

Mass Evangelization: Sharing faith with the Eucharist

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Within the first few weeks of his papacy, Pope Francis won widespread praise for his emphasis on “a poor church” that is “for the poor.” His warm and casual disposition, personal simplicity and tender outreach to “the poorest, the weakest, the least important,” as he expressed it in the homily at his inauguration Mass, may prove to be a defining feature of his papacy.

It is undoubtedly true that Pope Francis’ personal style is distinct from that of his immediate predecessors. How could it not be so? Inevitably each pope has his own personality, context and point of emphasis. But what is equally true is that the content and purpose of Francis’ outreach are in clear continuity with the legacy of the Second Vatican Council and especially Blessed John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI; the new pope’s outreach is an embodiment of the new evangelization.

The New Evangelization in Context

The theme of evangelization is indeed relatively new in Catholic circles. “Evangelizing” is something we had long associated with Protestant groups that send their members door to door. When we Catholics worried about the growth of the church, we thought in terms of missions, which meant, in practical terms, sending a donation to clergy who traveled overseas. The notion of evangelization was foreign to Catholics. Though the term and its near relatives are common in the church’s documents from the second half of the 20th century, one has to strain to find it before then. In the documents of Vatican I (1869-70), the word *evangelium* (Latin for “Gospel”) appears only once, and only then in reference to the four written Gospels.

If one skips ahead to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), however, one will find the root *evangel* and its cognates—*evangelize, evangelizing, evangelization*—more than 200 times. These words are used to speak of the act of spreading the Good News, sharing the message and life of Jesus Christ. Something had changed between the councils. The popes noticed.

When Cardinal Giovanni Montini assumed the Chair of Peter in 1963, he took the name Paul. He explained that he wanted to pattern his ministry after the peripatetic Apostle to the Gentiles. And so he did. He was the first pope to make apostolic journeys to six continents.

He was on a mission, but it was not his alone. It belonged to the church. He reorganized the Roman Curia and changed the name of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. He made evangelization a priority. When he issued his apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” (“On Evangelization in the Modern World”) in 1975, he lamented that Catholics were neglecting their most basic duty.

“Evangelizing,” he wrote, “is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize....”

Pope Paul’s summons cannot be dodged or delegated. “The presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church,” he wrote. “It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved. This message is indeed necessary. It is unique. It cannot be replaced. It does not permit either indifference, syncretism or accommodation. It is a question of people’s salvation.”

What Paul VI identified as a matter of primary importance, John Paul II made a matter of urgency. It was he who gave it a name, “the new evangelization,” and made it programmatic and pervasive.

His first use of the phrase came near the beginning of his reign. During his first return to Poland in 1979, John Paul addressed a people whose religious practice had been repressed by Communist overlords, and yet he had the audacity to preach: “A new evangelization has begun, as if it were a new proclamation, even if in reality it is the same as ever.”

The phrase seemed electric. And yet it did not come up again in his work until 1983. Then, however, it emerged as something focused, intentional and programmatic. It defined a vision. That year, speaking to the bishops of Latin America, John Paul announced that the

new evangelization was to be officially launched in 1992, the 500th anniversary of the first evangelization of the Americas.

How serious was he about the project? Serious enough to pledge everything the church has to its success: “I sense that the moment has come to commit all the Church’s energies to a new evangelization,” he said in his 1990 encyclical “Redemptoris Missio.” He continued, “No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church, can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.”

Evangelization was a priority for Pope John Paul II. He eagerly took up his predecessor’s practice of making pastoral trips, but increased the pace and frequency, traveling almost a million miles to 129 countries and addressing some of the largest crowds in history. He introduced World Youth Days, sometimes drawing more than a million young people at a time. He also reached out with electronic media.

It was a preoccupation for John Paul, but his successor also took it up with gusto. It was Pope Benedict who established a Vatican dicastery to oversee the new evangelization. He also summoned a synod to discuss the new evangelization, and it was Pope Benedict who began to speak analytically and theologically about the phenomenon—as a program that could be distinguished from past efforts. The new evangelization, he said in a homily in 2010, is “‘new’ not in its content but in its inner thrust...‘new’ in ways that correspond with the power of the Holy Spirit and which are suited to the times and situations; ‘new’ because of being necessary even in countries that have already received the proclamation of the Gospel.”

What is new about the new evangelization? Pope Benedict spoke more precisely at the opening of the Synod of Bishops in 2012. The new evangelization, he said, will be carried out not only by members of the clergy and missionaries, but by everyone in the church. It will be not just the matter of a moment, ending with initiation. It will be a summons to ongoing conversion. Christians will strive to evangelize not only individuals but also culture and society, overcoming the currents of secularism that have caused many Catholics to lose their faith. And most important, it will be directed not only toward those who are unaware of the Gospel; it will aim also to revitalize Catholics who have grown cold in their faith. It will evangelize the de-Christianized.

In his apostolic exhortation “*Verbum Domini*” in 2010, Benedict wrote: “Many of our brothers and sisters are ‘baptized, but insufficiently evangelized.’ In a number of cases, nations once rich in faith and in vocations are losing their identity under the influence of a secularized culture. The need for a new evangelization...must be valiantly reaffirmed.”

Common Objections

In the North American milieu, this call has been received with mixed results. In the pages of **America** more than 20 years ago, Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., raised for the sake of discussion some typical American objections to the new evangelization (“John Paul II and the New Evangelization,” 2/1/1992).

Words like *evangelization* and *evangelism*, he observed, have “a Protestant ring.” We associate these terms with fundamentalism, and so with methods that are non-Catholic and even anti-Catholic. Evangelism suggests emotionalism, revivalism and anti-intellectualism—the kind of religion we observe when we are channel-surfing late at night and momentarily land on a televangelist. Whatever he is doing, it is not what we do. We change the channel.

As Americans, moreover, we are raised with a strong sense that religion is a private matter. It is one of the two subjects never to be discussed in polite company—the other being politics.

Cardinal Dulles noted that the objections do not hold up. Our neighbors and co-workers speak incessantly about politics. And Catholic evangelization is not fundamentalist evangelism. The popes are not asking us to conquer the world with a weaponized book. “I submit that the popes of our time have correctly identified God’s call to the church in our day and have hit upon an effective remedy for the church’s present ills,” Cardinal Dulles wrote. “The church has become too introverted. If Catholics today are sometimes weak in their faith, this is partly because of their reluctance to share it.”

We need to get over this reluctance. We need to evangelize.

The Source of Evangelization

What, then, is the key to the new evangelization? I remember wondering that myself, back in 1992. As if on cue, I opened *L’Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican’s newspaper, and saw the headline: “Base New Evangelization on Eucharist.”

It caught my eye not only because it seemed to answer my question, but also because it made no sense to me whatsoever. Its proposal was counterintuitive. The Eucharist, after all, is for the already initiated, the folks who are showing up for Mass. Evangelization is supposed to reach outward. Yet the headline sat atop a homily by Blessed John Paul in which he referred to the Eucharist as the “beginning” (not the end!) of our outreach, “the source” and “the basis of the New Evangelization.”

Soon others picked up on this theme. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago gave an address on Catholicity and the new evangelization, and he drew the same conclusion: “All evangelizers proclaim who Christ is; Catholic evangelizers proclaim a Eucharistic Christ.”

In 2000 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger told a group of catechists that the church has always begun its evangelistic efforts at the altar. “The Church always evangelizes and has never interrupted the path of evangelization. She celebrates the Eucharistic mystery every day, administers the sacraments, proclaims the word of life—the Word of God, and commits herself to the causes of justice and charity. And this evangelization bears fruit.”

The Mass reminds us that evangelization is a gift before it is a task. It is receiving before it is doing. And we cannot share what we do not first possess.

Sacrifice and Sacrament

Not long ago I was hurrying through an airport when I heard someone shout my name. I turned to see a man my age approaching with his hand outstretched. When he said his name, Chris, I recognized him from a long-ago high school lunchroom.

When I was a teen, I was a born-again Christian, an earnest evangelical eager to argue the world into seeing the truth that was so plain to me. Chris was very bright, and he went on to become successful as a medical doctor and stockbroker. Though he had been raised a Catholic, he had no clear sense of his church’s doctrine. But neither was he interested in becoming anything other than Catholic. As clever as I was at argument, I never felt I had gone far in persuading him. When he greeted me in the airport, however, he was excited to tell me that I had indeed succeeded and that he eventually left the Catholic Church and became a “Bible Christian.” I was late for my plane, but told him we needed to talk. We exchanged cards, and within a week we reconnected by phone.

Chris reminded me that one of the questions I used to bait him in the lunchroom was “Where in the New Testament do you find the sacrifice of the Mass? Calvary is the sacrifice. The Mass is just a meal.” Well, he turned my question back on me.

In that first conversation I tried to dispel misconceptions and find common ground. Both Catholics and Protestants agree that Jesus’ sacrifice took place on Calvary “once for all” (Heb 7:27, 10:10; 1 Pt 3:18). There is no saving sacrifice apart from the cross.

I asked Chris to consider, however, that there was nothing on Calvary that would have suggested sacrifice to a first-century Jew. No devout Jews witnessing Jesus’ crucifixion would have gone home and recounted what they witnessed in terms of a sacrifice. For them, a sacrifice had to take place inside the Temple, at an altar, with a Levitical priest presiding. Jesus’ crucifixion took place outside the walls, where there was no Temple, no Levite, no altar. It looked like a bloody Roman execution, not a sacrifice.

What was it, I asked Chris, that transformed Jesus’ execution into a sacrifice? He was dumbstruck. I told him that for many years I could not answer that question. But St. Paul and the church fathers led me to the answer.

The transformative moment was Jesus’ offering of his body and blood at the Last Supper. Jesus spoke of that offering in sacrificial terms, commanding his apostles to keep it in perpetuity as his memorial: “Do this in remembrance of me.” He called it “the new covenant” (or “new testament”) in his blood (Mt 26:28), echoing Moses’ words as he ratified the Old Law with a sacrifice (Ex 24:8). The apostles, too, looked upon his memorial in sacrificial terms: “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7).

Holy Thursday is what transformed Good Friday from an execution into a sacrifice, and Easter Sunday is what transformed the sacrifice into a sacrament. Christ’s body was raised in glory, so it is now communicable to the faithful. Indeed, it is the same sacrifice he offered by instituting the Eucharist and then dying on Calvary, only now his sacred humanity is deified and deifying. It is the high-priestly sacrifice that he offers in heaven and on earth.

That is the holy sacrifice of the Mass. If the Eucharist were only a meal, then Calvary would be no more than an execution.

Where in the New Testament is the sacrifice of the Mass? The sacrifice of the Mass is the new testament! The “new testament” was a sacrament long before it was a document. It was not until A.D. 190 that we begin to find the phrase used to describe a book. It was not until the late fourth century that the church definitively ratified the canonical form of that book. But by then the New Testament sacrifice had already evangelized the world. The book was called the New Testament because of its proximity to the sacrifice of the Eucharist. The Scriptures are liturgical documents; and they need to be read as such in order to be properly understood.

My conversation with Chris continued for months. (Eventually, my portion became a book: *Consuming the Word*, Doubleday.) Through those months, our friendship was renewed and deepened. Eventually, he and his wife returned to the Catholic Church after more than three decades away.

Chris’s backstory is not so unusual. It is the story of many Catholics of his generation—my generation. Our hearts should at least be moved to reach out to them with the best that we have.

I have good reason for believing that a new evangelization based on the Eucharist will work. It is a papal teaching, and that is always a good bet. But I have also seen it work in my own life, in Chris’s and in the lives of so many friends.

We must evangelize. It is the church’s urgent and importunate call. Like the church, we exist in order to evangelize. Like St. Paul, we cannot be ourselves, we cannot be happy, we will never be satisfied in life if we neglect to reach out to our neighbor: “Woe to me if I do not evangelize” (1 Cor 9:16).

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