

## The New Evangelisation

### CROSSING THE THRESHOLD DAY

*St Mary's, Leyland: 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2013*



**Evangelisation:** is derived from the Greek **'Euangellion'** and means 'good news', or 'good/glad announcement'. The apostle Paul speaks of being 'a priestly minister of the good news of God', (Rom. 15:16), 'set apart for the gospel of God'. The word is commonly used throughout the New Testament and, simply expressed, encapsulates Jesus Christ, who he was, and all that he stood for.

In his now celebrated Apostolic Exhortation of 1975, **Evangelii Nuntiandi**, Pope Paul VI famously stated that the sole purpose for the Church's existence is to announce to the world what almighty God has accomplished in Christ, in other words: to evangelise – to proclaim the Good News! "To evangelise is, in fact, the grace and vocation proper to the Church. She exists to evangelise" (N.14) She has received this commission from the risen Lord himself with his parting words at the conclusion of Matthew's gospel, '*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you....*' (Mt. 28:19-20), and in John '*As the Father has sent me, even so I send you...*' (Jn. 20:21).

The term **'New Evangelisation'** was apparently first used by Pope John Paul II and he has been followed in this by Pope Benedict XVI, and was of course the theme of the recent international Bishops' Synod in Rome (October 2012): **The Transmission of the Faith in the New Evangelisation**. It is important to state here that we are not speaking of a new gospel, or of altering in any way what Christ has taught and which has been passed down to us through the tradition of the Church. The observation of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians is very pertinent here: "*Not that there is another gospel ..... Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached, let him be accursed.*" (Gal. 1:7-8).

The context which forms the background and has given rise to the concept of the New Evangelisation is the awareness of the rapidly changed and still changing world and society in which we live: how do we offer and faithfully transmit the truth of Christ's gospel in such a radically different social setting and milieu? We are all familiar with those changes and

innovations that we now take for granted: e.g. the age of the internet, instant communications through the mobile phone, i phone, smart phone, skype, etc; the ease of mobility and travel – everywhere is within reach nowadays – increased prosperity, by comparison to previous generations, and resulting materialism with the apparent absence of God. The remarkable advances in science and the field of medicine have given humanity a sense of autonomy, believing that everything is possible and all illnesses and problems can, or soon will be, cured. This leads to a general feeling that God doesn't impinge on our lives, that the world really don't need him, or his truth revealed to us in Christ.

Pope Benedict's principle reason for convening the recent Bishops' Synod in October in Rome was his concern for the faith and its practice in those parts of the Western world, which were once firmly Catholic with deep Christian roots, but had now become increasingly secular and even indifferent to those Christian values which originally shaped them. Someone spoke recently of the prevalence of a kind of 'neo-paganism'.

As we address the challenges posed by the New Evangelisation, Pope Benedict has suggested as sure guides, or vade-mecums, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In particular the Pope signals out for special study and reflection the four principal documents of the Council: the Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Revelation Dei *Verbum* the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, and the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. Together with the Catechism of the Catholic Church, reflective study of and return to these 'sources', Pope Benedict believes, would ensure that we draw deeply from the long tradition of Church teaching and remain firmly within the continuity of that tradition. They would also point us securely to the future.

The process of Aggiornamento, the word used by Pope John XXIII on the eve of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, roughly translates as 'bringing the Church up to date', or 'turning the Church towards the world'. This renewal continues in our day and is perhaps even more imperative and challenging. In our own endeavours to hand on the faith we are perhaps still wrestling with the same Pope's statement that '**the content of the faith is one thing, its mode of expression quite another.**' The Church today is still living with the implications of the Second Vatican Council, and fifty years within the perspective of Church history is not, believe it or not, a long time! A look at Church history also reveals a long period of ferment after a Church Council. Our struggles to find new ways of proclaiming the gospel in the third millennium should not therefore unduly surprise us.

The Church is too often presented and too commonly understood, especially in the mass media, as an "Institution", a "structure" with all the drawbacks these notions entail for the person of the twenty-first century, and not as a place or forum where the grace of Christ and the mercy of God may be found. Do we ourselves view the Church purely in terms which are "this-worldly", and not as the willed creation of Jesus Christ? St. Paul drew upon the image or analogy of the human body, with its diverse but intimately linked members, as a deeply spiritual picture of the reality which is the universal Church. Christ is the Head and

we are his members; He is the source of the life and nourishment of his body. This deeper and spiritual reality must go hand in hand with the notion of the Church as institution.

In this task or mission of evangelisation how do we allow the face of Christ “to shine forth brightly” from the Church to the world?

How can the Church be the hearth or focal point where “modern men and women” can both discover meaning and purpose for their life, as well as discerning God’s plan for the world?

How do we speak the word of God authentically and convincingly to our world, to our generation?

Is the Church experiencing an identity problem? Have recent scandals so overwhelmed, and to some extent demoralised her, to the exclusion of everything else?

How can the Church regain her moral authority?

We need to recover and ‘recharge’ the content of religious language – concepts such as faith, grace, salvation, redemption, etc. Can we address modern men and women in a language which appears relevant makes sense to them? Pope Paul VI in his same Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, also referred to the gap or chasm between the Gospel and culture as being one of the tragedies of the modern age.

**The Synod:** Some themes which emerged from the floor of the Synod:

Baptism - each individual member of the Church by virtue of his/her baptism is a bearer of the gospel. We are all evangelisers! We have a power and a fire within us because of this sacrament if we only were aware of the fact.

The beautiful biblical picture in John 4 of the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well was seen as a key text, paradigmatic, for the approach to catechesis: note the delicacy and sensitivity of Christ in speaking with the woman, her gradual awareness of the identity of this stranger, his unfolding revelation of himself as the Messiah, the woman’s discovery of what was really important in her life – she abandoned her water jar – and ran to tell her townsfolk of the One she had met. She was evangelised by Christ, and in turn became an evangelist herself!

The necessity of individual and corporate conversion as a prelude to evangelisation was also repeatedly stressed by the Synod members. How much of the prevailing secular mentality have we believers imbibed, consciously or unconsciously? We are of necessity ‘children of our age’ and conversion entails examining the assumptions and values which underpin our lives. Why have we appeared to have failed to convey the wonder and power of the

Sacrament of Reconciliation? If the Church is to be renewed or reformed it must first begin with me!

The Synod address of Archbishop Rowan Williams was well received. Surprisingly perhaps on the subject of evangelisation he spoke of the necessity and priority of contemplation for any would-be evangeliser, and of the need to teach others that such elevated and sublime prayerful engagement with almighty God was possible. Above all else, the evangeliser must be prepared to spend time in silent prayer and contemplation before beginning the work of proclaiming Christ. There is much food for thought in the Archbishop's address which was very well received by the Synod.

The subject of catechesis and its content was a constant theme on the part of many Synod speakers. The urgent need for proper and thoroughgoing catechesis in the faith received repeated emphasis, especially in preparation for, and following, the reception of sacraments.

Of overriding importance was for catechists themselves to be properly evangelised and trained for their mission. Local Churches must be prepared to invest in the whole work of catechesis.

One bishop asked: how do we dispel the tiredness that seems to have overtaken the faith in so many parts of the world?

Paradigm or pattern for the work of evangelisation and catechesis was to be found in the Acts of the Apostles and the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the hope that lies at the heart of Christ's gospel. The task which confronted the first disciples and the early Church was quite awesome, even monumental, as the Acts records, but their faith in the power and presence of the risen Christ and the gift of his all-powerful Spirit enabled the gospel to grow and spread in a most remarkable way.

In the work of evangelisation and catechesis, handing on the faith, we must remember that the Holy Spirit is the chief evangelist. His guidance and prompting have been promised to us by Christ. Our often limited and faltering efforts are enhanced and brought to completion by the Spirit: *"These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."* John 14:25-26.

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