

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS TO THE NEW EVANGELIZATION:  
AN APPEAL

*Committee on Doctrine*  
*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

I. MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP AND THE WORK OF THEOLOGIANS

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Blessed Paul VI recognized the need for a new evangelization in the contemporary world, an evangelization suited to the current situation of Christian communities that were first evangelized centuries ago.

This first proclamation is addressed especially to those who have never heard the Good News of Jesus, or to children. But, as a result of the frequent situations of dechristianization in our day, it also proves equally necessary for innumerable people who have been baptized but who live quite outside Christian life, for simple people who have a certain faith but an imperfect knowledge of the foundations of that faith, for intellectuals who feel the need to know Jesus Christ in a light different from the instruction they received as children, and for many others.<sup>1</sup>

This theme was taken up by his successor, Pope Saint John Paul II, who gave it a prominent place in his many writings and addresses. Building on these efforts, Pope Benedict XVI established a new dicastery, the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, and convoked a worldwide Synod of Bishops in 2012 to address "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith."

Pope Francis has similarly placed the new evangelization at the center of his agenda for the Church. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, his Post-Synodal Exhortation following on the Synod on "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith," he explains that evangelization is not simply one task among others for the Church; rather "missionary outreach

<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html)), no. 52.

is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, not only must all that the Church does be aligned with this task, all the members of the Church must contribute. Pope Francis described the Church as "a community of missionary disciples."<sup>3</sup> He insists that the task of mission does not belong only to certain select members of the Church.

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis links the missionary discipleship of the Church with the work of those who study theology: "The Church is herself a missionary disciple; she needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth. It is the task of exegetes and theologians to help 'the judgment of the Church to mature.'"<sup>5</sup> He highlights the importance of the work of theologians and calls upon them to make their own contribution to the mission of the Church.

A theology – and not simply a pastoral theology – which is in dialogue with other sciences and human experiences is most important for our discernment on how best to bring the Gospel message to different cultural contexts and groups. The Church, in her commitment to evangelization, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences. I call on theologians to carry out this service as part of the Church's saving mission.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html)), no. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 133.

This echoes the desire expressed by the bishops at the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization, who “called on theologians to accept and respond to the intellectual challenges of the New Evangelization by participating in the mission of the Church to proclaim to all the Gospel of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> The Synod was quite emphatic on the need to align the theological enterprise with the New Evangelization: “The Synod proposes that the New Evangelization be considered as an integral dimension of the mission of every theological faculty.”<sup>8</sup>

## II. IMPORTANT TOPICS THAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED BY CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS

The USCCB Committee on Doctrine would like to reaffirm the Synod’s call for theologians to consider the New Evangelization as an integral part of their mission as theologians. Furthermore, we would like to make a special appeal to those in the theological community here in the United States to strive to align their undertakings with the New Evangelization. In order to assist them in this task, the Committee would like to call the attention of theologians to the four “theological foundation stones” that were central themes of discussion at the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization. The Committee therefore especially recommends these topics as objects of research and writing for Catholic theologians in the U.S. These “Theological Foundations for the New Evangelization” are described in the *Relatio ante-disceptationem*<sup>9</sup> as follows:

### *A) Anthropological Foundation of Evangelization*

The presumptive foundation of the New Evangelization must be the natural desire that all have for communion with the transcendent – with God. Within each human being is the basic orientation to the transcendent and the right order of life rooted in the natural

<sup>7</sup> Final List of Propositions from 2012 Synod of Bishops ([http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino\\_25\\_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02\\_inglese/b33\\_02.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html)), Proposition 17.

<sup>8</sup> Final List of Propositions from 2012 Synod of Bishops, Proposition 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Relatio ante-disceptationem* from 2012 Synod of Bishops ([http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino\\_25\\_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02\\_inglese/b04\\_02.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b04_02.html)).

created order. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the Decalogue is itself a privileged expression of the natural law. The New Evangelization has to rest on the understanding that it is the Christian faith that offers us some understanding when we address the problem of evil, the reality of sin, the fall and the call to new life. Evil and sin are indeed obstacles to the Gospel, but it is precisely the Gospel message that makes sense of the human condition and the possibility of a life that overcomes the inherent limitations of human frailty. Ultimately the New Evangelization must rest on the recognition that it is in the light of Jesus Christ that we understand fully what it means to be human.

#### *B) Christological Foundation of the New Evangelization*

New Evangelization is the re-introduction, the re-proposing, of Christ. Our proclamation of Christ, however, begins with a clear theological explanation of who Christ is, his relationship to the Father, his divinity and humanity, and the reality of his death and Resurrection. At the center of our Christian faith is Christ. But the Christ we proclaim is the Christ of revelation, the Christ understood in his Church, the Christ of tradition and not of personal, sociological, or aberrant theological creation. On our own, none of us could come to know the mind, heart, love and identity of God. Jesus came to reveal the truth – about God and about ourselves.

#### *C) The Ecclesiological Foundation of the New Evangelization*

The New Evangelization must provide a clear theological explanation for the necessity of the Church for salvation. This is a sensitive aspect of our preaching and too often has been neglected in catechesis. Rampant in much of the revival culture of today is the sentiment that salvation is achieved through a relationship with Jesus apart from the Church. But what needs to be emphasized and demonstrated is that Christ meets man wherever he is, in and through the presence of the Church.

#### *D) Soteriological Foundations of the New Evangelization*

Intrinsic to the understanding of God's presence with us today is the awareness of what we mean by his kingdom. In the New Testament, we find the kingdom everywhere. To Jesus, it seems to be a preoccupation. From the moment he "began to preach," he announced that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). Jesus spoke of the kingdom's subjects, its power, its boundaries, its duration. The heart of the Gospel is the kingdom. If we want to live a Christian life — if we want to make a credible claim that we are followers of Jesus — it's essential that we look to this kingdom he has proclaimed.

The Committee also proposes that these topics be made subjects of discussion at future meetings of the March workshop.

### III. CONCLUSION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THEOLOGIAN

In *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop* (1992), the Committee on Doctrine explained that the "Church cannot exist without the office of bishop nor thrive without the sound scholarship of the theologian."<sup>10</sup> The Committee on Doctrine recognizes that the New Evangelization will not be complete without the participation of theologians offering their expertise. These topics are of particular importance to the success of the New Evangelization in our country, and it is the hope of the Committee that Catholic theologians will address them and thereby provide an important contribution to this initiative that is so crucial for the life of the Church.

<sup>10</sup> Committee on Doctrine, NCCB, *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop: A Pastoral Reflection* (Washington, D.C.: 1992), p. 10.