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FROM “MISSION” TO “NEW EVANGELIZATION”
The origins of a concept that challenges our Institutes

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On June 30, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI made a surprising announcement, that he had decided to establish a new Dicastery (Department) in the Vatican Curia, a “Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization”. On September 21 he issued a Motu Proprio formalizing its existence and named theologian-Archbishop Rino Fisichella as its first President. It was surprising because the present occupant of the Chair of Peter was on record as having called for the number of Curial offices to be reduced rather than increased. Moreover His Holiness just announced on October 24 at the conclusion of the Mid-East Synod that “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith” would be the topic of the next world-wide Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2012. What exactly is the “New Evangelization” that this new Vatican office is to promote? What are the origins of this concept? How did it develop? How does it affect the Catholic Church’s worldwide missionary activity?

Evangelizing all peoples: a permanent concern with different names

Ever since the risen Lord sent out his disciples to make disciples of all nations, the Catholic Church has engaged in what we now call “missionary activity”, the evangelization of those who do not yet know Christ so that local Churches could come to birth in their midst. But the way we speak of this activity has changed over the centuries. In fact for about 15 centuries the word “mission” was not used to refer to this activity. Also, the New Testament speaks of evangelizing or announcing the Gospel, but the noun “evangelization” began to be used by Catholics only about 50 years ago. In order to understand the term “new evangelization”, we have to understand first how the concept of “mission” has evolved, for it was in the context of clarifying the meaning of mission that Pope John Paul II officially introduced the concept of “new evangelization” into the Catholic Church’s vocabulary.

We can trace the development of the term, staring with the Second Vatican Council. When the Council centered mission on the evangelization of peoples rather than the geographical expansion of the Church, it brought about a transition from territorial to a situational idea of mission. How human groups relate to Christ in their concrete historical situations became more important than whether they lived in “mission lands”. Paul VI gave great importance to evangelization as being the fundamental task of the Church, and Latin America’s Puebla Conference called for a “new evangelization” of human groups in new cultural situations. John Paul II made this a major concern in his teaching ministry. I’ll describe what I have witnessed in the past 40 years, accompanying Latin American bishops in their efforts to make the continent’s Church truly “missionary”. I realize that others may offer other perspectives. What is important is appreciating what the “new evangelization” means and calls for. Understanding the origins of the concept may be of some help.

The modern meaning of “mission”

The word “mission” in its modern sense apparently goes back to St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. By the fourth “vow of the mission”, certain Jesuits were sent to non-Christian lands (or to countries lost to Catholicism during the Protestant Reformation) as agents vested with the authority of the pope to propagate the Catholic faith. Those sent soon came to be called “missionaries” and the places they were sent, “missions”.

The “missions” as a geographical and juridical term

Historically, since the 16th century the concept of “the missions” was closely associated with the practice of European (and later American) colonialism. The idea supposed that the “established churches” of Western Europe had a duty to transmit their form of Christendom to the previously non-Christianized
nations colonized by their countries. It implied the superiority of the old Christendom and the inferiority of the peoples colonized. The religious mission was normally combined with the secular enterprise of “civilizing” these peoples, in other words, transplanting Western cultural models. Thus the term “mission” came to mean the complex of activities by which the western ecclesiastical system was extended all over the world.

According to the jurisprudence in force when Catholic Christianity came to America and parts of Africa and Asia in the 15th and 16th centuries, the pope had direct authority over all peoples not yet embraced by Christendom, that is, subject to Christian authorities. It was assumed that he could delegate his powers to a secular power, as in the case of the Patronato conceded to the kings of Spain and Portugal. When in the 19th century these empires were weakened and new colonial powers came to control what we often call the “Third World” (Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific islands), the pope delegated his authority to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide (now called “for the Evangelization of Peoples”), which entrusted not-yet-Christianized territories to religious congregations or missionary institutes and delegated them to convert their inhabitants to Christianity and to “plant the Church” there (as Apostolic Prefectures or Vicariates). Thus “the missions” were generally identified with territories subject to the authority of Propaganda Fide.

**The limitations of the geographical and juridical idea of mission**

In the first place, this way of seeing things supposed that human groups needed missionary activity simply because they lived in certain geographical areas. It likewise implied that people who lived in Europe and North America (and more recently, in countries like Australia) simply needed ordinary pastoral attention, teaching doctrine and administering the sacraments to those who already were Catholic.

Theologically also, this geographical and juridical concept of “the missions” had some serious limitations. Conversion was often seen as the change of religion rather than an encounter with the living Christ and discipleship. The overt objective was really “Christianization” rather than evangelization: the incorporation of more and more peoples into a socio-political and religious entity called “Christendom”. The “missions” were the responsibility of the “missionaries”. It was not imagined that the entire Church is missionary by its nature or that all the faithful –bishops, priests, religious and laypeople– share in this missionary responsibility.

When the Latin American Church started to become actively missionary after the Council, the geographical and juridical criteria for defining mission were criticized as being seriously inadequate. For over 90% of those in need of a primary evangelization (mostly Native American peoples and African Americans) did not live in the “Propaganda territories” but in established dioceses. It was realized that people need missionary activity not because of they live in a certain type of ecclesiastical jurisdiction or territory but because they have not yet been evangelized in their cultural identity. The deficiencies of defining mission primarily by geography led to a “situational” view of mission. But first we’ll take a look at how the concept of “evangelization” came to complement that of “mission” in contemporary Catholic thinking.

**Catholic theology rediscovers evangelization**

The New Testament frequently uses the noun “Gospel” and the verb “evangelize” [or “announce the Gospel”]. In the 18th century, when some Protestants started to recognize the importance of mission activity (during the two centuries after Luther and Calvin, Protestant churches did not send missionaries), they coined the noun “evangelization”. Until 1955 this word is scarcely found in Catholic theological literature; since it was a “Protestant term” it was simply avoided. It was rediscovered in the Catholic catechetical renewal of the 1950’s and 60’s which emphasized that the teaching of the faith should have a “kerygmatic” dynamic, one that emphasized the “good news” of the Gospel. At that time, evangelization was distinguished from catechesis. Evangelization was the considered the first proclamation of the good news, and catechesis, the progressive formation in the faith of those who were already evangelized. In Asia, some missionaries and missiologists even spoke of a process of “pre-evangelization”, an announcing of how non-Christians are prepared for the explicit Gospel message. Thus the word “evangelization” was ready to be used in the Second Vatican Council forty years ago. In the documents of the Council the words “evangelization” and “evangelize” are used most frequently in the Decree on missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*, and normally in the sense of a first announcing of the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ. We’ll have more on evangelization below.

**From “the missions” to “missionary activity”**

The Council dramatically transformed the understanding of mission, although many Catholics, including bishops and priests not updated in missiology, still think and speak in preconciliar way. The document “on the missions” became the Decree “on missionary activity”. The change in terminology was not just a question of words but of concepts. The change was a costly process in the Council. The draft of that
Evangelization in the teaching of Paul VI

Ten years after the Council, in late 1974, Pope Paul VI convoked an Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to consider the different dimensions of "Evangelization in Today's World". The pope assumed and organized the input of the Synod and communicated it to the whole Church in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975). In it he stressed that evangelization is the specific and fundamental task of the Church. The Church exists to evangelize, to announce the Gospel. Evangelization is above all – and can never omit – the explicit announcing of the Gospel, making known the person and message of Jesus Christ. But evangelization is more; it is a complex, rich and dynamic reality that cannot be fully understood unless all of its elements are taken into account. Paul VI makes a point of not reducing evangelization to mission activity, the first announcing of Christ to those who do not yet know him and among which no mature local Church exists, from pastoral activity, directed to the evangelization of those peoples or groups that do not yet know Christ and among which no Catholic. This distinction was one of the Council’s "best kept secrets" until its emphatic reiteration by John Paul II in number 33 of Redemptoris Missio. Of course, for those who do not know this Encyclical, it is still a secret. We'll get back to this distinction below. But first we'll take a look at developments during the pontificate of Paul VI, in which the concept of "evangelization" acquired a new breadth and depth of meaning and a new importance.

Evangelization in the teaching of Paul VI

Unfortunately Evangelii Nuntiandi does not give a clear definition of "evangelization". It describes the multiple and rich elements involved in evangelization, the process involved, its effects and those responsible for it, but he does not define the term. Personally I like the definition proposed in the Instrumentum Laboris prepared for the Synod in 1973: "Evangelization is the totality of those activities by which people are brought to participate in the mystery of Christ". I like this definition because it reminds us that the objective of evangelization is a personal encounter with the person of Christ, and a participation in his paschal mystery. Personal encounter with Christ implies discipleship, and discipleship implies belonging to that community of disciples which is the Church. I see this (more than the salvation of individual souls) as the objective of all evangelization and of missionary activity in particular. The Church is necessary in salvation because the historical participation in God's saving plan is of utmost importance. God wants this participation to be fully human: realized with awareness, freedom, responsibility and heartfelt joy, not alone, but with others in society and culture.

Since Evangelii Nuntiandi the word "evangelization" became quite popular. Catholics began to speak a lot of evangelization and called just about everything they did evangelization, even if it did not make bring people to participate in the mystery of Christ. Some missionaries and missiologists focused more on the
“elements” of evangelization and on the “methods” used for doing it rather than on its theological foundations. While “evangelization” was the thing to do, a crisis arose regarding the need and urgency of missionary activity. Some considered it useful for promoting the well being of poor and oppressed peoples overseas and mutual toleration of religions and cultures, but not necessary for the salvation of persons. If not “necessary for salvation”, how could mission be urgent? The Catholic Bishops of the U.S. recognized this problem in 1986 and produced the Pastoral Letter: To the Ends of the Earth. In 1990, Pope John Paul II recognized the global scope of this crisis and wrote a challenging Encyclical on the permanent validity of the missionary mandate of Christ, Redemptoris Missio. In the following paragraphs I shall highlight only a few of his thoughts, those that help us understand what makes missionary activity specific and distinctive.

**Pope John Paul II opens up the perspectives on missionary activity and calls for a “new evangelization” of those who are no longer Christian**

John Paul II gave new energy to the conciliar concept of “missionary activity” in its specific sense, and he did this in various ways. As the Council did in Ad Gentes 6, the pope affirms that the Church has one evangelizing mission, but that the exercise of this is differentiated due to the different situations in which human groups find themselves. It was in this context that called for a “new evangelization” and gave it a rather clear meaning.

**He reiterates the distinction between mission and pastoral activity**

Basic to John Paul II’s missiology is his emphasis on the importance of distinguishing missionary activity, oriented toward those who are beyond the visible limits of the Church, from ordinary pastoral attention to those who already find themselves in the Church. To this mission activity in its proper sense he give the name “mission ad gentes”, a new term popularized in Latin American missionary circles since the Puebla Conference (1979), but not yet widely used elsewhere. Here are his words as found in Redemptoris Missio 33:

> First, there is the situation which the Church's missionary activity addresses: peoples, groups, and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups. This is mission ad gentes in the proper sense of the term.

> Secondly, there are Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures. They are fervent in their faith and in Christian living. They bear witness to the Gospel in their surroundings and have a sense of commitment to the universal mission. In these communities the Church carries out her pastoral activity and pastoral care.

In the years prior to Redemptoris Missio, only certain missionary groups and missiologists underscored this distinction between mission and pastoral activity. This distinction is still unknown to or ignored by many church leaders, theologians and even many missioners who still direct their efforts mainly to general pastoral care, the attention given to the faithful who frequent their parishes. They give so much attention to local and immediate pastoral problems, that the challenge of missionary activity in its specific sense is often ignored or postponed.

**Between Mission and Pastoral Activity: an intermediate situation that calls for a “New Evangelization”**

When John Paul II issued Redemptoris Missio in 1990. 25 years had elapsed since the Council’s mission Decree Ad Gentes. In that quarter century the socio-cultural and religious conditions affecting the world’s peoples kept on changing, as did the Church’s awareness of how these affected her evangelizing mission. The distinction between human groups that needed missionary activity and those that needed ordinary pastoral attention was valid but no longer sufficient. It is true that there still were entire peoples which did not yet know Christ, whose ancestral cultures were not affected by the Gospel, and that there were other groups that were evangelized and constituted as Christian communities. But there were also considerable groups that were no longer Christians, for whom Jesus Christ, his Gospel and his Church were of no importance. It was to these groups that John Paul pointed to in the next paragraph of Redemptoris Missio 33:

> Thirdly, there is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living 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.”
In the decade or so after Puebla, John Paul urged a “new evangelization” particularly in the context of the Church’s preparation for two events: the fifth centenary of the Gospel’s arrival in America (1492-1992) and the beginning of a new millennium (2000-2001). In the first case, the message was directed to Latin America and in the second, to a progressively secularized Europe. In the first case, the accent was on an evangelization that was “new in its ardor, in its methods and in its expression”. In the second case, its stress was on a “re-evangelization” of people who were baptized but who have grown indifferent to religion. As Pope Benedict XVI observed in his recent Motu Proprio, John Paul II “made this urgent task a central point in his wide-reaching Magisterial teaching” and “systematically explored [it] in depth on numerous occasions”.

Where did John Paul II get this idea of a “new evangelization”?

As far as I can understand the ways things developed, it was John Paul’s involvement in the Third General Conference of Latin American Episcopate (celebrated in Puebla, Mexico, in early 1979) shortly after his election that sharpened his focus on evangelization and gave him the words with which to speak of it.

The term “new evangelization” appeared in Latin American documents at least since 1968. In the final “Message” (№ 6) of their Second General Conference (that of Medellin), the Latin American Bishops committed themselves to “foster a new evangelization”. This was a “one-liner”. The idea was there, but it was still rather vague in its substance. I found other uses of the term “new evangelization” in 1969 and 1970 in the context of the indigenous apostolate in Latin America. I don’t know if it was also used in other continents. It does not appear in Paul VI’s Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975). I believe that it was the Latin American Church’s use of the term, particularly in the Puebla Document that directly influenced John Paul.

The Puebla Document (numbers 365-367) urges the Church to concentrate on three types of “situations most in need of evangelization” (the penultimate draft called them “missionary situations”). First are the “permanent situations”, the indigenous peoples and African American populations which are yet to be evangelized in their cultural identity. Second are the “new situations that call for a new evangelization”, human groups affected by recent socio-cultural changes, such as migration, urbanization and secularization. Finally are “particularly difficult situations”, groups whose urgent need of evangelization is often postponed: university students and other young people, military, business and labor leaders as well as the world of social communications (this item came from the pre-Puebla input of Bishop Juan Gerardi of Guatemala, martyred in 1998). I believe that the paragraph of the Puebla Document that concretely shaped John Paul’s thinking was Nº 366 that identified “new situations that require a new Evangelization”. The pope certainly knew that page of the Document quite well, because in Redemptoris Missio (№64) he praised as exemplary the commitment of the Latin American Bishops to missionary activity beyond their frontiers formulated in Nº 368.

Puebla 366 was not the result of a “spontaneous generation” during the course of the Conference. It had its own pre-history in the creative thinking of Bishop Roger Aubry CSsR (1923-2010), the one charged with drafting the text of Puebla’s sub-chapter on “The Criteria for Evangelization and its Universal Dimension”. Aubry, the Vicar Apostolic of Reyes in Bolivia’s Amazon area, north of La Paz, was President of the Mission Department of CELAM (the Latin American Council of Catholic Bishops) from late 1974 to early 1979. Since its inception in 1966 this Department had been committed to the specific evangelization of the continent’s indigenous peoples and the need to go beyond inadequate territorial criteria for determining what is “mission” in the specific sense. Central to the Department’s vision was the concept of “missionary situations” among human groups barely evangelized in their cultural identity. Aubry brought this line of thought to a new level and developed the concept of “new missionary situations”.

Aubry, perhaps more than anyone else, contributed to shaping a Latin American theology of mission with its own accents and to the missionary commitment of the continent’s episcopate. His profoundly biblical theology, formed by his mentor, François Xavier Durrwell, was centered on the paschal mystery and further shaped by the Council’s Ad Gentes. His reading of that Decree confirmed his conviction, born his understanding of the paschal mystery, that the Church is missionary by her very nature. He reiterated the importance given in Ad Gentes 6 to the distinction between missionary activity and ordinary pastoral activity. In the sixth paragraph of that number, these words caught his attention:

Moreover, the groups among which the Church dwells are often radically changed, for one reason or other, so that an entirely new set of circumstances may arise. Then the Church must deliberate whether these conditions might again call for her missionary activity.

Here the Council affirmed that changed conditions, even among previously evangelized human groups, may call for new missionary activity in the specific sense. Aubry was invited to address Latin America’s National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Sao Paulo in January, 1976. In that talk, describing “where is mission?” he called attention to this text, ignored by most other commentators on Ad
This was the origin of the concept of "new missionary situations" that would enter into the reflections of the CELAM Mission Department in the years before Puebla. It would become the substance of Puebla Nº 366, which affirmed that new missionary situations called for a "new evangelization". I believe that this is the text that gave John Paul II the language with which to speak of the need for a specifically original evangelization of those affected by changing socio-cultural situations.

**John Paul’s other approach to new missionary situations: non territorial “spheres of mission”**

The cultural identity of those who are served by missionary activity is implicit in the Council. John Paul II makes it explicit (RMis 34). The pontiff calls attention not only to traditional cultures but also to new socio-cultural situations. He speaks of three “spheres of mission”, territorial, social and cultural (RMis 37). What is interesting is that he considers these not only challenges to evangelization in general, but to mission _ad gentes_ in its proper sense.

For John Paul, missionary activity can no longer be limited to the first announcing of the Gospel to peoples _not yet evangelized_ in and from their cultural identity. This _territorial sphere_ of missionary activity is still extensive. It encompasses two-thirds of humanity or more than four billion people, mainly, but not exclusively, in Africa and Asia. The pope admits that this situation exists also in traditionally Christian regions, like Latin America (consider the urgent missionary situation of so many indigenous peoples and Afro-American and Asian American populations, perhaps one third of the continent’s inhabitants).

Whereas the territorial sphere is perduring, related to people with centuries-old religions and cultures, these are new situations, one “social” and the other “cultural”. The distinction I see is this. The “social sphere” refers to new ways of living together or of structuring relationships among human groups. The “cultural sphere” refers to new value systems and new ways of thinking.

The first non-geographical sphere that demands missionary activity is that which pertains to new social worlds and realities. It is the situation of those human groups involved in the phenomena of urbanization and migration, and particularly the new cultures of the poor, the marginalized and of youth. John Paul even dares to affirm that big cities should be “the privileged places” of _ad gentes_ mission today.

The third sphere of _ad gentes_ mission, and the second non-territorial sphere, are the _cultural areas_ or _modern “Areopagi”_, toward which the Church’s missionary activity should be directed. A modern “Areopagus” (a public meeting place) is the world of social communication, which shapes and diffuses new modern and post-modern cultural models. Another “Areopagus” of the modern world is constituted by the phenomena of generalized awareness (John XXIII and _Gaudium et Spes_ call them “signs of the times”) regarding human rights, promotion of women and children, integrity of creation, and the culture of politics, economics and scientific investigation.

In the teaching of John Paul II, all of these human situations or “spheres of mission”, whether historic-geographical or socio-cultural, demand _ad gentes_ missionary activity. The traditional territorial sphere refers broadly to _traditional cultures_, the peoples of Africa and Asia and the culturally non-Western populations of America, perhaps somewhat “Christianized” historically, but hardly evangelized. The new, non-geographical spheres, the social and cultural spheres, refer to _new cultures_ or new cultural situations. All of these require the attention and response of the missionary Church.

**Two ways of speaking of mission in new socio-cultural situations**

I believe that Pope John Paul II, in an effort to urge new form of missionary activity toward those distanced from the Church because of new socio-cultural and religious situations, uses two original ways if speaking: the “new evangelization” of RMIs number 33 and the non-geographical “spheres” of mission or “modern Areopagi” in number 37. While _ad gentes_ mission is directed to those who are “not yet evangelized” _in their particular cultural context situations traditional cultures_, there is another situation, or new cultural situation that of those who are “no longer Christians”, for whom a “new evangelization” is necessary. These are entire groups of baptized people in the countries of ancient Christendom for whom Jesus is not really important, who maintain their distance from the Church and have lost the living sense of Christian faith.

Some theologians and ecclesiastical people, including those who drafted the Lineamenta for the coming Synod of Bishops in 2011, distinguish the “new evangelization” from “ad gentes mission”. I believe that mentally they are restricting “ad gentes mission” to its geographical sphere, ignoring the social and cultural spheres identified by Pope John Paul II in RMis 37. For these non geographical spheres constitute effectively constitute “new missionary situations” that call for a specifically “new evangelization”. Perhaps
there is a certain confusion of terminology. After all the mystery of salvation is so deep, extensive and rich
that one particular way of expressing it is hardly ever sufficient or adequate. The problem is not one of
defining terms but of shaping our evangelization so that the Gospel message reaches the hearts of living
human groups in their particular historical situation.

“New Evangelization”: dimension of mission activity in the strict sense

Does this new evangelization of the dechristianized qualify as missionary activity in its specific
sense? It certainly does not fit into the category of ordinary pastoral care of the faithful who belong to mature
eyclesal communities and who are already committed to universal mission. Missionary activity in the specific
sense is an evangelization of human groups among whom Christ and his Gospel are not known and who do
not belong to the visible Church. Some of these groups are “not yet Christians”. Others are “no longer
Christians”. Because of this many of us Latin American missiologists are convinced that the “new
evangelization” of Pope John Paul II is a form of missionary activity in the specific sense.

Why a department of the Vatican to promote the “new evangelization”?

If the “new evangelization” is a dimension of ad gentes missionary activity, why is it necessary or
opportunity to create a new department in the Roman curia dedicated to this problematic? After all, we know
that the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, traditionally known as “Propaganda Fide”, already
exists, and has existed for almost 500 years. Here I offer some very personal opinions. I have no way of
knowing whether they correspond to the thought of the Holy Father. As a former National Director of the
Pontifical Mission Societies in Bolivia (1985-89) and as Past President of the International Association of
Catholic Missiologists (2000-04), I have had a limited experience of dealing with that missionary dicastery.
Obviously my observations are rather superficial, generalized and subject to nuancing or correction.

What I have observed is that Propaganda Fide has existed principally to supervise the ecclesiastical
organization and operations of the so-called “mission territories”. Its scope of action is vast, embracing two-
thirds of humanity. It extends to dozens of Apostolic Vicariates and Prefectures in certain geographical areas
(such as Latin America and the Middle East) as well as over a thousand missionary jurisdictions elevated to
the category of dioceses and archdioceses in Africa, Asia and Oceania. The nature of its task seems to be
mostly juridical (e.g. the naming of bishops in these jurisdictions) and economical (the financing of the
operations of the Church in these areas). The Congregation has inherited an inevitable historical and
structural burden. I believe it would be unrealistic to expect that it re-orientate itself to attend to the
challenges presented by the multitude of “new missionary situations” that are not territorial but rather social
and cultural

On the other hand, I have been able to observe that the new departments of the Holy See created
principally after Vatican II, the “Pontifical Councils” are more agile and better equipped to attend to the
challenges in their particular field of apostolate. I have had direct operative relations with the Pontifical
Councils for Promoting Christian Unity and for Interreligious Dialogue and indirect or occasional contacts with
the Councils for the Laity, Cultures and Justice and Peace. I have observed that the Presidents, Secretaries
and “staff people” of these Councils are chosen for their academic preparation and competency in the
specialization of the department.

I believe that the Holy Father, concerned about the multiple “new missionary situations” that call for a
“new evangelization”, has considered it opportune to create a new Pontifical Council charged with
responding to this challenge. Archbishop Fisichella is surely super-competent as a theologian and educator.
The cardinals and bishops already named as members of the Council seem to be quality people. Surely the
staff people will be chosen for their competency in the field of evangelization.

Is the “new evangelization” a concern only for the Church in Europe?

We know that Benedict XVI, like his predecessor, John Paul II, has shown in his teaching ministry a
particular concern for the re-evangelization of dechristianized human groups in Europe. But should the call
for a “new evangelization” be limited to that continent? Is a new department of the Vatican to be created for
the needs of one continent? At present over 60% of the world’s Catholics live in Latin America, Africa and
Asia. In these continents the challenges presented by pentecostalism, the encounter with new and traditional
cultures and the dialogue with other religions are greater challenges than dechristianization. John Paul II
obviously was not thinking of limiting his concern for the “new evangelization” to the continent of Europe. In
the 1980’s he was calling for a “new evangelization” in Latin America, “new in its ardor, in its methods and in
its expression”. After giving a specific definition to the term in number 33 his mission Encyclical, Redemptoris
Missio (see above), he insisted that “new evangelization” be one of the three guiding themes of the IV
General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (Santo Domingo, 1992). Obviously he did not have the intention of limiting it to Europe or to the phenomenon of dechristianization. Moreover the decision to make the “new evangelization” the theme on the 2012 General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops implies that it is a challenge the universal Church.

The “New Evangelization”: a challenge to the Missionary Institutes of Apostolic Life

The Missionary Institutes of Apostolic Life historically have been called to serve primarily in the territorial sphere of mission ad gentes, often in areas subject to the authority of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples or “Propaganda Fide”. Our mission has been a “mission ad extra”, beyond the frontiers of our homelands. For our priest and brother members, it was and is a “mission ad vitam”, as it is for our sisters who belong to missionary congregations of consecrated life. Since the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, all Catholic Christians, whether ordained, consecrated or lay, are called to be missionaries. I think I am faithful to the thinking of Blessed John Paul II, when I say that all, by virtue of their baptism, are called to be missionaries “ad gentes”, the evangelization of those who do not know Christ, in the vast new social or cultural spheres of mission, often in their lands. But not all are called to be missionaries ad extra or ad vitam as we are.

We Missionary Institutes of Apostolic Life have a charism that is rather unique. We exist totally for world mission and only for world mission. There are few other institutions in the Church (here of course we cannot forget the Pontifical Mission Societies) which are capable of educating people about the vast challenges of these other spheres of mission ad gentes and shaping a missionary spirituality that will give new life to our Church and motivating her to evangelize these sectors more effectively.

There is another important contribution we can and must make to our local Churches, at home or beyond our frontiers. Our missionary experience ad gentes and ad extra has made us aware of that evangelization necessarily involves a dialogical dynamic. We realize that before our contact with the diverse human groups, they have already experienced the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit which drawing them to a participation in the paschal mystery of Christ (GS 22). They express this experience in the language and symbols of their own culture, be that culture traditional and religious or modern and secular. Those involved on in the pastoral care of those of their own cultural groups do not have this experience or this special focus on evangelization. The “new evangelization” must be shaped by this dynamic if it is to be effective.

Conclusion

I have tried to show in these pages my belief that the idea of the “new evangelization” had its origins in Latin American missiological reflection, and that the use of the term in Puebla was a decisive influence on the thinking of John Paul II. I have been a witness of the process in which all of this happened. I hope that these observations and reflections may be of some use to some of my sisters and brothers in Church as the new Pontifical Council to Promote the New Evangelization is being set up and the 2012 Synod is being prepared. Surely this reality will have some resonance or repercussion in the life of or local Churches and Episcopal Conferences.

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