



Evangelization
for the
Third
Millennium

by
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- NA *Nostra aetate*. Vatican II's *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*
- NMI *Novo millennio ineunte*. Apostolic letter, John Paul II
- OE *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*. Vatican II's *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*
- ORE *L'Osservatore Romano*. Vatican newspaper, weekly English edition
- PC *Perfectae caritatis*. Vatican II's *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life*
- PO *Presbyterorum ordinis*. Vatican II's *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*
- RH *Redemptor hominis*. Encyclical, John Paul II
- RMis *Redemptoris missio*. Encyclical, John Paul II
- SRS *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. Encyclical, John Paul II
- ST *Summa theologica*. St. Thomas Aquinas
- UR *Unitatis redintegratio*. Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism*
- UUS *Ut unum sint*. Encyclical, John Paul II
- VC *Vita consecrata*. Apostolic exhortation, John Paul II

Chapter 1

Evangelization: New Testament through Vatican II

The term *evangelization* is biblical and goes back to the Old Testament. In the Greek Bible, the verb *evangelize* (*euaggelizesthai*) means to proclaim good news. In the Septuagint, the term occurs in the historical books, in the Psalms, and most prominently in Deutero-Isaiah. This last work has a famous description of the herald who runs ahead of the people on their return from Babylon to Jerusalem, proclaiming that Yahweh is triumphing over all his enemies and establishing his kingdom (Isa 52:7).

In the New Testament, the verb *euaggelizesthai* frequently appears in Luke, Acts, and the Pauline corpus. Jesus is anointed to proclaim the kingdom of God and evangelize the poor (Luke 4:18 and 7:22). After the Ascension, the apostles have the task of "preaching [*euaggelizomenoi*] Jesus Christ" (Acts 5:42). Quoting the previously mentioned passage in Deutero-Isaiah, Paul in Romans 10:15 exclaims: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring [the] good news!" Paul is driven by a sense of his own call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 15:20; 2 Cor 10:16; Gal 1:16; 2:7). Conscious of standing under a divine constraint, he exclaims, "Woe to me if I do not evangelize!" (1 Cor 9:16).

In the New Testament, therefore, the verb *evangelize* means to proclaim with authority and power the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. The evangelist is one sent by Christ and endowed with a corresponding charism from the Holy Spirit. The preached word comes from God and arouses saving faith in those who believe it.

The Catholic Church has been involved in evangelization throughout its long history. In the early Middle Ages, monks such as Boniface in the West and Cyril in the East, with a veritable army of collaborators and followers, successfully evangelized almost the whole of Europe, erecting monasteries, cathedrals, churches, schools, and hospitals. After the great voyages of discovery in the fifteenth century, Catholic missionaries fanned out to spread the faith to North and South America, Africa, and Asia.

The crisis of evangelization has its roots in the Counter-Reformation, when the terms *gospel* and *evangelical* were taken over by Protestants and became suspect to Catholic ears. Catholics put the accent not so much on announcement as on teaching, not so much on the message of salvation as on the moral law, the Church, and the sacraments. Their missionary activity was therefore less evangelical and more ecclesiastical.

Responding to the Protestant Reformers, the Council of Trent at some points sounded a surprisingly evangelical note. In its discussion of the authorities to be used for teaching and conduct, the Council declared that the gospel was the source of all saving truth and moral discipline, and was to be preached to every creature (DS 1501). By this emphasis on the gospel and evangelization, the Catholic Church could have claimed to be in its own way evangelical.

In the next few centuries, however, Catholics shied away from speaking about the gospel and evangelization, since Protestant churches had appropriated these terms. The Catholic Church was content to be known as the Church of tradition, law, priesthood, and sacraments rather than the Church of the word of God.

In the modern period, moreover, the Catholic Church became preoccupied with the problems of schism and heresy. Great pains were taken to protect the faithful against modern errors. The Church as a whole turned in upon herself; she became more preoccupied with the instruction and pastoral care of her own members than with reaching out to new audiences. Missionary activity still went on, but it was seen as the preserve of apostolic religious orders and societies rather than a concern of the Church as a whole. The Catholic revival of the nineteenth century witnessed

the foundation of many missionary orders and congregations, which still continue their labors.

The terminology of evangelization reentered Catholic literature toward the middle of the present century, thanks in part to the influence of Protestant thinkers such as Karl Barth. From the 1930s through the 1950s, Catholic religious educators promoted a new style of kerygmatic theology in which evangelization was taken to mean a confident proclamation of the basic message of God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ. The kerygmatic sermons of Peter and Paul, as found in the Book of Acts, were studied as models for revitalizing the faith in dechristianized sections of Europe.

The future Pope John XXIII was exposed to the new kerygmatic theology during his years as nuncio to France, where he seems to have picked up many of his ideas for the Second Vatican Council. In the apostolic constitution *Humanae salutis* (1961), officially convoking the Council, he expressed his hope that the Council would "bring the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel."¹ He called on the Council to demonstrate that the Church, "always living and always young, which feels the rhythm of the times and which in every century beautifies herself with new splendor, radiates new light, achieves new conquests...."² In his opening speech at the Council John XXIII expressed the hope that the Church would be able to draw all men and women of good will to herself not by threats and condemnations but by beneficence and gentle persuasion.³

Following these directives, Vatican II did in fact make evangelization one of its central themes, but this shift was scarcely noticed by the early commentators, most of whom interpreted the work of the Council in traditional Catholic categories. Vatican II became known for what it had said about the distribution of power in the Church, the reform of the liturgy, ecumenism, interfaith relations, and dialogue with the modern world—all themes of little or no interest to evangelicals.

In a document issued in 1975, Paul VI gave a radically different interpretation, emphasizing proclamation and the gospel. The objectives of the Council, he wrote, "are definitively summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the gospel to the people of the

twentieth century" (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 2; hereafter *EN*). In this apostolic exhortation, Pope Paul fulfilled a request of the 1974 Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which asked him to gather up the fruits of its labors, giving "a fresh forward impulse" and inaugurating what he called "a new period of evangelization" (*ibid.*). Rereading the Council documents in light of this statement, we can find considerable support for the pope's position.

The two great constitutions of Vatican II, those on the Church and on revelation, open on a strongly evangelical note. *Lumen gentium*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, begins with the assertion that Christ is the light of all nations, and that the Church as his sacrament strives to shed on all human beings the radiance of Christ, which brightens her countenance as she proclaims the gospel to every creature (*LG* 1). *Dei Verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, begins with a strikingly kerygmatic passage. The Church, it affirms, "hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it confidently," wishes to hand on Christ's message "so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe; by believing, it may hope; and by hoping, it may love" (*DV* 1).

The missionary spirit expressed in these passages permeates nearly all the documents of Vatican II. It is most evident, of course, in the splendid but rather neglected decree, *Ad gentes*, *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*. But the same spirit is evident in the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, which expounds at some length the ways in which lay men and women can suffuse the temporal sphere with the light and energy of the gospel, bearing witness to Christ by their words and their conduct. Passages in the Council documents that deal with bishops, priests, and liturgy emphasize the proclamatory dimension of the sacred ministry and the sacraments, especially that of the Eucharist, which is described as "the source and apex of the whole work of preaching the gospel" (*PO* 5). *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, *Gaudium et spes*, while speaking extensively of dialogue, gives equal attention to proclamation as a means of making the light of the gospel shine everywhere, fostering freedom and charity and transforming the human race into the family of God (*GS* 32, 41, 92).

In order to make these observations more concrete we may pose a series of questions about evangelization: its nature, its purposes, its bearers, its addressees, and its methods. All of these questions can, I believe, be adequately answered from documents of Vatican II.

What Is Evangelization?

The word *evangelization* originally meant the proclamation of the good news that the day of redemption had arrived. The gospel (*evangelion*, *evangelium*) is the good news, the saving message, heralded by an "evangelist." On many occasions, the Council cites the words of Paul to the Romans: "The gospel is the power of salvation to those who believe" (*UR* 21; cf. *LG* 19, 26; *DV* 17; *DH* 11). In the course of the centuries, the term *gospel* was increasingly objectified, so that it came to stand for the entire content of revelation. Vatican II sometimes uses the term to signify the basic message to be proclaimed, but sometimes more broadly, meaning the fullness of revelation given in Jesus Christ. Unlike Lutherans, Catholics do not divide revelation into law and gospel. God's revealed law is part of the gospel.

Evangelization, accordingly, has two senses. In the narrow sense, it means the announcement of the global Christian message to those who do not believe, that is to say, primary evangelization. But in a broad sense it means everything that brings human life and the world under the sway of God's word. In this second sense, evangelization practically coincides with the total mission of the Church. Normally, if not in every case, Vatican II used the term *evangelization* in the narrow sense, to mean the action of announcing Christ rather than of bringing his influence to bear upon diverse persons and situations through education, pastoral care, and social action.

Why Evangelize?

Christians, who confess Christ to be the Savior of the world, should have no difficulty in finding motives for evangelization in any of the forms just mentioned. Vatican II frequently quotes the final charge of the risen Christ to the apostles: to preach the gospel to all the nations of the world. This missionary mandate, as expressed in Mark 16:15, is quoted or referenced at least a dozen times (*LG* 1, 16, 19, and 24; *DV* 7; *UR* 2; *OE* 3; *AG* 1, 5, and 38; *PO* 4; and *DH* 13). Matthew 28:19–20, which reiterates the same mandate, is cited only slightly less frequently (e.g., *LG* 17, 19, and 24; *DV* 7; *AG* 5; *DH* 13 and 14). Obedience to the Lord's command is therefore the primary motive for evangelization.

Supplementing the argument from authority, the Council proposes intrinsic reasons for missionary activity: it contributes to the glory of God and the salvation of human beings. God is glorified when his saving work in Christ is acknowledged, when hymns of praise and thanksgiving rise to him, and when people shape their lives according to his teaching. In turning to Christ, men and women benefit themselves. Christ delivers them from the power of sin. As they receive the gifts of grace, they are made sharers in God's inner trinitarian life (*LG* 17; *AG* 7–8).

The decree *Ad gentes* teaches that missionary activity is an intrinsic demand of the Church's own catholicity. Tending by her very nature to express her catholicity, she realizes herself by proclaiming God's word to the nations and thereby contributing to the establishment of God's kingdom everywhere (*AG* 1).

Vatican II is careful not to reject authentic values that exist in the world before it is touched by the gospel. Evangelization, it declares, preserves everything good that is to be found in human cultures or religions, frees it from admixture with evil, and elevates it to a higher plane. "Whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also healed, ennobled, and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of man" (*LG* 17; cf. *GS* 58).

The Council did not fail to address the question of the necessity of the Church. She is indeed necessary because God has associated her inseparably with Christ as his Mystical Body. Having made her a universal sign of salvation, he uses her as his instrument for the redemption of all (*LG* 9). All who attain salvation, therefore, depend on the mediation of the Church as well as upon Christ the divine Mediator. Those who are in a position to recognize Christ as Savior are bound to believe and to confess him by joining the Church (*LG* 14).

To the question whether it is possible for people to be saved without actually hearing and accepting the good news of Jesus Christ, the Council answers with a qualified affirmative. If with the help of God's grace they do what they can to conform to God's will, God will make it possible for them to attain salvation in some way known to himself (*LG* 16; *AG* 7; *GS* 22). But if they hear and accept the gospel, they will have many additional helps to salvation: the guidance of revelation, the pastoral care of the Church, and the graces of the sacraments. Lacking these helps, people are often deceived into exchanging the truth of God for a lie (*LG* 16).

The comprehensive vision of the Council is splendidly displayed in *LG* 17, which states as follows:

The Church is compelled by the Holy Spirit to do her part towards the full realization of the will of God, who has established Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world. By the proclamation of the gospel, she prepares her hearers to receive and profess the faith, disposes them for baptism, snatches them from the slavery of error, and incorporates them into Christ so that through charity they may grow into full maturity in Christ....

In this way the Church simultaneously prays and labors in order that the entire world may become the People of God, the Body of the Lord, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and that in Christ, the Head of all, there may be rendered to the Creator and Father of the Universe all honor and glory.

Who Should Be Evangelized?

Vatican II many times states that all men and women are to be evangelized. It makes no exceptions because the rationale for evangelization applies to all, no matter what their race, nationality, gender, or social condition.

Since the Council, some theologians have suggested that Christians ought not to trouble adherents of other religions by proclaiming Christ to them. Since it is possible for such persons to be saved without becoming Christians, it is argued, we should leave them in good faith, helping them to live good lives in their own religious tradition. As a general policy, this practice would be unsound and contrary to the teaching of Vatican II. As a matter of pastoral prudence, however, it is sometimes advisable to wait for an opportune moment before confronting certain persons or groups with the claims of the gospel. They may need to be better prepared in order to hear it fruitfully.

Some contemporary Christians have maintained that there is no need to evangelize Jews, because Jews already enjoy a salvific covenant relationship with God. Having treated that question elsewhere,⁴ I do not want to go through that whole discussion again, but for present purposes it may suffice to say that Vatican II makes no exception for Jews. It teaches simply that the gospel is to be proclaimed to every creature. Jesus Christ died for all and wills that all come to a knowledge of the truth. Believing Jews, of course, are not in the same condition as pagans. They already have the word of God as given in the Law and the prophets. But by acknowledging Jesus as the promised Messiah and Lord to whom their ancestors looked forward, Jews give additional glory to God and enter into the blessings of the new and perfect Covenant, prefigured by the old (*LG 9*).

The question could be raised whether Catholics should evangelize other Christians. According to the teaching of Vatican II, these others are not fully initiated into the Body of Christ. Baptism is only the first sacrament of initiation and demands to be completed by the Eucharist (*UR 22*). Full communion requires acceptance of the Church's entire system and admission to the Eucharist, the sacrament of full communion (*LG 14*). Since the whole creed

and the dogmas of the Church, as well as the sacraments and pastoral government, pertain to the gospel, it follows logically that Christians who are not Catholics still require additional evangelization. But Vatican II, as I have mentioned, does not seem to use the term *evangelization* in this broader sense.

Missionary activity includes evangelization and the planting of the Church (*AG 6*), but it does not include the pastoral care of the faithful or undertakings aimed at the restoration of unity among Christians (*ibid.*; cf. *UR 4*). Having said that, the Council goes on to point out that both these activities are closely connected with missionary activity and consequently with evangelization. Pastoral care arouses zeal for evangelization in individuals and communities (*AG 39*). Division among Christians is a serious impediment to evangelization, since it blocks the way to faith for many. "Hence, by the same mandate which makes missions necessary, all the baptized are called to be gathered into one flock, and thus to be able to bear unanimous witness before the nations to Christ their Lord" (*AG 6*; cf. *UR 1*).

By the same token, it may be asked whether Catholics are still in need of evangelization. Many who have been baptized into the Catholic Church have not yet heard the gospel convincingly proclaimed. Some who have been catechized have never captured the basic Christian vision. They know many doctrines of the Church but seem never to have encountered the living Christ. They could certainly profit from hearing the kind of proclamation that is designed to bring nonbelievers to faith.

In passages dealing with evangelization, Vatican II did not speak to the question of unevangelized Catholics, except perhaps in one passage. In the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, the Council alluded in passing to the problem of dechristianization. It said that changes can occur in previously evangelized areas that call for a renewal of missionary activity (*AG 6*).

Even without using the term *evangelization* for ministry to marginal and inactive Catholics, the Council called attention to their need for a fresh encounter with the gospel. In Scripture reading, preaching, and Bible study, the faithful continually renew and energize their commitment. "The force and power of the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the

Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, and the pure and perennial source of spiritual life” (DV 21).

Who Should Evangelize?

In recent centuries, Catholics have commonly looked upon evangelization as the task of persons who receive a special call to become preachers or missionaries. The main body of the faithful considered that their task was not to extend the faith but to receive God’s grace and live according to the gospel. Vatican II made a new step forward. At many points it insisted that the whole Church is missionary and that every member is obliged to take part in disseminating the gospel. “The obligation of spreading the faith,” it stated, “is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his ability” (LG 17; cf. AA 35). But the obligation, it recognized, does not rest upon all in the same way. People in different states of life have different obligations.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church opens its discussion of the episcopal office with the words: “Among the principal duties of bishops, the preaching of the gospel occupies an eminent place. For bishops are preachers of the faith who lead new disciples to Christ” (LG 25). The diocesan bishop, it states, must be “ready to preach the gospel to all (cf. Rom 1:14–15) and to urge his faithful to apostolic and missionary activity” (LG 27). *The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity* teaches that “the responsibility to proclaim the gospel throughout the world falls primarily on the body of bishops” (AG 29). Missionary activity is “a supremely great and sacred task of the Church” (ibid.). Both individually in their dioceses and in councils and conferences, bishops are required to stimulate, organize, and direct evangelization.

Diocesan priests carry on the work of ministry in parishes, extending and applying the ministry of the bishop. In their pastoral activity, they are exhorted to “stir up and preserve among the faithful a zeal for the evangelization of the world” (AG 39). Both the *Decree on the Religious Life* and the *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity* mention the prominent role traditionally

played by religious orders, both active and contemplative, in missionary evangelization (PC 20; AG 18; cf. LG 44).

“The laity,” says *Lumen gentium*, “are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can she become the salt of the earth” (LG 33). “This evangelization,” it adds, “that is, this announcing of Christ by a living testimony as well as by the spoken word, takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world” (LG 35). The Christian family can be an outstanding example of testimony to Christ and the gospel (ibid.).

Other documents, such as the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, strongly emphasize the involvement of the laity in the evangelization of the settings in which they live and work. The Council also encouraged the laity to cooperate in ministries designed to build up the Church herself. Some lay persons, it noted, receive a special vocation to work with the hierarchy in teaching Christian doctrine, in liturgical services, and in the care of souls (AA 24). Organizations such as Catholic Action exemplify the collaboration of lay persons in the apostolate proper to the hierarchy (AA 20).

Ways of Evangelization

Among the many paths of evangelization, the most obvious is the preaching of the gospel, which the *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity* describes as the “chief means” of implanting the Church (AG 6). But when circumstances prevent the direct and immediate announcement of the gospel, Christians can bear witness to Christ very effectively by charity and works of mercy (ibid.). The laity, in particular, can exercise a fruitful apostolate by their conduct in the areas of their labor, profession, studies, neighborhood, and social life. And according to the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, they will look for opportunities to announce Christ to their neighbors through the spoken word as well (AA 13).

Proclamation of the gospel should always take account of particular cultural contexts. Without using the term *inculturation*, *Gaudium et spes* conveyed the idea. “This accommodated preach-

ing of the gospel,” it declared, “ought to remain the law of all evangelization” (GS 44). The gospel has a transformative impact on the cultures it encounters. “By the very fulfillment of her mission,” says the Council, “the Church stimulates and advances human and civic culture” (GS 58). The gospel “strengthens, perfects, and renews them [cultures] in Christ” (ibid.; cf. GS 61). Popes Paul VI and John Paul II would have a great deal more to say about the evangelization of cultures.

Evangelization can also take the form of social action, even though the proper and proximate goal of such activity is inner-worldly and natural. By promoting right order of values in their earthly activities, Christians practice faithfulness to the gospel and win respect for it. Allowing their whole lives to be permeated by the spirit of the beatitudes, they promote justice and charity in society (GS 72).

Vatican II at a number of points disavowed what it called unworthy methods of evangelization. No one should seek to gain converts by appealing to merely temporal motives, by offering false promises, by physical or psychological coercion, or by falsely demeaning other churches or religions. According to the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, the adherence of faith must always be physically and psychologically free (DH 2, 4, 10; AG 13).

St. Paul quotes the Psalmist as saying, “I believed, and so I spoke” (2 Cor 4:13; cf. Ps 116:10). Belief, where it is healthy and strong, naturally expresses itself in words and actions. If Catholics do not evangelize, the fundamental obstacle does not lie so much in the surrounding culture as in themselves. Having failed to nourish their faith by study, prayer, and contemplation, many have become weak and flabby in their adherence to the gospel and the Church. If they personally grasped the vision of faith, they would joyfully give witness to Christ, even at the cost of wealth, honors, and life itself. Perhaps their faith is weak because they have not tried to share it. As John Paul II wisely observed, “faith is strengthened when it is given to others” (RMis 2). Vatican II called upon every Christian, whether bishop, priest, religious, or lay, to evangelize by word, by personal example, and by helping to transform society according to the mind of Christ. An increasing group of young Catholics, I believe, are sensing the urgency of this project.

Notes

1. John XXIII, “Apostolic Constitution *Humanae salutis*,” *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), 703.
2. Ibid., 706.
3. John XXIII, Opening Speech at the Council, ibid., 710–19, esp. 716.
4. Avery Cardinal Dulles, “The Covenant with Israel,” *First Things* 157 (November 2005): 16–21.