EVANGELIZATION

Experiencing and Sharing the Catholic Faith

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Introduction

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1975, Pope Paul VI promulgated *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*On Evangelization in the Modern World*). With supreme clarity and drawing on the richness of the Catholic tradition, this apostolic exhortation provides an overview of the content, methods, beneficiaries, and spirit of evangelization. This document merits not only careful reading; it merits sustained meditation.

“Evangelization,” “spirituality,” and “stewardship” seem like jargon words, terminology accessible only to those in the inner circle of theology. This is not necessarily so. These words capture a segment of our faith life that is basically quite simple. Someone once said that spirituality is simply “staying awake”; someone once said that stewardship is “what we do after we say we believe”; someone once said that evangelization is “wanting everyone to know who God is.”

In baptism, every Christian receives a call to share the grace received in this sacrament, the grace of God’s life made manifest in the life of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every baptized person is called to be an evangelist, to
witness to God’s abundant love for the world. Evangelization is simply witnessing to God’s love and mercy revealed in Jesus, be it in word, deed, or lifestyle.

Brigid E. Herman writes that “meditation is nothing else than the art of thinking well and thoroughly upon the truths upon which prayer is based.” We do well to meditate “well and thoroughly” upon the truth of evangelization, the essential mission of the church. In so doing, we once again have the opportunity to renew the meaning of our Christian life and our commitment to share it.
#1 Evangelization in a Nutshell

_The heart of its [evangelization's] message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ._ Pope Francis

When Saul (later Paul) was journeying to Damascus, continuing his persecution of the Christian community, he encountered the mystery of Jesus, the crucified and risen one. We know the story and how St. Paul became one of the greatest Christian evangelizers of all times. He told the Galatians that Christ lived in him and that his “own” life counted for next to nothing (Galatians 2:20); he wrote to the Colossians that Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15); he told the Philippians that the only thing that matters is that Christ be proclaimed (Philippians 1:18). It’s all about Jesus, the presence and manifestation of God in the world.

The core message is love—God’s immense love for us. Though that love is offered to everyone, it needs acceptance. The story is told of a second-grade student who said to her teacher at the end of the school year: “You have no idea how much I love you!” The teacher was blown away. She interpreted this unexpected experience as a message from God. That little second grader, unknowingly, was an evangelist and confirmed for the teacher her intrinsic value and worth.
In the writings of St. John of the Cross, what is continuously made manifest is God’s immense love for us. John’s phrase “When God looks, God loves” captures well the message of all authentic evangelists. Throughout life, the challenge will be to appropriate this message—to really believe that we are totally and immensely loved. When that message is internalized and lived, the gospel comes alive. It is then that we experience the joy of the gospel.

#2 Being Evangelized

The Church does not evangelize unless she constantly lets herself be evangelized. Pope Francis

We ought to let others be constantly evangelizing us. Pope Francis

There is a danger regarding the ministry of evangelization. Some evangelists come across as self-righteous and as being “totally redeemed.” Such arrogance turns people off; such false pride harms the message delivered. Humility demands that we realize that we are always in need of God’s redemptive love, that we are all sinners. Pope Francis told the world: “I am a sinner.” Our evangelizing ministry must never forget that we stand in need of ongoing redemption because no one’s mind or heart
has been totally transformed by God’s grace.

God’s immense love is operative throughout history and in all cultures. We are challenged to recognize God’s presence and love in the great classics, in the arts, and in those individuals and cultures that have served the common good, some even at the expense of their lives. No single religion has all the answers; no one person or any particular people has exclusive rights to God’s providential care. Since God has been working throughout all of history, we have much to learn from other religions and cultures.

St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), the great Jesuit missionary, found in the Japanese culture virtues and strengths that astounded him. Clearly these were evidences of God’s grace and providence. Francis Xavier was also keenly aware of vices and sins that are a part of every land and people. But he built on the goodness that was there and connected it to the message of Jesus, the redeemer and friend of all. St. Francis Xavier went from Japan to China to continue to evangelize and be evangelized. He died at age forty-six before he reached mainland China.

#3 Evangelization’s Principal Agent: the Holy Spirit

*It must be said that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization: it is he who impels each individual to pro-
claim the Gospel, and it is he who in the depth of consciences causes the word of salvation to be accepted and understood. But it can equally be said that he is the goal of evangelization: he alone stirs up the new creation, the new humanity of which evangelization is to be the result, with that unity in variety which evangelization wishes to achieve within the Christian community. Through the Holy Spirit the Gospel penetrates to the heart of the world, for it is he who causes people to discern the signs of the times—signs willed by God—which evangelization reveals and puts to use within history. Pope Paul VI

In the opening stanza of “Veni, Creator Spiritus,” three verbs describe the singer’s desire: veni, visita, imple (come, visit, fill). In faith, we sing that the Spirit of the living God might become present in our lives, visit us with truth, and fill us with grace, the gift of God’s very life and love. God’s Spirit is active and dynamic. This “finger of God’s right hand” is on mission—to bring about that unity and union that is the very heart of the church’s purpose.

In the work of evangelization—the proclamation of God’s love and mercy made manifest in Jesus—the Holy Spirit is the primary agent. Just as the “Veni, Creator Spiritus” hymn sketches out the requested activity of the Spirit, so too Pope Paul VI describes the activities of the Holy Spirit within our hearts and the heart of the community. The Spirit impels proclamation, causes acceptance and understanding, stirs up a whole new creation, achieves community, penetrates the heart, and causes discernment. Without the Spirit, our
efforts of evangelization are in vain; without the Holy Spirit, our ministry will not bear fruit.

The beauty of Christian ministry is collaboration. Together with the Spirit and other members of the faith community, we do the work of fostering the kingdom of God. Together we are “coworkers” in the vineyard. There is no room for an attitude of crass self-sufficiency in the missionary field. We, either as individuals or as a community, are not the primary agents in any dimension of ministry. It is the Spirit of the Father and the Son who initiates, directs, and brings to completion our calling to be disciples and stewards of God’s many gifts.

#4 Evangelization and the Search for Transcendence

As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. Pope Francis⁶

Karl Rahner, one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, held the conviction that there is a depth and quality in everyday experiences that orientate us to the mystery of God. For Rahner,
everyone is essentially loved and graced by God and thus has an implicit longing for the Holy. Another way of stating this is that every individual has a religious dimension and experiences that dimension when truth, goodness, and beauty are present.

This reality of God’s presence in all that is true, good, and beautiful should foster a sense that we are all members of the same family sharing a common journey. Whether a person belongs to a particular religious tradition or is a “nonbeliever,” we still have something in common that is deep and binding. This is not to say that specific revelations of God’s design are not important. Rather, it is simply to put us on the alert that God’s love and mercy are universal and cannot be confined to any one place, culture, or set of beliefs.

In her excellent book *In the Light of Christ*, Lucy Beckett traces down through Western civilization how the great pre-Christian writers—Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Cicero, Virgil—reflected upon and wrote about truth, goodness, and beauty. In Christ, the fullness of the light was made manifest, but down through the ages grace was operative and was made manifest in unique ways. Evangelizers do well to appreciate this, lest smugness and crass arrogance poison and discolor the ministry of sharing the good news.
#5 Challenges for Evangelists

One of the central challenges of the gospel is to make the values of the reign of God our own—holiness, truth, justice, love, and peace—and then to live them out in the midst of a world that does not choose or even value them, sometimes swimming against the tide. But even as we do so, our first task in mission is not to correct or chide, but to remain approachable and open, collaborative and supportive of all who truly seek common cause and common good.

Michael Downey

As institutions write their mission statement, members describe their identity and purposes, articulated as core values. Dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors are noted that not only define the nature of the institution—be it a college, hospital, or parish—but also must be put into practice to achieve authenticity. Common values such as hospitality and integrity, respect and courtesy, compassion and sensitivity, are foundational to any healthy institution.

The five values mentioned in the Downey quote above are central to the kingdom of God: “holiness, truth, justice, love, and peace.” We might add to the list compassion, forgiveness, and freedom. In certain cultures and eras of history, these values are rejected, even directly opposed. Human trafficking, terrorism, drug dealing, corporate greed, sexual abuse, and vendettas express behavior contrary to the gospel mes-
sage and a Christian way of life. Our ministry of evangelization confronts a world still in need of redemption.

Evangelists are challenged to find “common ground” in all cultures. Certain attitudes—openness, approachability, collaboration—foster relationships and further the work of evangelization. The ability to appreciate differences and to see the good and the true in ways of life different from our own opens the door of dialogue and prepares the soil for sharing the good news of God’s love revealed in Jesus.

#6 Evangelization’s Great Sickness

The power of evangelization will find itself considerably diminished if those who proclaim the Gospel are divided among themselves in all sorts of ways. Is this not one of the great sicknesses of evangelization today? Indeed, if the Gospel that we proclaim is seen to be rent by doctrinal disputes, ideological polarizations or mutual condemnations... how can those to whom we address our preaching fail to be disturbed, disoriented, even scandalized? **Pope Paul VI**

Religious bodies can be healthy or sick, just like governments, universities, or families. So much depends upon common vision and values, clear
mission and mutual respect. A house divided against itself will not only fall, but outside observers will have evidence that authenticity and integrity are absent. One of the constant scandals to nonbelievers is how often “believers” fail to love and respect each other.

This sickness of disunity is just one illness diminishing the effectiveness of evangelization. There are others: self-righteousness, trepidation in the face of opposition, lack of zeal...and the list goes on. Evangelization is subject to as many diseases as are other noble missions. What is essential is vigorous effort to maintain unity, to be discerning of God’s movements, and to demonstrate one’s conviction through deeds of charity and justice.

The great sickness of disunity is not a new phenomenon. St. Paul dealt with it time and time again with his communities. In writing to the Ephesians he pleads with them not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). St. Paul goes on to name attitudes and behaviors that cause disunity and thwart the work of evangelization: anger, wrangling, slander, bitterness. Whatever the cause, polarization gives lie to the joy of the gospel. Just as Jerusalem caused Jesus to weep, so too human disunity causes the heart of our loving God to grieve.
#7 The How of Evangelization

She [Mother Teresa] yearned to light the light of God’s love in the ‘dark hole’ of every heart buried in destitution, loneliness or rejection. **Brian Kolodiejchuk**

It is one thing to understand the theology of evangelization; it is another to implement it. How do we share God’s love with others? How do we foster an environment conducive to encountering Jesus? Pope Paul VI lists eight ways that the Christian community does this evangelical ministry: witness, preaching, Scripture, catechetics, use of the mass media, personal contact, celebration of the sacraments, and popular piety and devotion.

Most people never heard Mother Teresa of Calcutta speak, but millions know about her work with the poorest of the poor. This witness of care and compassion was eloquent; this personal contact with the abandoned and despairing gave proof of God’s love. In the end, after all liturgical celebrations and catechetical programs and use of the mass media, it comes down to living the gospel that makes evangelization authentic and real.

There are a thousand and one ways of evangelizing and being evangelized: receiving encouragement in times of distress; writing a note that ends with “I love you!”; reading Augustine’s *Confessions* or Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*; serving food at a homeless shelter; welcoming a stranger. We sing
of the work of evangelization: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do unto me.”

#8 Evangelization and Holiness

The world calls for and expects from us simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, charity toward all, especially towards the lowly, obedience and humility, detachment and self-sacrifice. Without this mark of holiness, our word will have difficulty in touching the heart of modern man. It risks being vain and sterile. Pope Paul VI

In chapter five of Lumen Gentium, the fathers of Vatican Council II made it absolutely clear that the universal vocation of all the baptized is the call to holiness.

Before discerning whether to be married or remain single, to be ordained or enter religious life, everyone is called to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. To the extent that we respond to this call, our ministry of evangelization will be effective. Failure to embrace God’s love and share it with others risks making our ministry “vain and sterile.”

Back in 1964, Marshall McLuhan held the position that in communication we should focus on the medium, not the message. In the ministry of evangelization we focus on the message: God’s love and mercy revealed in Jesus. However, the
person (the evangelist) plays a significant part in the whole process. When evangelists demonstrate obedience and humility, detachment and sacrifice, charity and simplicity, the message is enriched in that the medium is attempting to live what is preached. When one’s lifestyle belies one’s ministry, things begin to fall apart.

What is it that touches the heart of contemporary people? Flannery O’Connor thought that when a culture is hard of hearing, you have to shout; when a culture is hard of seeing, you draw large, distorted pictures. Her novels and short stories approach conversion by shocking people awake. That is one method. Another way of touching the human heart is by a life of holiness, being kind and patient, forgiving and compassionate. When evangelists are open to the Spirit, they are able to move and convert hearts.

### #9 Evangelization and Joy

*Let me tell it my way. One cannot come into possession of joy and keep secrets.* **Jean Montaurier**

In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul urged that early faith community to rejoice, to rejoice always in the Lord. This epistle of joy is grounded in the mystery of Jesus, God-made-manifest in the child born of Mary. Paul could not keep this secret to himself. He had to shout it from the
mountaintop, and shout it he did even if this ministry proved to be a threat to his life.

Joy comes in many forms, in many varieties. One might wonder if St. Paul pondered the beauty and mystery of joy in these terms:

As sawdust is a byproduct for the logger, so joy is a byproduct for the lover.

initial joy / organized joy / strange joy
accidental joy / substantial joy / muted joy
fixed joy / introductory joy / first joy
disproportionate joy / present joy / last joy
vague joy / habitual joy / spiritual joy
perfected joy / humble joy / sad joy

Joy = the felt awareness of possessing a good

What we possess is the greatest good of all: the mystery of God’s love and forgiveness. No one can experience this grace without sharing it, be it a secret or not.
How are we to live wisely as Christians within the pressures and complexities of contemporary culture?

Michael Paul Gallagher

A very Cardinal Dulles delineates five factors that impact negatively on our faith life and the ministry of evangelization: the strong force and climate of secularism, the loss of traditional sociological supports (such as the family and small communities), the incredible speed of cultural change, the multiplicity of belief systems, and the fact that we have so many different options to choose from. No wonder that faith is endangered.

At the same time, our culture offers some golden opportunities for evangelization. First of all, the tremendous potential of modern technology to share our message of the good news. Our culture, through the advancement of science, has greatly improved the quality of life. An increased sense of equality and the emancipation of many countries from oppressive government is a sign of hope. The opportunity for education has grown by leaps and bounds. If we “read the signs of the time” well, we can perceive God’s grace in our world.

To live wisely in our world today we might go back to good old Solomon. When God asked Solomon what he de-
sired, the request was for “an understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:9). We might add to our request for “a courageous discerning heart” that we, in our contemporary culture, might “do the truth in love.” Discernment reveals the truth; love enlarges our heart; courage empowers us to do God’s will. Evangelization in our culture is grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit, whose fire enkindles our heart, enlightens our mind, and empowers our will.
In fulfilling our baptismal call to evangelize, are there some guidelines or imperatives in undertaking this responsibility? Here are seven that come to mind.

*Be alert.* If we are attentive to God’s abiding presence and attentive to the hunger for meaning in every human heart, we are well disposed to share the good news with our fellow pilgrims. That attentiveness calls us to be receptive to how God’s love and mercy are being offered to us by others. Evangelization is never a one-way street.

*Be joyful.* There are many causes to make us downcast: wars, abuse, corruption, broken relationships. But there is a faith-fact that should permeate our days: God’s ever-lasting, abiding love. We cannot afford spiritual dementia. But recalling on a daily basis the incredible grace of being loved should feed our hearts with a joy that no one can take from us.

*Be courageous.* St. Paul is our model here. Despite great opposition and many threats to his life, this Apostle to the Gentiles ventured forth and boldly proclaimed the mystery of Jesus. Suffering and death itself did not deter his ministry. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, St. Paul was freed from fear and was gifted with great fortitude.

*Be thankful.* The psalmist raises a haunting question as to
what return we can possibly make for all the good that God has done for us (Psalm 116:12). All that we have and are comes from God. If we are conscious of this, gratitude should become a way of life. One way of expressing that gratitude is to publicly thank the Giver of all gifts and to invite others to that awareness. By doing so we are evangelizing.

Be sneaky. In a sense, Jesus’ use of parables was somewhat sneaky. In his furtive teaching method, Jesus snuck into the imaginations of the people as he proclaimed the reign of God. We can do the same by using art, music, and literature in conveying the message of the good news. C.S. Lewis, in The Chronicles of Narnia, told the Christian narrative in a disguised way.

Be hopeful. In the musical “Guys and Dolls,” Sarah Brown’s evangelization work in “Save a Soul Mission” was not going well. Her attempt to engage Nathan Detroit and Sky Masterson failed time and time again. But in the end, she was graced to change their hearts and lifestyle (to some degree). At times, she was discouraged, as all evangelists will be. Hope is the grace we need to persevere in our missionary work.

Be confident. Trust is foundational to the ministry of evangelization. That trust is not grounded in us but in the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. Our confidence is rooted in this promise of presence. We may never see the results of our work. Just planting seeds may be our lot—so be it. God will bring about the harvest.
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