

How to evangelise

How do we evangelise? Pope Paul VI commented, "The obvious importance of the content of evangelisation must not overshadow the importance of the ways and means. This question of "how to evangelise" is permanently relevant, because the methods of evangelising vary according to the different circumstances of time, place and culture, and because they thereby present a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and adaptation" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.40).

He urges the Church to assume the responsibility "for reshaping with boldness and wisdom, but in complete fidelity to the content of evangelisation, the means that are most suitable and effective for communicating the Gospel message to the men and women of our times".

How can we evangelise in Australia at the beginning of the third Christian millennium?

There is the obvious value of our personal witness. Every Catholic has many opportunities to show that their life is moulded by their Catholic faith. Opportunities often emerge whereby we can share our faith or explain our beliefs. This does not need to be deeply theological, but can simply be an expression of our faith as we understand it. Often people of no faith are fascinated by someone who has something to live by and has beliefs that underpin their lives. We should not be embarrassed about giving an account of the hope that lies within us. It is Good news! Good news to many now who have no clear foundation to their lives.

But as individuals, or more importantly as groups, we can take new initiatives in the mission to evangelise.

As noted above, Pope Paul VI spoke of "reshaping with boldness and wisdom" the means in which we are to evangelise. Evangelisation today calls for creativity and innovation. It is not just standing on a street corner and preaching the message of "turn or burn"! One of the very exciting aspects of the Church today is the new and inventive ways in which the Gospel message can be presented. We are witnessing youth teams using drama, contemporary music and the power of personal testimony in effectively communicating with young people in schools and universities.

Other initiatives have included engaging with people on the streets or in the shopping centres. Public displays of faith – like a procession of the Blessed Sacrament – are important evangelising opportunities. We are witnessing various Catholic groups using a variety of techniques that can present the Gospel in an attractive and engaging way.



The role of the Holy Spirit

In spite of all our efforts, the principal agent of evangelisation is the Holy Spirit, as Pope Paul VI so eloquently spoke of in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "Evangelisation will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit". He commented further, "Techniques of evangelisation are good, but even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit. The most perfect preparation of the evangeliser has no effect without the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit the most convincing dialectic has no power over the heart of man. Without Him the most highly developed schemas resting on a sociological or psychological basis are quickly seen to be quite valueless" (n.75).

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Like his predecessor, Blessed John Paul II had confidence that it will be the Holy Spirit at work in the Church who will ultimately inspire and make fruitful its evangelising mission: "The horizons and possibilities for mission are growing ever wider, and we Christians are called to an apostolic courage based upon trust in the Spirit. He is the principal agent of mission! The history of humanity has known many major turning points which have encouraged missionary outreach, and the Church, guided by the Spirit, has always responded to them with generosity and farsightedness. Results have not been lacking" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n.30).

The joy of evangelising

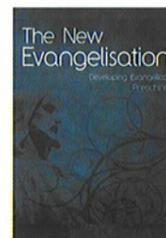
Evangelisation is our call, our task, our duty, but it is also our joy. We know we have a treasure in the Catholic Faith. It is the source of encouragement, of hope and of joy.

What we offer to the world is the joy of knowing God and living under the hand of his love.

Pope Paul VI concluded his great document on evangelisation by saying: "Let us therefore preserve our fervour of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelising, even when it is in tears that we must sow". He then adds, "And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelisers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no.80).

Questions for discussion

1. "Now there are significant sections of our population who live as though God does not exist": is this your experience? What challenges and opportunities might this situation offer to Christians in this country?
2. "The Church is missionary by its very nature. It is not a closed society. It is open and outward directed": What are some of the ways that we can participate in the Church's mission: 1) on a personal level 2) on a Parish level?
3. Evangelisation is said by Pope John Paul II to be the "the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world...": (*Redemptoris Missio*, n.2): why do you think he said this?
4. "There is a call to all the baptised to realise that they have a duty to lead others to Christ": if all the baptised were to live out this calling in this country, what impact do you think it would have upon the Church's mission to proclaim Christ to all Australians.



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The New Evangelisation

Bishop Julian Porteous

In 1988, ten years after becoming Pope, Blessed John Paul II made this comment, "Whole countries and nations where religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and capable of fostering a viable and working community of faith, are now put to a hard test, and in some cases, are even undergoing a radical transformation, as a result of a constant spreading of an indifference to religion, of secularism and atheism. This particularly concerns countries and nations of the so-called First World" (Ap. Ex. *Christifideles Laici*, 1988, n.34). He went on to comment that such a situation fosters a life lived "as if God did not exist".

We can easily recognise the truth of these words. This is what we see happening in Australia. Now there are significant sections of our population who live as though God does not exist. Many have come from families that have Christian roots; many have Catholic backgrounds. There has been a significant shift in the religious make-up of many nations that have been regarded as Christian. While the nations may still be regarded as nominally Christian, some are claiming that due to the rise of those who have no religion the nation should be viewed as secular. However, many of the cultural patterns in the country still reflect its Christian roots.

These words of the Pope are in a section of the Apostolic Exhortation entitled, "The Hour Has Come for a Re-Evangelisation". The response of Blessed John Paul II to this situation was to encourage Catholics to engage in the great task of effecting a "re-evangelisation" or a "new evangelisation" of societies and cultures that have been traditionally Christian. He spoke of the new evangelisation with increasing frequency in the latter years of his pontificate. He considered it of vital importance for the future of the Church.

What is this new evangelisation? For that matter, what is evangelisation? What is the place of evangelisation in the Church?

The Church exists to evangelise

The important place of evangelisation in the life of the Church was explored by Pope Paul VI in his pivotal document, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), following the Synod of Bishops which met in 1974 at the Pope's behest to discuss the subject of evangelisation.

In this Exhortation, the Pope declared in such clear and bold terms: "Evangelisation is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelise" (n.14). Pope Paul VI put the question of evangelisation at the heart of the life and mission of the Church. It is not an optional extra undertaken by some in the Church. This statement clarifies the fact that evangelisation is not just one of the works of the Church, but its chief *raison d'être*. It also declares that evangelisation is not restricted to the task of missionaries in foreign countries but is something that devolves on every member of the Church in their own location. One can say that participating in evangelisation brings the individual Catholic to their "deepest identity".

The importance of evangelisation is clearly seen in the final command of the Lord to his disciples at the time of his Ascension: "Go out to all the world, proclaim the Gospel to all creatures, baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15-16). The Church

is now in every nation on earth because over the centuries it has responded to and taken up the call of Christ. The Church is missionary by its very nature. *It is not a closed society. It is open and outward directed.* The Church wants to offer the world the truth, freedom and salvation found through faith in Jesus Christ.

What we offer to the world is the joy of knowing God and living under the hand of his love.

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The new evangelisation expresses the fact that the Church is not only to look to places where the Gospel has not yet been preached – this missionary task remains of vital importance – but now must direct more serious effort to evangelisation in societies that have been traditionally Christian and are experiencing the rise of sections of the population who have no faith – who live as though God does not exist.

This task is now seen as a vital mission for the Church. Blessed John Paul II appealed for a new evangelisation "new in its ardour, in its methods and in its expressions" (*Discourse to the XIX Assembly of C.E.L.A.M.*, 1983). The Pope called for a new boldness in engaging in the task of proclaiming the perennial message of Christ in modern situations.

In the light of these thoughts it is not surprising to see that on 28 June 2010 – the vigil of the Feasts of St Peter and Paul – Pope Benedict XVI announced the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation. In launching this new Pontifical Council the Pope said, "There are regions in the world that still wait for a first evangelisation; others that received it but need more profound work; others still in which the Gospel put down roots a long time ago, giving place to a true Christian tradition, but where in the last centuries – with complex dynamics – the process of secularisation has produced a grave crisis of the sense of the Christian faith and of belonging to the Church". Pope Benedict spoke of an "eclipse of the sense of God," which, he says, "constitutes a challenge to find the appropriate means to propose again the perennial truth of the Gospel of Christ".

In establishing this new Pontifical Council the Pope clearly wants the task of evangelising to receive direction and inspiration from the top. He wants to give a heightened profile to this task for the Church. Those engaged in the new evangelisation are at the heart of the mission of the Church.

Further to this the Pope has decided that the next Synod of Bishops – to be held in Rome in October next year – will discuss the question of the new evangelisation and how the Church can find new ways to bring the message of faith to the world of today. This meeting of bishops will be an opportunity to pool together experiences from across the Church and will be an impetus for promoting the new evangelisation.

In a document prepared for the Synod the question was asked: "How has the boldness, characteristic of new evangelisation been displayed [in local Churches]?" The Church is being asked to consider what it is doing at the local level to engage effectively in the new evangelisation.

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The role of the lay person

Returning to the comments of Blessed John Paul II, which began this article, it is worth reminding ourselves that his words are found in a document addressed to the "lay person in the Church and in the world" (*Christifideles Laici*). In other words, the Pope proposed that the task of the new evangelisation is not only the responsibility of priests and religious, but in a particular way is the task of the lay person living in the world. The Pope was calling on lay people to engage in what he saw as the great task of the Church in this time.

Blessed John Paul II noted that there were new movements among the lay people emerging in the Church. These communities and groups often emerged from among lay people. Many have lay founders. These various movements have not only generated a renewed life among their members but have often engaged in forms of evangelisation. They have found new and innovative ways to express the Gospel message. These new initiatives are proving fruitful. The Pope encouraged these movements to confidently develop their new ways to evangelise in union with the Church.

It is one of the distinguishing features of the new evangelisation that it is a work of lay people who participate in the new movements that have sprung up in the Church over the past fifty years. While priests and religious work alongside them, the initiative often belongs to the lay people themselves.

Blessed John Paul II saw the significance of the ecclesial movements. He recognised the apostolic dynamism of the movements and saw them as a significant presence in the Church: "The great blossoming of these movements and the manifestations of energy and ecclesial vitality which characterise them are certainly to be considered one of the most precious fruits of the vast and profound spiritual renewal promoted by the last Council" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 1987).

In 1998 he said that the movements "represent one of the most significant fruits of that springtime in the Church which was foretold by the Second Vatican Council" (*Message for the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, n.2). He went on to add that the movements have "a very precise – we can say irreplaceable – function in the Church". In his Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), the Pope saw the movements as "a true gift of God both for the new evangelisation and for missionary activity properly so-called". He spoke of the movements as "a new Pentecost for the Church".

The content of evangelisation

We can ask ourselves about the actual content of the message of the Church to the people of our time. It is best captured in a phrase that Blessed John Paul II used at the conclusion of his homily at his inauguration as Pope on 22 October 1978. He declared, "Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ!" This captured the spirit of his pontificate and that of the mission of the Church in the world. The Church wants to invite all people to open their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ. It is no co-incidence that Pope Benedict XVI, upon his inauguration as Pope, concluded his homily in a similar vein when he said, "And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you ... : Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life. Amen".

Pope Benedict has spoken on a number of occasions about the importance of developing a "personal relationship with Jesus". In a general audience Pope Benedict commented, "it must then be ourselves [who] become personally involved in an intimate and deep relationship with Jesus in order to know he is truly the saviour of the world".

In his Encyclical on the virtue of hope, *Spes Salvi* (2007), Pope Benedict commented, "Life in its true sense is not something we have exclusively in or from ourselves, it is a relationship. And life in its totality is a relationship with him who is the source of life. If we are in relation with him who does not

die, who is life itself and love itself, then we are in life. Then we 'live'... Our relationship with God is established through communion with Jesus – we cannot achieve it alone or from our own resources alone" (n.27-28).

These words do encapsulate the evangelising mission of the Church. Evangelisation has its focus on the person of Jesus Christ – coming to faith in him and developing a personal relationship with him.

In the new evangelisation the content is the same as the primary or first evangelization. In *Redemptoris Missio* Blessed John Paul II spelled out clearly that the name of Jesus Christ must be explicitly proclaimed. What distinguishes the new evangelisation is the ability to communicate in a way that effectively reaches the people of our times who may have some vague link to Christianity but have no real faith in Christ.

At the heart of the mission of the Church is a proclamation of Jesus Christ. As Pope Paul VI said so clearly in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "Evangelisation will always contain – as the foundation, centre and at the same time the summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ ... salvation is offered to all people, as a gift of God's grace and mercy" (n.27).

A renewed missionary commitment

In *Redemptoris Missio*, Blessed John Paul II distinguished between the first evangelisation to those who have never heard the Gospel and the need to proclaim the Gospel afresh in areas where secularism has drained the faith of large groups of people. He said, "I wish to invite the Church to renew her missionary commitment. The present document has as its goal an interior renewal of faith and Christian life. For missionary activity renews the Church, revitalises faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others! (n.2)"

He added that evangelisation is "the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world, a world which has experienced marvelous achievements but which seems to have lost its sense of ultimate realities and of existence itself".

The Pope was calling upon all Catholics to develop a missionary spirit. Our faith cannot be considered just a private affair. There is a call to all the baptised to realize that they have a duty to lead others to Christ.

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(*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.14)

