

Pouring New Wine into New Wineskins: The New Evangelization

By Bishop Edward Clark

In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is challenged by the disciples of John the Baptist concerning his teaching on fasting, Jesus responds with this image: “People do not pour new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and then both are preserved” (9:17).

This statement was emblematic of all his teaching. He did not come simply to restate what was already taught by the Pharisees, by the Mosaic Law or even by John and his disciples. The teaching of Jesus was something entirely new, and it could not be packaged and presented in traditional wrappings, no matter how good those wrappings appeared.

Jesus does not use this occasion, recorded in all three synoptic Gospels, to challenge the old teachings. Over the course of his ministry he will in fact reaffirm many of them. But what he proclaims here is unquestionable. If his

new teaching is presented in the same old way, all will be lost, like ruptured wineskins, like spilled wine. His listeners will not hear what is new. They will miss the message.

Worse yet, what was true in the older tradition will be destroyed along with the new. All will be spilled out, and all will be lost. The only way to hear and preserve

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Today it is quite common to hear people talk about “new evangelization.” But when you listen carefully to what they are saying, they are really talking about the traditional and classic idea of evangelization. They fail to recognize that they are doing today what Jesus warned the disciples of John to avoid: They are pouring the wine of “new evangelization” into the old wineskin of traditional proselytizing. They are missing exactly what is new, different and

deeply challenging about what Pope John Paul II came over the course of years to call the “new evangelization.”

Except for the content of faith, which is always unchanging, the new evangelization is something entirely new. (Note the article “the new evangelization.”) It is not merely a matter of putting old wine into new wineskins— calling evangelization by a new name. Neither is it a matter of putting new wine into old wineskins— attempting to do something new in the same old way. We need to put this new wine into new wineskins. But what exactly is this new wine?

The purpose of this article today is threefold. First, to give a brief description of the origin of the new evangelization. Second, to describe both traditional evangelization and the new evangelization and to distinguish eight characteristics of the new evangelization as presented by Blessed Pope John Paul II, and by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI. And third, to suggest how the new evangelization might be useful in renewing traditional evangelization as well.

Origins of the New Evangelization

The term new evangelization was coined by Pope Paul VI in 1975 in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. By new evangelization Pope Paul meant two things: one, a renewed emphasis and enthusiasm in preaching the Gospel to those who had not yet heard the word of God; and, two, an entirely new response to the new challenges that the contemporary world was creating for the mission of the church—new responses to new questions (cf. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, New York: Knopf, 1994, p. 114).

Three years later Paul VI was dead, and in the minds of many people the vision of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* seemed for a time to have died with him. Then

in 1983, speaking to the council of Latin American bishops in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Pope John Paul II called for a “new evangelization” on the American continent and throughout the world. He called for “a new evangelization that would be new in ardor, new in methods and new in expression.” What he had in mind, however, went far beyond the vision of Pope Paul VI (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, 6 and 66).

Pope John Paul was not simply calling for a renewed evangelization, although he also reaffirmed the need to revitalize traditional forms of evangelization as an ongoing ministry of the church. At the same time he was calling for something more comprehensive than mere new responses to new questions. When he spoke of new evangelization he had something entirely different in mind. In 1983 his thinking was only in a germinal state. By 1990, when he issued his groundbreaking encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, he had worked out a comprehensive new vision which he continued to develop and encourage during the remaining 15 years of his pontificate.

For Pope John Paul the new evangelization differs significantly from the traditional evangelization, which he often referred to as the *missio ad gentes*, the “mission to the nations”— the preaching of the Gospel to those who are not Christian and who have never before heard the Gospel proclaimed to them (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 34). Pope Benedict refers to this as classic evangelization— the traditional missionary activity of the church (Dec. 12, 2000, address to catechists and religion teachers). For simplicity, we’ll refer to it here as old evangelization. This is not to dismiss it. This old evangelization remains a significant activity of the church—but it is not the new evangelization.

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Parallel to the old evangelization, standing shoulder to shoulder alongside it, is the new evangelization. The old evangelization will itself be transformed by the influence of the new evangelization, but new evangelization is something entirely different. To understand the difference we need to first understand how the old evangelization operates.

What Makes It “New” and How Does It Differ From the “Old”?

Traditionally the work of evangelization is the work of making converts, of baptizing nonbelievers and non-Christians into Christianity and specifically into the Catholic Church. The Gospel is preached and the catechism is taught to non-Christians and non-Catholics in foreign lands and here at home. Potential converts are taught about Jesus Christ (note the preposition about), and they are instructed in the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church. Once the convert is baptized and/or received into the church and is added to the number of church members, the work of evangelization is done.

From that time forward the pastoral ministry of the parish is to keep the new Catholic close to the church, catechize him or her for the further reception of the sacraments and respond to his or her spiritual needs until he or she passes from this life and is safely interred in sacred soil. Vast numbers of converts were evangelized in just this fashion and, sadly, many of them did not remain active members of the Catholic faith. Sadder yet, once-vibrant Christian countries have become only nominally Christian or even post-Christian nations.

It was these phenomena in particular that Pope Paul VI was referring to when he spoke of the need for a re-evangelization that would respond to the new challenges created for the church by the contemporary world.

In contrast to the old evangelization, the focus and the process of the new evangelization developed by Pope John Paul II are quite different. The goal of the new evangelization is not proselytizing, baptizing new converts or increasing the number of new church members. Rather, the goal is completing the mission of Christ and revitalizing the members of the church by leading those who do not know Jesus intimately into a personal and intimate relationship with him. Conversion to the person of Christ, the Holy Father announced, must precede conversion to the church.

“The new evangelization,” he wrote, “is not a matter of merely passing on doctrine but rather of a personal and profound meeting with the Savior.” For the new evangelization, the point of departure is Christ himself, his person, because he himself is our salvation. This is the first focus of the new evangelization (cf. *Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., Jan. 14, 1991, p. 2). This process of conversion begins not with the person who does not yet know Christ, but with the person who already claims to know him and to be his follower. All of us stand in need of further conversion, and we cannot bring others to know Christ until we know him better ourselves. As a result, the second focus of the new evangelization is our own deeper conversion to Christ and consequently to the Gospel he preached.

In the life of every person, noted the Holy Father, there are dark corners where the light of the Gospel has not yet penetrated. We must begin by seeking out those dark and seemingly impenetrable corners and allow the light of the Gospel to be shed on them.

How do we discover those dark and yet-to-be-evangelized corners of our lives? The answer is simple. They are discovered in the moments when we find ourselves bristling at some teaching or proclamation of the church that challenges our personal opinions and preferred

beliefs— issues like abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, the death penalty, justice for immigrants and the preferential option for the poor, just to mention some of the more challenging issues that contrast the teaching of the church with the tenets of our contemporary culture.

The third focus of the new evangelization is on those who are barely evangelized, those who are marginal members of the church because they have not been deeply introduced to Christ, his Gospel, the life of the Catholic community and the teachings of the church. Here the Holy Father referred to those who have little or no training in the Catholic faith and who have yet to meet the person of Christ in their lives. They need to be evangelized with the basic Gospel and to receive formation in faith.

The fourth focus is on those who have left the church or ceased in the practice of their faith. The goal is to welcome them back. Baptized as infants, many have never made a personal commitment to the Lord Jesus and to his Gospel. As adolescents and adults, many have drifted away from the church or abandoned the faith altogether. Remember, at each phase of new evangelization the goal is first to know Christ better and to allow a personal familiarity with Christ to be the opening for a deeper exploration and knowledge of the content of faith.

The fifth focus of the new evangelization is on the re-evangelization of cultures previously identified as Christian. There is a need to re-evangelize those traditionally Christian countries that have been weakened by a process of secularization, resulting in a devaluation of some essential human values. The goal at this level of the new evangelization is somewhat different, because the intent is not conversion to Christ but acceptance

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of the values he taught in proclaiming the kingdom of God.

In the expressed thought of Pope John Paul, the intent here is not a matter of restoration, proselytism or a denial of religious freedom (cf. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 115). It is not an attempt to reclaim individual nations for a particular religious faith. It is, however, a call to transform

whole cultures through the adoption of authentic human and cultural values shared in common with the Gospel of Jesus Christ—such values as justice, peace, respect for human life and human dignity, mercy, charity, what the Holy Father calls a “civilization of love.” He offers the church’s body of social teaching as a primary tool for the evangelization of nations. The Gospel message is destined for all, not only for a specific circle of believers—not only for Catholics, not even solely for Christians.

The sixth focus of the new evangelization is on the methods used in communicating the Gospel. The witness of believers will always be the greatest tool for evangelization. At the same time, advances in communication and technology such as the Internet and new and more creative approaches based on developing theories in communication need to be fostered. The call of the Holy Father is for a new evangelization that is not only new in ardor and new in expression, but also new in methods.

The final focus of the new evangelization is on the laity.

For most Catholics, evangelization is perceived to be the work of special groups within the church: missionaries, religious, the clergy and particular associations of laypeople. In the new evangelization it is clear that the work of evangelization is incumbent upon the entire people of God. It is the task of all the Christian

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What are the particular characteristics of the New Evangelization?

There are eight:

1. The new evangelization is parallel to but distinct from the old evangelization. The intended audience for each is different. The new evangelization is not directed at non-Catholics, non-Christians or non-believers.
2. The new evangelization begins with fostering a deep personal relationship with Christ, not with passing on doctrine, not with baptizing converts.
3. The new evangelization is directed first at believers who need the person of Christ to enlighten the still dark corners of their lives where the Gospel has not yet penetrated. Then they will be prepared to share the Gospel of Christ with others.
4. The new evangelization is concerned with deepening the religious experience and commitment of nominal believers.
5. The new evangelization seeks to call back non-practicing believers to active participation in the church.
6. The new evangelization seeks to re-evangelize traditionally Christian countries weakened by secularization, to transform these cultures through those Gospel values that are identical with the human and cultural values that belong to the common heritage of humankind.
7. The new evangelization calls for new methods of communicating the Gospel—new methods, new technologies, new communication theories.
8. The new evangelization involves all members of the Christian community, all members of the church, in particular the laity.

faithful. Not all are called to go to foreign missions, engage in street preaching or seek out non-Christians for conversion. But we are all called to evangelize one another: friends, acquaintances, family members, fellow Catholics and fellow Christians.

The involvement of the laity, according to Pope John Paul, is not due solely to the declining number of priests and religious in certain countries of the world. Rather, it is the rightful place of the laity in the church and in society to collaborate in the work of evangelization, particularly in the home, the workplace, the parish, the school, and the political and social arenas. It is your right by baptism, it is your “rebirth right.”

“I sense that the moment has come,” wrote Pope John Paul, “to commit all of the church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the missio ad gentes. No believer in Christ... can avoid

this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples” (Redemptoris Missio, 3).

To summarize. How does the new evangelization differ from the old, from traditional or classic evangelization? Traditional evangelization seeks to make converts of those who have never before had a chance to hear the Gospel. Its purpose is to baptize the non-Christian and the nonbeliever, to convert the non-Catholic. The new evangelization is directed at those who have had some contact with and knowledge of Christ—all of us believers who are in need of a deeper or more complete conversion as well as marginal Catholics with little or no formation and education in their faith and those who have fallen away or abandoned their faith altogether. New evangelization is not just a matter of renewing or updating or reinvigorating traditional approaches to evangelization. It is something new altogether.

The New Evangelization's Influence on the Old

The third part of this article can be presented in several brief paragraphs. As Pope Benedict has expressed, accepting the new evangelization does not mean abandoning classic evangelization and old traditional approaches. It does provide an opportunity, however, to renew classic evangelization in light of the new evangelization. This is not a matter of pouring new wine into old wineskins. It is a matter of adding to the bouquet of the old wine while allowing it to retain its own distinctive body and flavor—and to retain its old wineskin as well.

So what might be the influence of the new evangelization on the old?

First, like the new evangelization, the old traditional classic evangelization should begin with Christ. The primary goal, even of the old evangelization, ought to be to bring non-Christians and nonbelievers into a personal, intimate relationship with Christ. Once Christ is known, then his message and the teachings of the church will be more readily accepted.

Second, all evangelization, both old and new, should begin with deepening the conversion of the evangelizer himself/ herself. We all have dark interior corners where our lives still need to be enlightened by the Gospel. When the nonbeliever is brought to an experience of Christ and then sees that same experience reflected in the witness of the evangelizer, he or she will be led more spontaneously to accepting Christ and his Gospel and ultimately baptism into the community of faith.

Third, the old evangelization should seek out the same new methods, technologies and communication theories that are developed through the work of the new evangelization.

Finally, the old evangelization should involve the cooperation of all the people of the church and every member of the laity. Note again what Pope John Paul wrote, referring not only to the new evangelization but also to the old, the *missio ad gentes*:

“I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the missio ad gentes” (Redemptoris Missio, 3).

It is not only in foreign lands that nonbelievers and non-Christians are found. It is not only in foreign lands where Christ has yet to be encountered in a personal, intimate relationship. It is here as well—in every neighborhood, in every social gathering, in every school and workplace. Each of us encounters people every day who are in need of evangelization, and the responsibility to evangelize them belongs to each of us. It is also our “rebirth right” through baptism.

The Gospel message is destined for all, not only for a specific circle of believers - not only for Catholics, not even solely for Christians.

The new evangelization has continued to be a topic addressed repeatedly by Pope Benedict XVI through-out his pontificate. He has repeatedly reaffirmed

its importance for the future of the church and for the reconversion of Europe, in particular. He has reaffirmed his own commitment to the vision of his beloved predecessor, Pope John Paul II. The New Evangelization will not pass away.

At the conclusion of this article, five essential points should remain with us. One, a clear understanding that the new evangelization is not traditional, classic evangelization. It is something entirely different. It is truly new wine.

Two, a conviction that the very term new evangelization should never be used to define traditional forms of evangelization—nor evangelization in general. It is not “renewed” evangelization.

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degree been introduced to Jesus. It is in fact a full-bodied wine.

And five, a commitment to communicate

Three, a realization that the new evangelization does not replace the old. We need both. We need to savor both new wine and old.

Four, an appreciation that the new evangelization is not about proselytizing non-Christians and nonbelievers. It is about the ongoing conversion of those who have already in some way to some

the authentic meaning of the New Evangelization as conceived and explained by Pope John Paul II. It is, after all, a wine to be shared.

Most Reverent Edward W. Clark is an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.
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