

Historical Context of the New Evangelization

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit.”

—Mt 28:19

The Church’s *ad gentes* (“to the world”) mission given to her by Christ is the proclamation of the Good News to those who do not know him. The historical and social circumstances of the twentieth century prompted the Church to renew her mission to evangelize. This renewed vision of evangelization includes, as Pope Benedict XVI has stated, the challenge to “propose anew”¹⁵ the Good News to all of the Christian faithful, most especially to those of the faithful who are absent from the Lord’s Table.

Pope Paul VI’s Call for Evangelization

Ten years after the close of the Second Vatican Council and a year after the 1974 Synod of Bishops, Pope Paul VI issued *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Pope Paul VI stated that the Church “exists in order to evangelize, that is to say in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of his death and glorious Resurrection.”¹⁶ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* describes the essential aspects of evangelization as well as its effects on the one evangelizing and the one being evangelized. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God and salvation for all people through Jesus Christ is at the very core of the Church’s mission and the essential aspects of evangelization.¹⁷ To evangelize, one bears witness to God’s Revelation in Jesus through the Holy Spirit by living a life imbued with Christian virtues, by proclaiming unceasingly that salvation is offered to all people through the Paschal Mystery of Christ, and by preaching hope in God’s love for us.¹⁸ Pope Paul VI recognized that the first proclamation of the Good News is directed *ad gentes*. However, he also recognized the need for the evangelization of the baptized who no longer practice their faith.¹⁹ He called upon the Church to evangelize these two groups, to invite them to a life of conversion, and to add new meaning to their life through the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

Blessed John Paul II and the New Evangelization

Blessed John Paul II renewed the call to all of the Christian faithful to evangelize in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI. “No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.”²⁰ Blessed John Paul II made evangelization a focus of his pontificate and emphasized man’s need to be evangelized by the Church. Evangelization occurs most effectively when the Church engages the culture of those she evangelizes. In 1983, he addressed the Catholic bishops of Latin America in Haiti and called for a New Evangelization: “The commemoration of the half millennium of evangelization will gain its full energy if it is a commitment, not to re-evangelize but to a New Evangelization, new in its ardor, methods and expression.”²¹ This marked the first time Blessed John Paul II used the term “New Evangelization” as the theological concept of proclaiming the Gospel anew to those already evangelized. He called for new “ardor, methods and expression” of evangelization, ones that engage the present-day culture and modern man. Blessed John Paul II, in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, provided three circumstances in evangelization: (1) preaching to those who have never heard the Gospel (*ad gentes*), (2) preaching to those Christian communities where the Church is present and who have fervor in their faith, and (3) preaching to those Christian communities who have ancient roots but who “have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization.’”²² Blessed John Paul II alluded to the New Evangelization again in his opening address to the Catholic bishops of Latin America in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, as well as in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Although Blessed John

Paul II did not develop a full theological scheme of the New Evangelization, his writings reveal central themes of the New Evangelization, including the implementation of the call of the Second Vatican Council to proclaim the Good News of Christ by the engagement of the present culture and to accompany individuals on their journey from this life to eternal life. For Blessed John Paul II, evangelization must proclaim the Good News, which when appropriated into one's life, leads to conversion. This conversion provides a life of witness to the Good News and compels one to fulfill his or her vocation to the universal call of holiness. One's vocation to holiness is strengthened through the gifts of the Church, namely the grace of the sacraments, prayer, Scripture, and the Church's teachings and traditions.

Pope Benedict XVI and the Future of the New Evangelization

During his homily on the Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls on June 28, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI renewed the Church's call to the New Evangelization. Pope Benedict XVI called for the *riproporre* ("re-proposing") of the Gospel to those regions "still awaiting a first evangelization" and to those regions where the roots of Christianity are deep but that have experienced "a serious crisis" of faith due to secularization.²³ He clarified that the New Evangelization is new, not in its content but rather in its inner thrust; new in its methods that must correspond to the times; and new because it is necessary to proclaim the Gospel to those who have already heard it.²⁴ Pope Benedict XVI calls the Church to evangelize by entering into dialogue with modern culture and confronting the cultural crisis brought on by secularization. To aid the Church in re-proposing the faith to modern society, Pope Benedict XVI established the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization on September 21, 2010, and proposed that the New Evangelization be the focus of the next Synod of Bishops. When describing why he created a council for the promotion of the New Evangelization, Pope Benedict XVI stated that the mission of the Church has always remained the same, but the cultural contexts confronting man and the Church have changed. The council will help the Church understand the cultural contexts of the twenty-first century. Pope Benedict XVI noted that the Church is being challenged by "an abandonment of the faith—a phenomenon progressively more manifest in societies and cultures which for centuries seemed to be permeated by the Gospel."²⁵ He also outlined the modern cultural factors, such as secularism, that are contributing to the decline of the Christian identity in the world. Pope Benedict XVI has also indicated that the New Evangelization is not a single formula meant for all circumstances; first and foremost, it is a personal "profound experience of God

15 Benedict XVI, Homily of First Vespers on the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20100628_vespri-pietro-paolo_en.html.

16 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1975), no. 14. (Also available online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html.)

17 Cf. EN, nos. 8-9.

18 Cf. EN, nos. 26-28.

19 See EN, nos. 52-53; 56-57.

6 Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization

20 RM, no. 3.

21 John Paul II, *Address to CELAM* (Opening Address of the 19th General Assembly of CELAM, 9 March 1983, Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition 16/780 (18 April 1983), no. 9.

22 RM, no. 33.

23 Homily on the Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul.

24 Ibid.

Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization 7