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IS THE "NEW EVANGELIZATION" NO MORE THAN A MARKETING SLOGAN?

It's one of the ironies of contemporary Catholicism: Pope St. John Paul II coined a phrase, *the new evangelization*, and within a relatively short period of time, people either forgot what it meant, or it began to mean nearly anything anyone wanted it to mean. Now, the only thing most people *really* know about the new evangelization is that it's sup-

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posed to be *new*.

In fundamental ways, the new evangelization can be traced back to the Second Vatican Council's universal call to holiness. This call, which exhorted all members of the Church (especially the laity) to live out the Gospel in their everyday lives, had been developing since the pontificate of Leo XII (1878-1903). In response to the crisis in European Church-state relations after the French Revolution Leo abandoned the old strategy of trying to influence social and political affairs from the "top down," so to speak, via ostensibly Christian or Catholic monarchs, and settled instead on an indirect route educating the Catholic laity in such a way that they might serve as a leaven from within society.

What this strategy presupposes is that the laity would not only be thoroughly educated in the faith but also faithful to the teachings of the Church especially in social matters. Leo XIII seems to have thought such a level of education of the Catholi

laity was possible; by the time of his pontificate, the Church had developed the most impressive educational infrastructure in the world, from Montessori schools to major universities, in nearly every nation across the globe.

It was in the light of this tradition that John Paul II coined the term *the new evangelization* to designate the evangelization of culture. In *A Witness to Hope*, his biographer George Weigel confirms that the Pope was animated by the conviction that “history was driven by culture and the ideas that formed cultures.” Thus, “if the idea of the human person that dominated a culture was flawed, either that culture would give birth to destructive aspirations, or it would be incapable of realizing its fondest hopes, even if it expressed them in the most nobly humanistic terms.” Indeed, the failed utopian projects of the twentieth century were, the Pope was convinced, largely the result of flawed conceptions of the human person.

John Paul II believed that the Church offers the modern world an especially keen understanding of the nature and destiny of the human person. The Church is an “expert in humanity,” he used to say, taught by God Himself in His Incarnation what *true humanity* looks like. The Church, he insisted, can help the modern world come to an ever clearer understanding of man, created in the image of God but fallen and in need of forgiveness, redemption, and grace — a being whose ultimate end cannot be fully realized in any merely political program. Rather, man’s destiny can only be realized fully in the communion of saints in union with the blessed Triune God, the eternal communion of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Making clear these fundamental teachings about the person and culture were, thought John Paul II, to be the goal of evangelization at the beginning of the third millennium.

Everyone seems to agree that John Paul II first made specific mention of the term *new evangelization* in an address to the Latin American Bishops’ Council in Haiti in 1983. The Holy Father was addressing bishops from culturally Catholic countries, many of whose congregations were turning to Marxist liberation theology on the one hand, or evangelical forms of Protestantism on the other. (Jimmy Swaggart, for example, had an especially large following in Latin America.) And he

was addressing them in one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere.

It was in this cultural and historical context that John Paul reminded his brother bishops that they were about to celebrate five centuries of Christianity in Latin America. “The commemoration of the half millennium of evangelization will gain its full meaning,” he told them, “if it is a commitment on your part as bishops, together with your priests and faithful...not to a re-evangelization, but to a new evangelization, new in ardor, methods and expression.” The Pope then proposed to “sum up in a few words...those aspects which seem to be fundamental for the new evangelization.”

These *fundamental aspects* are two. The first, somewhat surprisingly, has to do with the importance of ordained ministers. The Church, John Paul said, “will need vitality, and this will be impossible unless she can count on numerous and well-trained priests.” He exhorted the bishops to “arouse fresh vocations and train them properly in the spiritual, doctrinal and pastoral aspects of their calling.”

The second aspect flows from the first. Bishops, together with their churches, must form “an increasing number of laity who are ready to collaborate effectively in the work of evangelization.”

The Pope did not explain what he meant by saying that the bishops’ commitment should not be to re-evangelization but to a *new* evangelization, or what its “methods and expressions” consist of.

Matters had changed by the time John Paul II wrote *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), his encyclical on “the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate.” In it he distinguishes between “three situations”: (1) “where people have not heard the Gospel,” (2) where societies are “fervent in their faith and in Christian living,” and (3) an “intermediate situation” in which “entire groups of the baptized 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” (no. 33). For those in this third category, John Paul says, “what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization.’” Here he equates the new evangelization with re-evangelization, whereas he had distinguished the two in Haiti.

In *Redemptoris Missio* John Paul II gives more

detail about the application of these terms. The first situation, where people have not heard the Gospel message, involves the evangelical mission *ad gentes* (to the nations) “in the proper sense of the term.” The second situation, where societies remained fervent in their faith and in Christian living (e.g., Poland), largely involves pastoral care, not evangelization. The third, or “intermediate,” situation, where people do not need to be evangelized as though they had never heard the Gospel, requires a “new evangelization” — or better, a “re-evangelization” in the sense of being evangelized again as though for the first time — one that responds to their specific needs and problems.

What is at the root of the problems of those in this third group? John Paul II’s answer is clear: the secularization of their culture — a secularization that cuts man off from his ultimate end in God, and in which the good of man and the nature of human flourishing are no longer grounded in an adequate notion of the human person. “The temptation today,” declares the Pope, “is to reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being. In our heavily secularized world a ‘gradual secularization of salvation’ has taken place, so that people strive for the good of man, but man who is truncated, reduced to his merely horizontal dimension” (no. 11). In this view, the Pope warns, the Kingdom of God “tends to become something completely human and secularized; what counts are programs and struggles for a liberation which is socio-economic, political and even cultural, but within a horizon that is closed to the transcendent” (no. 17).

And yet, as John Paul II repeatedly makes clear, the boundaries between pastoral care of the faithful, specific missionary activity, and the new evangelization are “not clearly definable, and it is unthinkable to create barriers between them or to put them into watertight compartments.”

We hear the term *the new evangelization* all the time these days, but it seems that we’ve lost the sense of its meaning since the death of John Paul II. There have been admirable book-length attempts to clarify what that is — for example, *New Evangelization: Passing on the Catholic Faith*



Today by Donald Cardinal Wuerl (2013) and *Evangelizing Catholics: A Mission Manual for the New Evangelization* by Scott Hahn (2014), among others. And many of the websites of the centers for the new evangelization that have sprung up in various dioceses across the U.S. appear to be doing a lot of good work.

Yet one still encounters a great deal of confusion about what the term means. A Google search yields entries such as “What is the new evangelization?” “What are characteristics of the new evangelization?” and “What’s this ‘new evangelization’ thing anyway?” If everyone knew what it was, there wouldn’t be this constant need to try to define it.

I work with college-aged people, many of whom are Catholic. When I ask them what the new evangelization is, I often get blank stares, even from those who have a fairly good knowledge of their faith. I recently asked a bright young woman what she wanted to do. She replied that she wasn’t sure, but she knew she wanted to be involved in “the new evangelization.” I asked her to explain how she understood the term, and she replied that she wasn’t entirely sure what it meant, but she assumed it had something to do with media and youth ministry.

If the new evangelization is supposed to be about “getting the message out,” one of the things about which we haven’t gotten the message out is what exactly the new evangelization is.

Greg Willits, who has written a fine book on the topic, elucidates the problem in an article in *The Catholic Digest*. At a dinner with several other Catholics, his wife Jennifer posed the question: “What’s the first thing you think when you hear the phrase *new evangelization*?” Willits reports: “Around the table, everyone nodded in agreement with the hypothesis that, even though the phrase is frequently used in the Catholic Church...many people don’t have a clue as to what ‘new evangelization’ is, what their role in it is, or how to make it a part of their daily lives. Sadly, this seems to be the case even after three decades of discussion on the topic.”

So, what *is* the new evangelization? Well, it’s complicated, as it turns out. “There are many different ideas of what the new evangelization is and isn’t,” Willits writes. “You

might think it has something to do with improving religious education, or perhaps it has to do with new media, podcasts, blogs, and social networks. Or maybe you simply think the new evangelization is about a whole new way of sharing the Faith.” Actually, I thought it was about being a leaven in society by faithfully following the teachings of the Church in our everyday lives — but that wasn’t one of the options. “The fact of the matter,” says Willits, “is that the new evangelization includes each of these approaches, and many more.” Willits explains:

The new evangelization is all about Jesus Christ and living out the faith that draws us closer to him. It’s about your relationship with Christ, as well as helping others to continually develop a relationship with him, too. But it’s also about the many approaches available to do so, and the fervor with which we embrace this challenge in today’s secular and relativistic culture.... Defining the new evangelization is like herding squirrels: It can take you in a multitude of different directions, sometimes all at once.

Now, this definition (if it can be called that) seems to me both admirable and, on its surface, unobjectionable. Yet I’m left with a concern. You see, for the term to *mean something*, it can’t mean whatever anybody wants it to mean depending on whatever direction (or multiple directions) their personal relationship with Jesus happens to take them. As Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out, there is no such thing as a “private language.” A term that has a private meaning for each person cannot possibly have a public meaning for everyone. And since asking a room full of Catholics what the new evangelization is garners either blank stares or a score of completely different answers, we might have to conclude that the meaning of the term has morphed from a “thick” cultural concept into little more than an empty slogan.

Now, that wouldn’t be such a horrible thing in and of itself — we use words and terms we don’t fully comprehend all the time — but for two potential problems. The first is simply that empty slogans rarely have any power to inspire. One can say of empty slogans what Daniel Burnham once said of making “little plans”: “they have no magic to stir men’s blood and probably themselves will not be realized.”

The other problem is more serious. George Or-

well famously warned that when words get emptied of their original meanings, a host of demons will rush in to take up residence within their comfortable confines. Empty slogans rarely remain empty for long. Often enough, someone ends up *using* them for his own purposes.

There are two ways in which the term *new evangelization* has been hollowed out by certain trends within the Church. One is the result of the tendency toward obsessive navel-gazing and parochial self-concern; the other has to do with the contemporary preoccupation with marketing and novelty.

Somewhere along the way, the new evangelization became unmoored from John Paul II’s call to evangelize the modern world’s largely secularized cultures (whether historically Christian or not) with a Christ-centered, fundamentally Trinitarian view of the human person. In some venues it has become solely about re-evangelizing apathetic Catholics who live in what are called “historically Christian cultures” — in other words, getting the people who wandered away from the Church to wander back in. Thus, rather than being a turn outward *to* the world, as John Paul II envisioned, the new evangelization has become a turning inward, reinterpreted primarily as an invitation to people who were once Catholic, or who still claim to be Catholic but never go to Mass, to renew their relationship with Jesus Christ. For example, Kevin Cotter, blogging at the website of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (June 3, 2013), boldly proclaims that the new evangelization “pertains to a very specific group of people: fallen-away Christians,” and it means “sharing Christ with others in their own ‘language and culture.’” To do that, “we need to know where people are today in their worldview.”

There is nothing wrong with inviting people back to Mass. It’s simply that, in some cases, what is called the new evangelization is really just a desperate attempt to try to figure out *what went wrong*. Why did self-involved Catholics in a wealthy, secular, sexually obsessed culture *stop going to Mass*? Why did the Christian faith, with its call to selfless love, moral discipline, personal integrity, and devotion to God and neighbor, lose its personal meaning and transformative power for such people?

These are important questions, yes; but there

is an inherent danger to this approach: By tailoring the Gospel message to appeal to fallen-away Catholics' secularized "worldviews," we are more likely to *accommodate* the culture by presenting a compromised view of the human person than we are to *leaven* the culture with a fully Christocentric view of the human person. Besides, this approach to evangelization isn't really "new," is it? It resembles too closely the much ballyhooed "spirit of Vatican II" that was at least in part responsible for the massive defections of Catholics from the faith in the first place. Who can forget the heady days of the 1970s and early 1980s when ecclesial reformers repeated the mantra that the Council called on them to "read the signs of the times"? What they usually failed to mention was that the Church has *always* had the duty and the mandate to scrutinize the signs of the times — and to interpret them in light of the Gospel.

In a similar, inward-looking vein, John L. Allen Jr. wrote in the *National Catholic Reporter* (Mar. 7, 2013) that the new evangelization "aims to reach out to alienated Catholics who in many cases have become secularized," with Europe and North America "a special preoccupation" because "that's where a disproportionate share of these 'distant Christians' are found." Allen summarizes: "In a nutshell," the new evangelization "is about salesmanship. The idea is to move the Catholic product in the crowded lifestyle marketplace of the post-modern world."

If I understand him correctly, Allen seems to think that the new evangelization is a bit like selling pink watches and lime green socks down at the mall. You're not selling anything anybody really wants or needs, but you have to sell it or you go out of business. "The problem isn't customer service," Allen writes, "but new sales."

Writing before the last papal election, Allen mentioned something I hadn't considered before — namely, that "when cardinals say the next pope has to be committed to the new evangelization...what they mean is that he should be a pitchman, someone who can attract people to the faith." So Pope Francis was chosen to be a *pitchman* — someone like Don Draper in *Mad Men* but without all the sexy women? Someone who can sell ice



cubes to Eskimos, or Toyotas to Honda drivers? The new evangelization, Allen would have us believe, is about *pitching the message*, getting consumers in the door. And these days the biggest group of "consumers" — the most important market for selling anything — is the youth.

Thus, the new evangelization has also become associated with attempts to use the "new media" — blogs, social-media websites, video platforms, etc. — to get young people "fired up" about Christ. It's about things like Google & the Gospel, friending the fallen away on Facebook, and tweeting the message of Christ's mercy to all mankind.

Indeed, according to Wikipedia.com, an online encyclopedia, one of the major goals of the new evangelization is to "study and promote the use of modern forms of communication, as tools for the new evangelization." This, however, is like saying that the new evangelization is about studying forms of communication for communicating the new evangelization — a statement so circular it's almost a palindrome. But if using the new media has become a central concern of the new evangelization, we should ask whether the *medium* has become more important than the *message*. Indeed, if the great philosopher of communication theory Marshall McLuhan (a Catholic convert) was correct in saying that "the medium *is* the message," then if the medium has changed — and has, in some cases, become primary — then is the message really the same?

I have no doubt that certain information can be delivered effectively via the Internet. I teach young people; I have them look things up on the Internet all the time. But anyone who thinks that real *teaching* can take place via the Internet simply doesn't understand teaching. The Internet is the perfect mechanism for *selling* things — it is really a grand marketplace of products, ideas, and lifestyles. It is not, however, a good mechanism for genuine *teaching* or for *connecting* people with each other in meaningful ways.

Moreover, working as I do every day with young people, I can tell you this: Anyone who thinks that any of this new-media message-spinning is going to draw young people into the Church just doesn't know young people. They recognize slick messaging;

they process terabytes of it every day. I'm not saying it doesn't *affect* them — that they don't go out and *buy* things because of it. But they also generally recognize the difference between people who are trying to *sell* them something and those who actually *care* about them. And when something that is supposed to be serious and life-changing comes to them with even the slightest hint of “hip” or “slick” packaging, they instinctively draw away, and usually for good reason.

Timothy Cardinal Dolan has said that the new evangelization “is accomplished with a smile, not a frown.” Yet I remember my days as a young “alienated” Christian when the earnest students from a local college campus-ministry group visited my secular public high school to try to show us that Christianity was something “relevant.” It was like watching an unwanted, slightly awkward mime. It was cringe-worthy, and I couldn't get away fast enough. If Christianity was about *that*, I thought — that thin gruel of “hip” spirituality, guitar music, and sunshine — then I didn't want it.

A year later, when I was given Augustine's *Confessions* and Thomas Aquinas's *Treatise on Law*, it began to dawn on me that Christianity wasn't just for poseurs with guitars and perpetually cheery dispositions. I sensed that men like SS Augustine and Thomas, along with John Paul II (who had become pope a few years earlier), offered something different. They possessed brilliant minds, yes; but they were in service to something higher and more profound than even themselves. This wasn't “youth ministry” anymore. I was dazzled.

Young people yearn to be adults and to deal with serious things. I sensed that the message of the campus-ministry bunch was kid stuff. By contrast, it was clear to me that writers like Aquinas, Augustine, and John Paul II weren't fooling around. They were engaged in something serious, and it was something that had been going on for a very long time — centuries, in fact. They were talking about the deepest issues and the most important subjects human beings can talk about. Even though I couldn't fully understand all that they were saying, I sensed that their works would require something *more* of me — and I knew I wanted to be part of it. When competing with the constantly humming “white noise” of the secular world in which I had been im-

mersed, the Gospel had to gain my *respect* before it could capture my sustained attention.

Whatever the new evangelization is supposed to be, it ought to look a lot like the *first* evangelization. It should be centered, as St. Paul tells us repeatedly, on preaching Christ and Him crucified. It should be based on communities of faith gathering together, as Acts 2:42 tells us, devoting themselves in fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles and their successors, to fellowship and acts of charity, to prayers and the breaking of bread. It should involve picking up our cross each and every day and following Our Lord.

Anyone who offers love without sacrifice, who offers Christ without the cross, is just selling snake oil. Some people may buy this sort of thing for a while. But in time, like all those pink watches and lime green socks bought on a whim at the mall, this sort of Catholicism will wind up unused next to all the rest of the junk in the back of people's closets, an embarrassing memory of someone they used to be.

Let's not put the cart before the horse. We are not getting the fallen-away Catholics back *first*, and only *then* evangelizing the culture and the world. People who prefer consumerism, radical individual autonomy, unlimited freedom, and the other reigning cultural paradigms over Church teachings are not coming back anytime soon.

What the Church has to offer is a vision that is distinctly countercultural, but not in the typical modes of being countercultural in contemporary society, all of which tend to involve particular lifestyle choices and the purchase of specific consumer goods that are supposed to announce one's individuality to the world — an “individuality” one shares with scores of other “countercultural” people who have identified themselves with whatever special lifestyle enclave they adhere to at the moment.

People interested in “evangelizing the youth” have to tell them that being truly and fully Catholic is one of the only remaining ways of being *truly* countercultural in a way that isn't merely sold back to them by slick marketers and hip advertisers. I tell my students: If you want to be truly countercultural, then *develop the virtues*. That's the one countercultural act that no one is going to try to sell back to

you in a store at the mall or on the Internet. Young people instinctively know that there is something wrong with the culture; they just don't know what it is. The Church needs to show them that she understands the problem and has a solution: A unique view of the human person that truly affirms human dignity and can serve as the basis for an authentic culture of human flourishing.

The Church's Christocentric understanding of

the human person and culture won't make anyone popular; quite the contrary. It's likely to get them ridiculed and spat upon — possibly even crucified in some circumstances. That's the price of adhering to the truth. People who prefer trendiness to the truth will not be comfortable with Catholicism, especially not at this point in history. If it's any consolation, it wasn't comfortable at other points in history either. ■