

## Evangelization: If not us, who? If not now, when?

Over 2,000 years ago, Emmanuel, God-with-us, came to earth to win the world over to himself. He willingly became human and died for us to reveal the Father's plan, offer us eternal redemption, invite us to receive his love and fill us with his Holy Spirit. Yet so many people live disconnected from his love and mercy, unaware of his plan and purpose for their lives.

Is there anything we can do about it? Yes, we can, by evangelizing: by making Christ known to those who are still not benefiting from his awesome love, sharing the Good News: "You have nothing to fear! I come to proclaim Good News to you — tidings of great joy to be shared by the whole people. This day in David's city a savior has been born to you, the Messiah and Lord." (Lk. 2:10-11)

### THE CHURCH EXISTS TO EVANGELIZE

In *Evangelii nuntiandi*, "On Evangelization in the Modern World," Pope Paul VI very poignantly stated that, "the task of evangelizing all peoples constitutes the essential mission of the church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize." (No. 14)

In that same spirit, Pope John Paul II repeatedly called for a "new evangelization: new in fervor, new in method and new in expression," reminding us that the well-being of millions of human beings depends on it: "We cannot be content when we consider the millions of our brothers and sisters, who like us have been redeemed by the blood of Christ but who live in ignorance of the love of God. For each believer, as for the entire church, the missionary task must remain foremost, for it concerns the eternal destiny of humanity and corresponds to God's mysterious and merciful plan." (*Redemptoris missio*, No. 86)

### AN URGENT TASK — THE SOONER THE BETTER!

We have Good News worth telling, and we had better be telling it from the rooftops as soon as possible! Watch the news: things are not well across the nation and the globe. Terrorism, wars, violence, murders and other ills are on the rise in an ever-growing culture of death. Incredulity, immorality, divorce rates, addiction, fraud and abuse in its many forms continue to multiply. Not even the church is exempt these days.

Yet amidst this chaos, the church speaks of a "new springtime for Christianity." Pope John



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Paul II spoke of the dawning a new missionary age such as the church has never seen before, stating: "I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission ad gentes. No believer in Christ, no institution of the church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples." (*Redemptoris missio*, No. 3) He foresaw with the dawning of the third Christian millennium a "new Pentecost" of missionary zeal and evangelistic fruitfulness, if Christians were responsive. Pope Benedict XVI too sees the urgency of the call, asserting that "The church feels with renewed strength that Christ's missionary mandate is more pressing than ever" and reiterating that, "the church is, by its nature, missionary; its primary task is evangelization."

In May, addressing the Latin American bishops in Brazil, he confirmed that every baptized person has received from Christ the "missionary mandate" to "go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation," (cf. Mk 16:15) adding "what a magnificent vocation" this is. Like the first followers of Jesus we too must become convinced that, "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2) This is a great time for all believers to give a united witness to Christ before the whole world.

### A PURPOSEFUL PLAN IS NEEDED FOR EVANGELIZATION, FORMATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

Pope Benedict XVI has spoken often of the inroads made by secularism, relativism and consumerism and an overall erosion of traditional human values. Though he has not laid out any easy solutions, he stated in Brazil that the church should conduct "a methodical evangelization aimed at personal and communal fidelity to Christ" and he encouraged "seeking out those Catholics who have fallen away (from the church) and those who know little or nothing of Jesus Christ." This can be done, he said, "by implementing a pastoral plan which welcomes them and helps them realize that the church is a privileged place of encounter with God and also through a continuing process of catechesis."

The pope also alluded to a key dimension of evangelization, namely, personal discipleship,

saying: "Discipleship and mission are like two sides of a single coin: when the disciple is in love with Christ, he cannot stop proclaiming to the world that only in him do we find salvation. The disciple knows that without Christ there is no light, no hope, no love, no future."

Indeed, only the disciple, the follower, the one who has felt the gaze of the Lord and has fallen in love with him, feels the need to tell everyone about it.

### EVANGELIZING IN A CHRIST-LIKE MANNER

That we evangelize is only half the evangelistic equation: how we evangelize is as important. All we say and do as church must be filled with the evangelistic impetus that characterized Jesus' own life, but our zeal must be pregnant with Christ's unique acceptance, respect and care. Catholic evangelizers must reach out to others as Christ did: with the truth of God's undying compassion and mercy, in a spirit of authentic welcome and love, so that drawn by love, all may receive and embrace the truth. Pope Benedict XVI confirms this saying, "Christ's mission is accomplished in love;" Christ "kindled in the world the fire of God's love," and the church "has been sent forth to spread Christ's love throughout the world so that individuals and peoples 'may have life, and have it abundantly.'" By living charity day in and day out, Christians release "an irresistible power, which is the power of holiness" noting that "faith in Christ implies a way of living based on the twofold command to love God and neighbor."

### GETTING THE JOB DONE

God depends on us to bring his saving love to the world. We must give constant priority to this task. We cannot leave it to someone else or to some other time — for there is no one else, nor a better time.

Whether cleric, religious or lay, we each need to ask ourselves: If not us, who? If not now, when? We must each do our part, for as the Second Vatican Council stated: "Evangelization is a duty of the People of God." (*Ad gentes*, No. 35)

Suitable or unsuitable as they may have seemed in the eyes of their contemporaries or in their own, it was to disciples like us that the Lord entrusted this mission: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation." (Mk 16:15) Had the first disciples not been diligent in making evangelization their main apostolate and daily activity, you and I would not even be around to tell. Our duty is to follow the example of the first disciples who, empowered by the Holy Spirit received at Pentecost,

**GOAL I:** To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they may freely share it with others.

**GOAL II:** To invite all people in the United States, whatever their social or cultural background, to hear the message of salvation in Jesus Christ so they may come to join us in the fullness of the Catholic faith.

**GOAL III:** To foster Gospel values in our society, promoting the dignity of the human person, the importance of the family and the common good of our society, so that our nation may continue to be transformed by the saving power of Jesus Christ.

"Go and Make Disciples, A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States," National Catholic Conference of Bishops, 1992.

immediately began to proclaim with boldness the marvels of God to all they met. They wasted no time! They were convinced that the church — each one of them — existed in order to evangelize: to proclaim the Good News to all creation. They knew they were on mission! And so are we. And how could we not be? As Pope Paul VI stated clearly: "the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn." (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, No. 24)

We are called to be everyday evangelized evangelizers, saints and missionaries "who bring Good News" (Rom 10:15) and ensure that Christ is known. We have been given a plan: goals, objectives and strategies set before us by our bishops in "Go and Make Disciples, A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States." (1992)

### ACQUIRING THE KNOWLEDGE, TRAINING AND ZEAL NEEDED

Certainly, we do not all have the same talents and gifts, yet we do have the same call.

If you lack knowledge of the faith, take time to acquire it. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Compendium* are excellent means, along with the variety of sound catechetical books, Web sites, conferences and adult faith formation opportunities available at the parish, archdiocesan and national levels.

If you lack training and practice in giving personal witness and proclaiming the Gospel message, make it a priority to acquire it. In addition to the various training programs and schools of evangelization throughout the country, the Office for Evangelization of the Archdiocese of San Antonio offers resources and sponsors gatherings, study sessions and workshops to educate, enthuse

and equip Catholics for various evangelization strategies and programs.

If you lack boldness, or simply lack the motivation needed to witness to Jesus Christ wherever you go, do not let the sun go down without remedying this situation: explicitly ask the Lord to renew within you the zeal of a disciple committed to continuing his mission on earth; beg him to help you capture his vision for this new springtime which is dawning for Christianity; begin today to remove from your life whatever hinders you from being the evangelizer you are meant to be. Believe me: you will be surprised at what you will see!

### ON YOUR MARK, GET SET: GO!

God is always prepared to produce a great harvest of souls, to attract men and women to himself through his church. Are we willing and ready to play our part to get the job done? Let us truly focus our entire attention as church on the mission for which we exist, evangelization, placing it once and for all at the very top of our daily activities list. Perhaps we ought to implement what the Marianist fathers and brothers profess in their Rule: "Whatever does not contribute to the mission, we delete from our life. Everything! Everything we do is meant to contribute, directly or indirectly to our mission. (The Society of Mary, Rule, Art. 5.1) They focus on what is essential, a focus that lights the blaze necessary "to set the earth on fire." (Lk 12:49)

A world of fragile peace and broken promises awaits the Good News of the Gospel. Someone has to tell the world about their redeemer at some point. If not us, who? If not now, when?

To the extent that every believer and every church institution makes the mission of the redeemer a priority, to that extent will the church and the world enjoy a new springtime of blessings during the next 1,000 years.

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