



# LIGHT & LIFE

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## THE NEED OF EVANGELIZATION

By Fr. Paul A. Duffner, O.P.

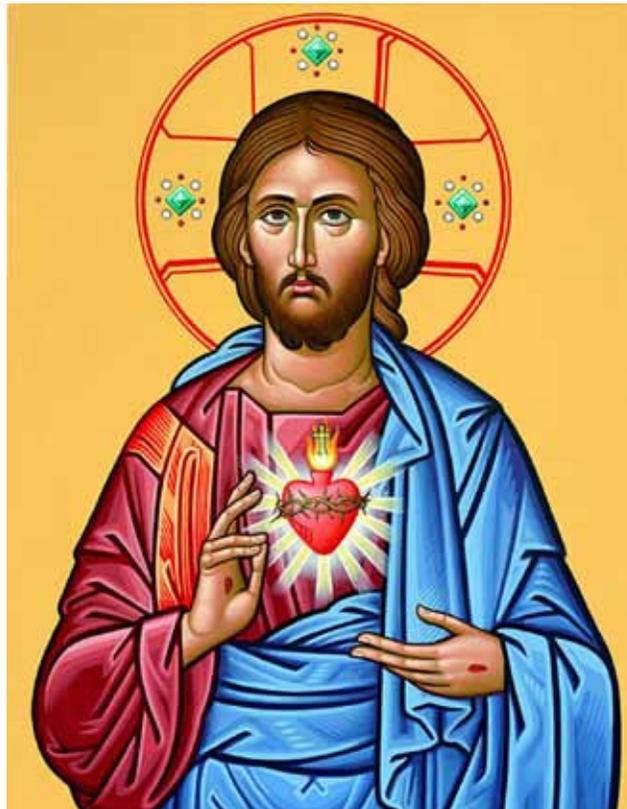
Pope John Paul II, speaking on the vocation of the laity in the Church in 1989, spoke of the ever-growing religious indifference among many of the baptized as evidence of the inroads of secularism. This "phenomenon of de-christianization," he said, "strikes long-standing Christian people, and continually calls for evangelization."

The Holy Father is speaking here, not of the evangelization of non-Christians, but of the re-evangelization of Christians whose faith has been weakened and whose love has been cooled. He was more explicit about this need in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*:

"This separation (of morality from religion) represents one of the most acute concerns of the Church amid today's growing secularism, wherein many ... people think and live as if God did not exist. It is urgent to rediscover and to set forth once more the authentic reality of the Christian faith, which is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent. Rather, faith is a lived awareness of Christ, a living remembrance of His commandments, a truth to be lived out. A word ... is not truly accepted ... until it is put into action. Faith is a decision involving one's whole existence. It is an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It entails an act of entrusting abandonment to Christ which enables us to live as He lived, in profound love of God and of our brothers and sisters (n. 88)."

This "authentic reality of the Christian faith" is the fire that Christ came to enkindle in the hearts of men.

"I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish that it were already enkindled" (Lk. 12:49). That fire was ignited and burned brightly in the minds and hearts of the apostles, and that is why they were so instrumental in the spread of the faith. A fire gives forth both light and heat, and both are needed for evangelization. Both are needed for a "living faith," one that enlightens the mind with the Truth handed down by the Church, and proclaimed by the successor of Peter, and inflames the heart with the Love that urges one to make the sacrifices required to love God above all things, and to love one's neighbor as oneself.



While our Blessed Lord became incarnate "to cast fire upon the earth," notice that He did not deeply touch the hearts of his followers until He had given His life for them. That fire was ignited on Calvary. Only after that did the Holy Spirit come with those enlightening and strengthening graces, those purifying and healing graces, that transformed the

apostles into the instruments of grace they became.

We, too, will not deeply influence the lives of others until we have borne the cross and undergone trials with patience in union with our divine Savior. Pope John Paul II reminded the Catholic laity of this in San Francisco in 1987:

"You are in the forefront of the struggle to protect the authentic Christian values from the onslaught of secularization. Your great contribution to evangelization

*(Continued on page 4)*

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# THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

## Evangelizations: New and Old

By Fr. Peter Hannah, O.P.

[Fr. Peter Hannah, OP, was born in Temple, Texas. He became passionate about golf in high school and college, and aspired to be a professional. He entered the Western Dominican Province in 2007 and was ordained to the presbyterate in 2014. He currently serves as an Adjunct Professor at the DSPT teaching Scripture.]

The term "New Evangelization" has acquired a prominent role in contemporary Catholic discussion. Its genealogy arguably goes back to Paul VI's encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), which introduced a concept of evangelism beyond the traditional category of converting non-Christian peoples. Pope St. Paul VI realized that the dramatic secularization of modern society also demanded a re-evangelization of Europe and the West. The theme was picked up by John Paul II in his speeches through the 1980s, and became crystallized in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). "Today the Church must...push forward to new frontiers," John Paul wrote, "both in the initial mission *ad gentes* and in the new evangelization of those peoples who have already heard Christ proclaimed." Benedict XVI established a Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization in 2010. And Pope Francis has continued to employ the term, giving much attention to it in his early apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013).

### THE CHALLENGE OF APPLICATION

It is important for Catholics to understand the imperative of evangelism in the Church and the variety of shapes it takes in the present day. But this is not easy. The problem is not with the concept, which is sound. Secularization has left the West with the vestiges of Christian culture: the great but more or less empty cathedrals of Europe; the Judeo-Christian concept of human dignity now thought to entail a wild array of "rights" that hardly meet the standard; sensibilities still shaped by Christian virtues but often wildly misapplied. The West is in a spiritually different situation than a non-Christian or unevangelized area of the world, and thus demand a distinctive evangelistic strategy. The problem is not with the idea but with the broad application of the term and with certain emphases that have become skewed.

The New Evangelization has been taken so far to include these areas and methods: (1) pastoral and parochial ministry; (2) catechetical instruction; (3) charity to the poor; (4) reforming the political order and working for social justice; (5) evangelization of youth; (6) use of new media and

technologies; (7) as linked with environmental concerns; (8) identifying where contemporary interests overlap with faith commitments as a way of bridge-building; (9) as founded in "dialogue" and relationship rather than mere presentation of the faith. One is tempted to ask: is there any area of the Church's life which the "New Evangelization" does not touch? The short answer is: probably not. By definition, the re-evangelization of our Western secular culture necessarily entails renewal at every level, and employing all the means of modern communication at our disposal.

But there is an incompleteness to this approach that needs to be made explicit: when Christ appears on earth, he comes both as something eminently familiar to us (a human being) and as something unlike anything we can grasp (God). Whatever emphasis the Church places, therefore, on the need to engage "modern man's sensibilities," Catholics must never forget that Jesus's message brings with it things that are radically disproportionate to our human minds, in fact that we have no possibility of understanding apart from divine grace. And that is a good thing. If God is God, we ought to expect that God's way of approaching us will upend, purify and transform our human patterns of thinking and feeling. To see this more clearly, and the implications it has for our method of bearing witness to the Gospel today, it is helpful to turn our attention to two areas: (1) the mind of the Church in relation to the world circa 1960; (2) the pedagogical methods of our Lord and of the most effective evangelist of all time, the Apostle Paul.

### THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL'S REORIENTATION OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION

In many ways, the impetus to the "New Evangelization" began not with John Paul II or Paul VI, but with the spiritual impulses arising from the Second Vatican Council. Two reference points provide an orientation to the Church's mindset at the time: Pope St. John XXIII's speech to open the Second Vatican Council; and the first lines of one of the Council's most important documents, *Gaudium et Spes*.

Pope John's famous address (readily available online) is a short and very valuable read for any Catholic. It gives one a palpable sense of his love of the Church, combined with his pastoral solicitude for peoples and his desire to see the Church flourish in the modern age. He is confident in the truth of the faith that comes to us from the Apostles—"in its entirety and preciseness, as it still shines forth in the Acts of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council." But he wants the Council to raise "the torch of religious truth" as a "loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness." He is explicit that the task of the Second Vatican Council will not be to formulate new doctrine or clarify subtleties in answer to heretical or questionable theological fads. The Church's teaching is what it is—

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subtleties and all—and cannot change. But the ancient faith can be presented in a new way, using the "medicine of mercy" and a "predominantly pastoral" approach.

The Church always has the sacred duty of preserving the apostolic faith whose center is Christ, the only Son of God; but it does so "not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). As any pastor or teacher or parent knows, the process of pedagogy for the disciple, student, or child, is one that must artfully combine instruction with persuasion, wisdom with gentleness, clarity with patience. The sentiment behind this pastoral solicitude, this "Christian humanism," becomes concrete in the first lines of *Gaudium et Spes*:

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts... That is why this community [i.e. the Church] realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds."

The Second Vatican Council's posture to the world thus comes to embody the pastoral vision of Pope St. John XXIII. The members of the Body of Christ share a solidarity with the "joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties," of all people, regardless of their relation to the one, true Church. The task of evangelization, in other words, must also account for the social context in which evangelization is done—the "joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties" of the current age. Just as a loving parent knows that issuing repeated dictates to a stubborn or disaffected child will not necessarily persuade or convince, the effect of fire and brimstone preaching on many modern people can often alienate them further from the sources of eternal life. As a loving parent needs to be both firm and gentle in strategic proportion, so the Church ought to exercise her teaching authority with steadfast fidelity couched in kindness and charity.

## CHARITY AND TRUTH IN JESUS

So far so good. John XXIII's vision at the Second Vatican Council is consonant with the Apostle Paul's eloquent words in 1 Corinthians: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1). But Pope Benedict XVI puts his finger on an error that can emerge from the wrong-headed application of this principle. Truth should be spoken with charity; but charity demands that one is actually speaking truth. Charity, Benedict wrote, is "of fundamental importance in human relations"; but "without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality... more or less interchangeable with a pool of good feelings, helpful for social cohesion but of little relevance" (*Caritas in Veritate*, #3).

Benedict's warning deserves attention. There can be a temptation, when desiring someone to come over to one's own view—in this case, not one's own view only, but the Catholic faith—to forsake critical aspects of the faith so they become more "amenable" to the person receiving. But then one is actually not persuading the other of the truth but enervating and misrepresenting the truth in order to

elicit acceptance and encourage "good relations." This was not the vision of John XXIII; nor is it the way of Our Lord. In the Gospels we see Jesus ready to receive anyone who approaches him with a genuine and open disposition. But he does not alter the message itself when his audience is confused or taken aback.

When Jesus speaks maybe the most important truth of all so far as the Church's life goes—his own flesh as the life of the world—those around him are immediately offended. "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6:60). Our Lord's response is not to respond by feeding his followers half-truths that they can accept, "adjusting himself" to their sensibilities, and leaving the full truth out of it. He rather repeats it, fully aware of their difficulty in accepting: "Do you take offense at this?...no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." Then, we are told, "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66). Jesus is "inclusive" of all who are open to the truth; but also realizes not all will accept it and discover the life he brings.

## CHARITY AND TRUTH IN PAUL

Our duty, too, is to be charitable when we speak the truth and encourage dialogue where we can. But in doing so we should be mindful that not all will find us charitable. This is not only okay, but to be expected. After our Lord, the Apostle Paul knew this perhaps better than anyone. St. Paul's experience on his Second Missionary journey is a case study in effective evangelization. When he goes to Athens, he adopts a more conciliatory approach to his learned audience on the Areopagus. He observes their religious statuary, in particular an altar erected "to an unknown god" (Acts 17:23). He appeals to Athenian sensibilities by arguing that the "unknown god" they "grope after to find" has in fact come among them and been raised from the dead in the person of Jesus (Acts 17:22-34). The response is tepid. "Some men joined him and believed" but "some mocked" and others expressed mere intellectual curiosity—"we will hear you again about this" (17:33-34). Paul then journeys to Corinth where he shifts the strategy.

On his way to Corinth, Paul seems to have reconciled himself to the fact that, however intellectually interested the Greeks were, and however much he appealed to their cultural sensibilities, there is an element of the message of Christ which will inevitably appear ridiculous to the unbelieving world. Better be honest about this up front and trust in God's power to enlighten, he seems to reason, than try to accommodate the message to people's preconceived notions. "When I came among you," Paul writes, "I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:1-2). The Crucified Christ becomes the center of his preaching at Corinth, rather than efforts appealing to sophisticated intellectual sensibilities.

St. Paul understood that the Lord does not appear simply to meet and affirm our human ways of thinking, but in many ways to subvert, overcome, and transform

*Continued on page 4*

### **Evangelizations: New and Old** (Continued from page 3)

them. "Jews demand signs," he writes, "and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:22-23). Paul refers here to (1) the Jewish expectation that a Messiah would come to organize all human society under an earthly and Jewish king; and to (2) the well-known Greek fondness for philosophical debate and reflection. While expecting a Messiah is no bad thing, and a love for truth via human wisdom ought to be respected, the Logic of the Cross explodes such human strivings with a message that is not only unexpected but seen as a "scandal and foolishness." God's wisdom is impenetrable to one who does not believe, thus the Holy Spirit is necessary to convert the heart: "None of the rulers of this age understood [God's wisdom]; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory...And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:8, 13).

### **CONCLUSION**

The call of the New Evangelism, as articulated by Pope St. Paul VI, Pope St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, are real. A distinctive evangelistic strategy is needed in our secular age to "re-Christianize" nations which retain the vestiges of the faith but have lost the Spirit that animated it. This revitalization is needed on every level of the Church's life: catechesis, pastoral ministry, social and political action. All modern means of communication ought to be employed. And a spirit of charity and openness to the concerns of our contemporaries is apt. But on the last point, shrewdness is also required (Mt 10:16). Not all individuals in the Gospel approach Jesus with a good will and open disposition. Only a small proportion of Paul's hearers were interested in "dialogue" (and even there, one senses it was more intellectual curiosity than anything; Acts 17:32). We need to recall also the hostility and opposition which Our Lord, St. Paul and most early Christians faced. The torturers who sent eleven out of twelve of the apostles to their deaths did not exactly exhibit an openness to dialogue and relationship-building. They did not need "plausible words of wisdom" but "a demonstration of Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4). ■

*Heavenly Father, Your Son taught us "Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called Children of God."*

*In this time of great worry, we fervently pray that Your Holy Spirit sustain all the people of Ukraine to be vigilant and dedicated to peace and justice. Grant their leaders wisdom and prudence. Yet, may they also have the strength and perseverance to defend their land from all adversity and foreign attacks. Help us all to live according to your Divine Will.*

*O God, our Father, in the days to come, we beseech you to comfort the suffering, heal the wounded, and accept the souls of the faithful departed into Your Heavenly Kingdom. We ask also that the Most Holy Mother of God extend her blessed mantle of protection over our Ukraine. Amen.*

### **The Need for Evangelization** (Continued from page 1)

of your own society is made through your lives. Christ's message must live in you — in the way you live, and in the way you refuse to live. At the same time, because your nation plays a role in the world far beyond its borders, you must be conscious of the impact of your Christian lives on others. Your lives must spread the fragrance of Christ's Gospel throughout the world."

Yet the de-christianization of our society is so widespread and deeply-rooted, that only special help from heaven can turn this trend around. However, divine providence requires that we do what we can. Although it is grace that turns hearts back to God, the Lord wants us to use the human means at our disposal. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that it would be tempting God if we omit to do what we can and expect everything to be done by Him.

As to the disregard for God in our society, if every follower of Christ truly lived his or her faith, a veritable deluge of graces from heaven would flood this world. Only when the fire that Christ came to enkindle has been ignited in the minds and hearts of enough Christians will the tide of secularism begin to be reversed.

Our Blessed Lord so yearns for the return of those who have gone astray that He will mercifully pardon them, if only there is a sincere desire to return and a humble acknowledgment of guilt, and if sufficient prayers and sacrifices are offered to make up for what is wanting on the part of other members of the Mystical Body. So widespread is the crisis of faith that there is needed as never before on a world-wide scale sincere apostles (among the laity, religious and clergy) who will become the leaven, the salt, and the light of the world. Pray that God will raise up leaders in whose hearts that enlightening and strengthening fire burns brightly, to lead and inspire others to follow.

In those petitions do not fail to call on Mary, the Mother of God and of us all, who, in her own hidden way, far excelled all other humans in the one goal that counts — that of perfect love of God and neighbor. In her, the fire of love and light burned immeasurably more brightly than in all others. In her was her Son's wish most perfectly fulfilled. "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish that it were already enkindled" (Lk. 12:49). ■

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### **TO KNOW HIM: THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE**

The above article is an excerpt from *To Know Him: The Way, the Truth and the Life*, Vol. I, by Fr. Paul Duffner, founder and former Director of the Rosary Center. These volumes are a collection of essays published in the Rosary Center's newsletter over the course of more than twenty years. Fr. Duffner shines the light of St. Thomas Aquinas, Scripture, Tradition and the words of the Popes on the most fundamental truths of Catholic faith and morals. Available online - [RosaryCenterStore.org](http://RosaryCenterStore.org)

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