

Stanisław Card. Ryłko
President
Pontifical Council for the Laity
Vatican City

The New Evangelization: a question of being and doing¹

The important contribution of the ecclesial movements and new communities

From October 7 to 28, 2012, in Rome, the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will take place. Convoled by the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, on the theme of *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops published the *Lineamenta*, at the beginning of this year; it is a true *vademecum* on the new evangelization and a very useful and in-depth elaboration. The idea certainly is not new: the entire pontificate of Blessed John Paul II was characterized by the *leit-motiv* of the new evangelization. Pope John Paul II did not fail to explain to us what he intended when he placed the adjective “new” in front of the traditional term, “evangelization”: new in ardor, new in methods, new in expressions.² For an appropriate and faithful understanding of the contents of the guidelines, one needs to have an adequate key for reading the text. The expression, “new evangelization,” in fact, has become so common – even abused – that we run the risk of distorting its sense, or worse, reducing it to an insignificant slogan.

To arrive at the core of the matter it is convenient to start from the Magisterium of Blessed John Paul II in order to arrive at the teachings of Benedict XVI, who, also in this theme, follows the same lines drawn by his predecessor. At the close of the Great Jubilee Year, John Paul II wrote his apostolic letter, *Novo millennio ineunte*, in order to help the Church in facing the challenges of the new millennium. The letter contains essential and very actual directives regarding the mission of the Church in our days and points out some serious risks to keep in mind. For example, in number 15 we read: “Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness, with the risk of ‘doing for the sake of doing’. We must resist this temptation by trying ‘to be’ before trying ‘to do’. In this regard we should recall how Jesus reproved Martha: ‘You are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is necessary’ (Lk 10:41-42)”. Thus, concludes the Holy Father, “the mystery of Christ” must always be “the absolute foundation of all our pastoral activity”. Also, a little later, in no. 29, we find the now well known phrase: “We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced

¹ Opening speech of Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, during an encounter of representatives from the ecclesial movements and new communities on the theme of evangelization held in the offices of the same dicastery on 25 June, 2011.

² Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, *Address to CELAM’s 19th ordinary assembly*, 9 March 1983.

with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!”. Thus it is not a formula, but rather, a Person. Before the proliferation of various initiatives that deal with the new evangelization, even though they are valid in themselves and quite interesting, it is necessary to be on guard against this illusory temptation always present in ecclesial circles of seeking a “magic formula” for evangelizing or a sort of infallible method with a hundred percent guarantee!

To further clarify this point, we can recall what Benedict XVI said in an encounter with the Swiss bishops: “one can do much, many things in the ecclesiastical field, all for God..., and yet remain totally taken up with oneself, without encountering God”. These are strong words: one can apparently be doing all for God, but in reality we are really seeking our own interests, without ever entering in relation with God. The Pope continues: “Work replaces faith, but then one becomes empty within”. Here is brought to light the risk faced by many of those involved in evangelization today: that of becoming interiorly bankrupt which is the inevitable consequence of losing that which is most fundamental, the faith. Even in ecclesial settings, as Pope Benedict XVI has often reminded us, faith can be taken for granted.³ “I therefore believe that we must make an effort above all to listen to the Lord in prayer, in deep interior participation in the sacraments, in learning the sentiments of God in the faces and the suffering of others, in order to be infected by his joy...”.⁴ Starting from this consideration, the Holy Father goes on to stress the need of reaffirming the centrality of God in the lives of Christians. Underlying the centrality of God in the work of evangelization could seem like a tautologous statement, but, in reality, it is not something we should never take for granted.

To further complete this magisterial perspective, let us reread the words Pope Benedict XVI pronounced spontaneously to a journalist about the theme of the “primacy of God” in the work of evangelization: “One might say that a church which seeks above all to be attractive would already be on the wrong path, because the Church does not work for itself, does not work to increase its numbers so as to have more power. The Church is at the service of Another; it does not serve itself, seeking to be a strong body, but it strives to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ accessible, the great truths, the great powers of love and of reconciliation that appeared in this figure and that come always from the presence of Jesus Christ. In this sense, the Church does not seek to be attractive, but rather to make herself transparent for Jesus Christ. And in the measure in which the Church is not for herself, as a strong and powerful body in the world, that wishes to have power, but simply is herself the voice of Another, she becomes truly transparent to the great figure of Jesus Christ and the great truths that he has brought to humanity, the power of love; it is then when the Church is heard and accepted. She should not consider herself, but assist in considering the Other, and should herself see and speak of the Other and for the Other.”⁵

We can say that the centrality of God in our lives is at the very heart of the question of the new evangelization. An old scholastic Latin adage states: *operari*

³ Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Homily during his apostolic visit to Portugal*, 11 May, 2010.

⁴ ID., *Homily during a mass with the bishops of Switzerland*, 7 November, 2006.

⁵ ID., *Interview given in flight to The United Kingdom*, 16 September 2010.

sequitur esse. This can be translated as: our actions express our very being. Thus, as the great saints teach us, the primary concern for all of us is that of truly being Christians. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, while en route to Rome to face his martyrdom, wrote to those in the Eternal City: “Pray that I might not only bear the title of a Christian, but that I might also truly be one”.⁶ At the roots of evangelization is one’s very being, not the modes of proclamation, nor the methods, nor the technical means of communication nor the choice of language. Certainly, these are not matters of little importance, but they cannot constitute the starting point. We must begin with who we are: with being a Christian, and with being the Church. In fact, using the term “new evangelization” should invoke in us a renewed way of being a Christian: one who is concerned with finding sound environments which nurture authentic Christians who possess a unity between their faith and their actions; a renewed way of being Church: capable of bearing witness to the beauty of being a Christian. Thus we should not be seeking a magic formula that will attract the men and women of our time, but the awareness that all this begins with ourselves, with our very way of being disciples of Christ. The *Lineamenta* for the upcoming Synod contain clear references to the need for personal conversion in this sense.

The members of ecclesial movements and new communities are also called to reconsider their vocation and mission in this perspective, which means serious reflection on their own identity. Undoubtedly, these new ecclesial realities have demonstrated a unique capacity to draw out an unsuspected missionary zeal in many lay men and women especially whom they themselves did not know they possessed. Where do these capacities come from?

They certainly do not come from a magic formula or prefabricated methodologies, but rather from a pedagogy of the faith that is generated by the charism, and quite apt for stimulating a spiritual growth in the baptized person which produces Christians who are aware of their proper vocation and consequently of their own mission. For this reason, the call for a new evangelization is a strong reminder of the proper identity of the new communities and the ecclesial movements. To be themselves, as a movements, implies accepting with a renewed spirit and a renewed enthusiasm, the proper charism of the community or movement to which they belong. In the actual moment of history that we are passing through, it is truly fundamental that you rediscover this charism. As mentioned in the *Lineamenta*, sooner or later, tiredness, discouragement and even routine creep in. We should not deny the fact that even that which is most holy and beautiful can eventually fade into the ordinary. The majority of the international movements and ecclesial communities have completed many years of existence: some thirty years, other forty, some even fifty or more. In the spanning of these years, the life of a community has passed through various seasons: that of infancy, adolescence, and maturity -the so called ecclesial maturity- as desired by John Paul II.⁷ With the passing of each season emerges the need to defend this vitality with regards to one’s own charism, this spirit of wonderment before the unique gift that one has received from God.

⁶ Cf. *Letter to the Romans*, III, 2.

⁷ Cf. *Address to the movements and new communities*, 30 May 1998, n. 6.

In the measure in which the members of each movement and community are renewed in welcoming their charism, will lie the capacity for offering a significant contribution to the new evangelization and will constitute the real “newness” and that unique characteristic common to all of these new charisms: that of reinvigorating the missionary impulse of the Church today. In other words, it is a question of the very being of these institutions. Blessed John Paul II enjoyed using the expression “being more”⁸ with regards to the ecclesial movements and new communities. “Being more” implies rediscovering all the more the beauty of each one’s charism while recalling that no charism is given only for the institute alone but for the good of the entire Church and its mission. From this awareness comes the extraordinary missionary creativity so typical of these new ecclesial associations, as well as their boldness in proclaiming the Gospel. It is not a question then of elaborating a special formula, but of “re-appropriating” that which already pertains to one’s own being.

Accepting this premise is of utmost importance when dealing with the theme of the new evangelization in order to avoid the risk of instrumentalizing these charisms that the Holy Spirit has raised up in the Church today. Too often, we expect from these groups a nice instant recipe or method for the new evangelization, whereas, instead, we should be asking them to be even better collaborators with the Holy Spirit in generating true Christians. In the end, the call for a new evangelization is really asking for a new way of being Christian, a new way of being Church, where this “newness” is to be found in the Gospel model which is seen in the Acts of the Apostles where it is the strength of the Spirit which renews the entire Christian community.

⁸ Cf., for example, *Address to the 3rd general Conference of the Latin American Episcopate*, 28 January 1979, III, 4.