; EG 50-109, 181-185, 197-216). Compassionate service is a message that the deaf can hear and the blind can see!

Jesus said to his followers: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate" (Lk 6:36). This injunction is virtually a summary of Luke's entire Gospel; recall Luke's "mercy" parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. Tenderness and compassion are hallmarks of Jesus' ministry. Pope Francis writes in *Misericordiae Vultus*: "Jesus reveals the face of the Father who is rich in mercy." Jesus' very person "is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously.... The signs he works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion" (MV 8). Jesus is "mercy made flesh" (MV 24). Mary is commonly known as "Mother of Mercy." She manifests her mercy through service when visiting her elderly, pregnant cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-45, 56) or by interceding with Jesus at the Cana wedding feast (Jn 2:3). Her *Magnificat* canticle (Lk 1:46-55) extolls God's abundant mercy.

Interreligious Dialogue. All evangelizing activities are inserted into specific contexts; particularly in Asia, these activities naturally assume an interreligious dimension. Thus, the Church in Asia, similar to most places in the world of today, accomplishes her mission in pluralistic and diverse cultures; she enters into interreligious or interfaith dialogue, cooperating with the followers of the great religious traditions. This dialogue takes many forms; there are the dialogues of daily life, deeds of service, religious experts, and faith experience, as well as other forms. John Paul II asserts: "Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (RM 55). This dialogue emerges from one's faith convictions. In contemporary circumstances, particularly in Asia, dialogue with religions and cultures is the truly appropriate Christian response (cf. EN 20, 53; RM 52-54, 55-57; EG 115-118, 238-243, 250-254).

During the time of Jesus various religions and cultures intermingled in Palestine. Thus, we witness Jesus interacting with the Syrophenician women (Mk 7:24-37), the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42), and the Roman centurion (Lk 7:1-10). He encountered a wide variety of non-Jews and people of other faiths, Romans, Greeks, Samaritans, and Gentiles. He pointed out that such people often proved to be models of virtue and compassion (the grateful leper in Lk 17:11-19; the Good Samaritan in Lk 10:29-37; the Samaritan woman in Jn 4:1-42). Jesus marveled at the faith of such foreigners (Mt. 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10). The same interfaith experience is manifested in the life of Mary and Joseph; they would have encountered a variety of people with a faith different than their own. This would have been particularly true during their time of exile in Egypt (Mt 2:13-15; 2:19-21). In addition, Mary can be taken as a model for interfaith dialogue, especially with Muslims, as noted in the documents of Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium* 16; *Nostra Aetate* 3). Specifically, the Council noted: The Muslims "honor Mary, His [Jesus'] virgin mother; at times they even call on her with devotion" (NA 3).

Explicit Gospel Proclamation and Catechesis. This dimension of evangelization includes preaching, catechesis on Christian life, teaching the content of the faith; in a word, this means

“telling the Jesus story” and “handing on the faith.” When the Holy Spirit opens the door and when the time is opportune, Christians do tell the Jesus story, giving explicit witness and testimony to their faith, its teachings and content, its biblical basis. Others are invited, in freedom of conscience, to come to know, love and follow Jesus and his teachings; the beauty of Christian faith is presented as a gift for others, without any pressure or coercion of any kind. This effort follows the helpful advice found in First Peter 3:15: “Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have; but, give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience.” In addition, through this proclamation of the faith, Christians themselves are further instructed in their faith; this is the process through which the Christian faith is communicated to the next generation of believers (cf. EN 22, 27, 42; RM 44-51; EG 3, 12, 24, 110-111, 246).

Jesus was a proclaimer of God’s message of Good News and salvation. He was known as a *rabbi*, a teacher; his message was centered on the coming of God’s Kingdom. His first words, recorded in Mark 1:15, are: “The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Good News.” *Basileia*, “kingdom,” appears well over one hundred times in Jesus’ message. His primary mode of teaching about God’s Kingdom was through the medium of parables. Jesus taught us to call God our Father and to pray: “Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done”! Mary is also a “servant of proclamation.” Mary manifested Christ to the shepherds (Lk 2:1-20). She proclaimed him to the visiting Magi (Mt 2:1-12). She directed the servants at the wedding in Cana to “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5). Mary becomes the “Mother of all Evangelizers” as Jesus speaks to his beloved disciple (and all disciples): “This is your mother” (Jn 19:27). Note also that many statues and paintings portray Mary showing and proclaiming Christ to the world. A common prayer to Mary is: “Show unto us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus.”

Liturgical Life, Prayer and Contemplation. Finally, integral evangelization and holistic mission necessarily include prayer, meditation, and worship. No one can effectively be engaged in the Church’s mission without a strong faith and prayer-life. Evangelization needs holy men and women who are themselves on fire with the love of Christ; spreading the fire of the Gospel will be accomplished only by those already burning with an experience of Christ. Holiness is an irreplaceable condition for evangelizers. The “God-experience” achieved in prayer and contemplation, in sacramental and liturgical life, will illumine and transform all other dimensions of evangelization (cf. EN 23, 43-44, 47; RM 46-49, 87-92; EG 47, 173, 259-288). Mission spirituality always emerges from a genuine and sustained “God-encounter”; as Pope Francis asserts: “mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people” (EG 268).

The Gospels manifest that Jesus was undoubtedly a “man of prayer.” He rose early in the morning to pray (Mk 1:35-39); he goes to the temple (Lk 2:41-50); he instructs his disciples to pray (Mk 11:24-25; Lk 11:1-4, 9-13). It is noteworthy that Jesus turns to his loving Father, *Abba*, during the “crisis moments” of his life: during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-46; Lk 22:39-46) and in prayer on the cross (Lk 23:34; 23:46). Certainly, Jesus’ “*Abba*-experience” permeates his entire life and person. The Gospels also present Mary as a “disciple-at-prayer.” Artists portray Mary at prayer during the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38). She constantly manifests the “response of the heart” during her life-time (Lk 2:19; 2:34-35; 2:51). Mary is at prayer with the disciples awaiting the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Like Jesus and Mary, we believe, as Pope Francis notes: “Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work” (EG 262).

An Integrated Perspective. Obviously, these five dimensions of a holistic understanding of evangelization complement and reinforce each other. In speaking of the complexity of the Church's evangelizing action, Paul VI gave a timely admonition: "Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it." The pope continued: "It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all its essential elements" (EN 17; cf. EG 176).

Thus, an older concept of the Church's mission has now been set aside. No longer are the elements of social justice, interfaith dialogue, peace-building, education and health care, life-witness, etc. simply "preparatory" to evangelization [*praeparatio evangelica*]; all five "principal elements" described here are constitutive of a holistic and integral understanding. Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Francis have expanded the horizons of evangelization; the more restrictive view, which held that only explicit Gospel proclamation and sacramental life constituted mission, has been superseded.

Concomitant with this expanded vision of evangelization, one finds a renewed emphasis on the missionary nature of the *entire Church* (cf. AG 2; EN 14, 59; RM 61-76; EG 14, 20, 119-121). Every baptized member of the Church is an evangelizer, whether layperson, ordained, or religious. Previously, when evangelization was linked more exclusively with explicit Gospel proclamation and sacramental life, laity often found it difficult to appreciate how they were to be evangelizers. Today, Catholic evangelization engages the entire Church (from top to bottom; especially, all the local churches), all states of life (lay, religious, ordained, married, single), all apostolic activities and forms of witness (the five principal elements—and other aspects). Undoubtedly, the totality of Christian missionary evangelization embraces all these dimensions.

Conclusion. This presentation has described a panoramic overview of a Catholic vision of evangelization. Through a presentation of the vision of recent popes, the bases for a renewed, holistic, and integral understanding of evangelization have been elucidated. When many words have been uttered, when much ink has been spilt, and when one more presentation has been completed, Catholic Christians must step back and radically affirm that: *All mission and evangelization is God's project. The Holy Spirit is always the principal agent of evangelization.* For evangelizers, missionaries, catechists, religious and lay alike, mission necessarily means trying to find out what God wills and what he is doing. Then, authentic evangelizers bend their wills to God's will, joyfully surrender to God's loving plan, and expend all efforts and energy to become worthy instruments that enable God's design to unfold. Evangelization, at heart and center, is an issue of faith (cf. RM 11). For Christians, for all local Churches, to live is to evangelize, to truly become "missionary disciples" (EG 120)!

Reflection Questions: What are the "principal elements" of a holistic view of the Church's mission? Why is it called "integral evangelization"? Present a synopsis of each of the five elements. Show how all of these elements are present in the lives of Jesus and Mary; provide examples from Scripture.

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