

FROM “MISSION” TO “NEW EVANGELIZATION”

The Origins of a Challenging Concept

John F. Gorski, M.M.

On June 30 Pope Benedict XVI made a surprising announcement, that he had decided to establish a new Dicastery (Department) in the Vatican Curia, a “Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization”. On September 21 he issued a *Motu Proprio* formalizing its existence and named theologian-Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella as its first President. It was surprising because the present occupant of the Chair of Peter was on record as having called for the number of Curial offices to be reduced rather than increased. Moreover His Holiness just announced on October 24 at the conclusion of the Mid-East Synod that “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith” would be the topic of the next world-wide Assembly of the Synod in 2012. What exactly is the “New Evangelization” that this new Vatican office is to promote? What are the origins of this concept? How did it develop? How does it affect the Catholic Church’s worldwide missionary activity?

Evangelizing all peoples: a permanent concern with different names

Ever since the risen Lord sent out his disciples to make disciples of all nations, the Catholic Church has engaged in what we now call “missionary activity”, the evangelization of those who do not yet know Christ so that local Churches could come to birth in their midst. But the way we speak of this activity has changed over the centuries. In fact for about 15 centuries the word “mission” was not used to refer to this activity. Also, the New Testament speaks of evangelizing or announcing the Gospel, but the noun “evangelization” began to be used by Catholics only about 50 years ago. In order to understand the term “new evangelization”, we have to understand first how the concept of “mission” has evolved, for it was in the context of clarifying the meaning of mission that Pope John Paul II officially introduced the concept of “new evangelization” into the Catholic Church’s vocabulary.

We can trace the development of the term, starting with the Second Vatican Council. When the Council centered mission on the evangelization of peoples rather than the geographical expansion of the Church, it brought about a transition from territorial to a situational idea of mission. How human groups relate to Christ in their concrete historical situations became more important than whether they lived in “mission lands”. Paul VI gave great importance to evangelization as being the fundamental task of the Church, and Latin America’s Puebla Conference called for a “new evangelization” of human groups in new

cultural situations. John Paul II made this a major concern in his teaching ministry. I'll describe what I have witnessed in the past 40 years, accompanying Latin American bishops in their efforts to make the continent's Church truly "missionary". I realize that others may offer other perspectives. What is important is appreciating what the "new evangelization" means and calls for. Understanding the origins of the concept may be of some help.

The modern meaning of "mission"

The word "mission" in its modern sense apparently goes back to St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. By the fourth "vow of the mission", certain Jesuits were sent to non-Christian lands (or to countries lost to Catholicism during the Protestant Reformation) as agents vested with the authority of the pope to propagate the Catholic faith. Those sent soon came to be called "missionaries" and the places they were sent, "missions".

The "missions" as a geographical and juridical term

Historically, since the 16th century the concept of "the missions" was closely associated with the practice of European (and later American) colonialism. The idea supposed that the "established churches" of Western Europe had a duty to transplant their form of Christendom to the previously non-Christianized nations colonized by their countries. It implied the superiority of the old Christendom and the inferiority of the peoples colonized. The religious mission was normally combined with the secular enterprise of "civilizing" these peoples, in other words, transplanting Western cultural models. Thus the term "mission" came to mean the complex of activities by which the western ecclesiastical system was extended all over the world.

According to the jurisprudence in force when Catholic Christianity came to America and parts of Africa and Asia in the 15th and 16th centuries, the pope had direct authority over all peoples not yet embraced by Christendom, that is, subject to Christian authorities. It was assumed that he could delegate his powers to a secular power, as in the case of the *Patronato* conceded to the kings of Spain and Portugal. When in the 19th century these empires were weakened and new colonial powers came to control what we often call the "Third World" (Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific islands), the pope delegated his authority to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide (now called "for the Evangelization of Peoples"), which entrusted not-yet-Christianized territories to religious congregations or missionary institutes and delegated them to convert their inhabitants to Christianity and to "plant the Church" there (as Apostolic Prefectures or Vicariates). Thus "the missions" were generally identified with territories subject to the authority of Propaganda Fide.

The limitations of the geographical and juridical idea of mission

In the first place, this way of seeing things supposed that human groups needed missionary activity simply because they lived in certain geographical areas. It likewise implied that people who lived in Europe and North America (and more recently, in countries like Australia) simply needed ordinary pastoral attention, teaching doctrine and administering the sacraments to those who already were Catholic.

Theologically also, this geographical and juridical concept of “the missions” had some serious limitations. Conversion was often seen as the change of religion rather than an encounter with the living Christ and discipleship. The overt objective was really “Christianization” rather than evangelization: the incorporation of more and more peoples into a socio-political and religious entity called “Christendom”. The “missions” were the responsibility of the “missionaries”. It was not imagined that the entire Church is missionary by its nature or that all the faithful –bishops, priests, religious and laypeople– share in this missionary responsibility.

When the Latin American Church started to become actively missionary after the Council, the geographical and juridical criteria for defining mission were criticized as being seriously inadequate. For over 90% of those in need of a primary evangelization (mostly Native American peoples and African Americans) did not live in the “Propaganda territories” but in established dioceses. It was realized that people need missionary activity not because they live in a certain type of ecclesiastical jurisdiction or territory but because they have not yet been evangelized in their cultural identity. The deficiencies of defining mission primarily by geography led to a “situational” view of mission. But first we’ll take a look at how the concept of “evangelization” came to complement that of “mission” in contemporary Catholic thinking.

Catholic theology rediscovers evangelization

The New Testament frequently uses the noun “Gospel” and the verb “evangelize” [or “announce the Gospel”]. In the 18th century, when some Protestants started to recognize the importance of mission activity (during the two centuries after Luther and Calvin, Protestant churches did not send missionaries), they coined the noun “evangelization”. Until 1955 this word is scarcely found in Catholic theological literature; since it was a “Protestant term” it was simply avoided. It was rediscovered in the Catholic catechetical renewal of the 1950’s and 60’s which emphasized that the teaching of the faith should have a “kerygmatic” dynamic, one that emphasized the “good news” of the Gospel. At that time, evangelization was

distinguished from catechesis. Evangelization was considered the first proclamation of the good news, and catechesis, the progressive formation in the faith of those who were already evangelized. In Asia, some missionaries and missiologists even spoke of a process of “pre-evangelization”, an announcing of how non-Christians are prepared for the explicit Gospel message. Thus the word “evangelization” was ready to be used in the Second Vatican Council forty years ago. In the documents of the Council the words “evangelization” and “evangelize” are used most frequently in the Decree on missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*, and normally in the sense of a first announcing of the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ. We’ll have more on evangelization below.

From “the missions” to “missionary activity”

The Council dramatically transformed the understanding of mission, although many Catholics, including bishops and priests not updated in missiology, still think and speak in preconiliar ways. The document “on the missions” became the Decree “on missionary activity”. The change in terminology was not just a question of words but of concepts. The change was a costly process in the Council. The draft of that Decree had to undergo more changes than any other document of the Council, but it was finally accepted by a greater degree of unanimity than any other.

Ad Gentes in the first place affirmed that the entire Church by her very nature is missionary. In other words, mission is not just a concern of religious congregations, missionary institutes or “professional missionaries”. The juridical perspective viewed mission as an exercise of authority to submit nations to the true religion. The Council’s Decree based the mission of the Church on the Father’s loving initiative in sending his Son and the Holy Spirit to communicate divine life to humanity.

Missionary activity distinguished from pastoral activity

One of the most significant contributions of *Ad Gentes* was the following. Although the Decree sometimes continues to employ the phrase “the missions” in the traditional sense, it introduces a new, more dynamic concept: “missionary activity.” It is based on the conviction that the evangelizing mission of the Church is one, but it is differentiated in its exercise given the condition of the ones for whom it is directed, the different types of human groups evangelized. Thus, *Ad Gentes* number 6 distinguishes *missionary activity*, directed to the evangelization of those peoples or groups that do not yet know Christ and among which no mature local Church exists, from *pastoral activity*, directed to the on-going evangelization of those who are already Catholic. This distinction was one of the Council’s “best kept secrets” until its emphatic reiteration by John Paul II in number 33 of *Redemptoris Missio*. Of course, for those who do not know this

Encyclical, it is still a secret. We'll get back to this distinction below. But first we'll take a look at developments during the pontificate of Paul VI, in which the concept of "evangelization" acquired a new breadth and depth of meaning and a new importance.

Evangelization in the teaching of Paul VI

Ten years after the Council, in late 1974, Pope Paul VI convoked an Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to consider the different dimensions of "Evangelization in Today's World". The pope assumed and organized the input of the Synod and communicated it to the whole Church in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). In it he stressed that evangelization is the specific and fundamental task of the Church. The Church exists to evangelize, to announce the Gospel. Evangelization is above all –and can never omit– the explicit announcing of the Gospel, making known the person and message of Jesus Christ. But evangelization is more; it is a complex, rich and dynamic reality that cannot be fully understood unless all of its elements are taken into account. Paul VI makes a point of not reducing evangelization to mission activity, the first announcing of Christ to those who do not yet know him. While bringing the Gospel to every sector of the human race is of great importance, Paul also insists on its penetration into every level and aspect of human life, particularly in the evangelization of culture and of cultures. This implies a transformation of scales of values, patterns of behavior, structures of relationships and ways of thinking. Evangelization is a process that starts with a witness of life and word that lead to an announcing of the Gospel and which invites the person evangelized to conversion and incorporation into an ecclesial community and sacramental life. The end result is that the one evangelized becomes the evangelizer of others. The pope emphasizes the evangelizing responsibility of the local churches –of bishops, priests, religious and laity– in evangelization (something that was hardly taken for granted), but strangely does not speak specifically of life-long missionaries or missionary institutes.

Unfortunately *Evangelii Nuntiandi* does not give a clear definition of "evangelization". It describes the multiple and rich elements involved in evangelization, the process involved, its effects and those responsible for it, but it does not define the term. I personally like the definition proposed in the *Instrumentum Laboris* prepared for the Synod in 1973: "Evangelization is the totality of those activities by which people are brought to participate in the mystery of Christ". I like this definition because it reminds us that the objective of evangelization is a personal encounter with the person of Christ, and a participation in his paschal mystery. Personal encounter with Christ implies discipleship, and discipleship implies belonging to that community of disciples which is the Church. I see this (more than the salvation of individual souls) as the

objective of all evangelization and of missionary activity in particular. The Church is necessary in salvation because the historical participation in God's saving plan is of utmost importance. God wants this participation to be fully human: realized with awareness, freedom, responsibility and heartfelt joy, not alone, but with others in society and culture.

Since *Evangelii Nuntiandi* the word "evangelization" became quite popular. Catholics began to speak a lot of evangelization and called just about everything they did evangelization, even if it did not make bringing people to participate in the mystery of Christ. Some missionaries and missiologists focused more on the "elements" of evangelization and on the "methods" used for doing it rather than on its theological foundations. While "evangelization" was the thing to do, a crisis arose regarding the need and urgency of missionary activity. Some considered it useful for promoting the well being of poor and oppressed peoples overseas and mutual toleration of religions and cultures, but not necessary for the salvation of persons. If not "necessary for salvation", how could mission be urgent? The Catholic Bishops of the U.S. recognized this problem in 1986 and produced the Pastoral Letter: *To the Ends of the Earth*. In 1990, Pope John Paul II recognized the global scope of this crisis and wrote a challenging Encyclical on the permanent validity of the missionary mandate of Christ, *Redemptoris Missio*. In the following paragraphs I shall highlight only a few of his thoughts, those that help us understand what makes missionary activity specific and distinctive.

Pope John Paul II opens up the perspectives on missionary activity and calls for a "new evangelization" of those who are no longer Christian

John Paul II gave new energy to the conciliar concept of "missionary activity" in its specific sense, and he did this in various ways. As the Council did in *Ad Gentes* 6, the pope affirms that the Church has one evangelizing mission, and that the exercise of this is differentiated due to the different situations in which human groups find themselves. It was in this context that he called for a "new evangelization" and gave it a rather clear meaning.

He reiterates the distinction between mission and pastoral activity

Basic to John Paul II's missiology is his emphasis on the importance of distinguishing missionary activity, oriented toward those who are beyond the visible limits of the Church, from ordinary pastoral attention to those who already find themselves in the Church. To this mission activity in its proper sense he gives the name "mission *ad gentes*", a new term popularized in Latin American missionary circles since the Puebla Conference (1979), but not yet widely used elsewhere. Here are his words⁶ as found in *Redemptoris Missio* 33:

First, there is the situation which the Church's missionary activity addresses: peoples, groups, and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups. This is mission *ad gentes* in the proper sense of the term.

Secondly, there are Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures. They are fervent in their faith and in Christian living. They bear witness to the Gospel in their surroundings and have a sense of commitment to the universal mission. In these communities the Church carries out her pastoral activity and pastoral care.

In the years prior to *Redemptoris Missio*, only certain missionary groups and missiologists underscored this distinction between mission and pastoral activity. This distinction is still unknown to or ignored by many church leaders, theologians and even many missionaries who still direct their efforts mainly to general pastoral care, the attention given to the faithful who frequent their parishes. They give so much attention to local and immediate pastoral problems, that the challenge of missionary activity in its specific sense is often ignored or postponed.

*Between Mission and Pastoral:
an intermediate situation that calls for a "New Evangelization"*

When John Paul II issued *Redemptoris Missio* in 1990. 25 years had elapsed since the Council's mission Decree *Ad Gentes*. In that quarter century the socio-cultural and religious conditions affecting the world's peoples kept on changing, as did the Church's awareness of how these affected her evangelizing mission. The distinction between human groups that needed missionary activity and those that needed ordinary pastoral attention was valid but no longer sufficient. It is true that there still were entire peoples which did *not yet* know Christ, whose ancestral cultures were not affected by the Gospel, and that there were other groups that were evangelized and constituted as Christian communities. But there were also considerable groups that were *no longer Christians*, for whom Jesus Christ, his Gospel and his Church were of no importance. It was to these groups that John Paul pointed to in the next paragraph of *Redemptoris Missio* 33:

Thirdly, there is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where 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. In this case what is needed is a "new evangelization" or a "re-evangelization."

In the decade or so after Puebla, John Paul II urged a “new evangelization” particularly in the context of the Church’s preparation for two events: the fifth centenary of the Gospel’s arrival in America (1492-1992) and the beginning of a new millennium (2000-2001). In the first case, the message was directed to Latin America and in the second, to a progressively secularized Europe. In the first case, the accent was on an evangelization that was “new in its ardor, in its methods and in its expression”. In the second case, its stress was on a “re-evangelization” of people who were baptized but who have grown indifferent to religion. As Pope Benedict XVI observed in his recent *Motu Proprio*, John Paul II “made this urgent task a central point in his wide-reaching Magisterial teaching” and “systematically explored [it] in depth on numerous occasions”.

Where did John Paul II get this idea of a “new evangelization”?

As far as I can understand the ways things developed, it was John Paul’s involvement in the Third General Conference of Latin American Episcopate (celebrated in Puebla, Mexico, in early 1979) shortly after his election that sharpened his focus on evangelization and gave him the words with which to speak of it.

The term “new evangelization” appeared in Latin American documents at least since 1968. In the final “Message” (Nº 6) of their Second General Conference (that of Medellin), the Latin American Bishops committed themselves to “foster a new evangelization”. This was a “one-liner”. The idea was there, but it was still rather vague in its substance. I found other uses of the term “new evangelization” in 1969 and 1970 in the context of the indigenous apostolate in Latin America. I don’t know if it was also used in other continents. It does not appear in Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). I believe that it was the Latin American Church’s use of the term, particularly in the Puebla Document that directly influenced John Paul.

The Puebla Document (numbers 365-367) urges the Church to concentrate on three types of “situations most in need of evangelization” (the penultimate draft called them “missionary situations”). First are the “permanent situations”, the indigenous peoples and African American populations which are yet to be evangelized in their cultural identity. Second are the “new situations that call for a new evangelization”, human groups affected by recent socio-cultural changes, such as migration, urbanization and secularization. Finally there are the “particularly difficult situations”, group whose urgent need of evangelization is often postponed: university students and other young people, military, business and labor leaders as well as the world of social communications (this item came from the pre-Puebla input of Bishop Juan Gerardi of Guatemala, martyred in 1998). I believe that the paragraph of the

Puebla Document that concretely shaped John Paul's thinking was N° 366 that identified "new situations that require a new Evangelization". The pope certainly knew that page of the Document quite well, because in *Redemptoris Missio* (N°64) he praised as exemplary the commitment of the Latin American Bishops to missionary activity beyond their frontiers formulated in N° 368.

Puebla 366 was not was the result of a "spontaneous generation" during the course of the Conference. It had its own pre-history in the creative thinking of Bishop Roger Aubry CSSR (1923-2010), the one charged with drafting the text of Puebla's sub-chapter on "The Criteria for Evangelization and its Universal Dimension". Aubry, the Vicar Apostolic of Reyes in Bolivia's Amazon area, north of La Paz, was President of the Mission Department of CELAM (the Latin American Council of Catholic Bishops) from late 1974 to early 1979. Since its inception in 1966 this Department had been committed to the specific evangelization of the continent's indigenous peoples and the need to go beyond inadequate territorial criteria for determining what is "mission" in the specific sense. Central to the Department's vision was the concept of "missionary situations" among human groups barely evangelized in their cultural identity. Aubry brought this line of thought to a new level and developed the concept of "new missionary situations".

Aubry, perhaps more than anyone else, contributed to shaping a Latin American theology of mission with its own accents and to the missionary commitment of the continent's episcopate. His profoundly biblical theology, formed by his mentor, François Xavier Durrwell, was centered on the paschal mystery and further shaped by the Council's *Ad Gentes*. His reading of that Decree confirmed his conviction, born from his understanding of the paschal mystery, that the Church is missionary by her very nature. He reiterated the importance given in *Ad Gentes* 6 to the distinction between missionary activity and ordinary pastoral activity. In the sixth paragraph of that number, these words caught his attention:

Moreover, the groups among which the Church dwells are often radically changed, for one reason or other, so that an entirely new set of circumstances may arise. Then the Church must deliberate whether these conditions might again call for her missionary activity.

Here the Council affirmed that changed conditions, even among previously evangelized human groups, may call for new missionary activity in the specific sense. Aubry was invited to address Latin America's National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Sao Paulo in January, 1976. In that talk, describing "where is mission?" he called attention to this text, ignored by most other commentators on *Ad Gentes*. This was the origin of the concept of "new missionary situations" that would enter into the reflections of the CELAM Mission Department in the years before Puebla. It would become the substance of Puebla N° 366, which affirmed that new missionary situations called for a "new evangelization". I

believe that this is the text that gave John Paul II the language with which to speak of the need for a specifically original evangelization of those affected by changing socio-cultural situations.

John Paul's other approach to new missionary situations: non territorial "spheres of mission"

The cultural identity of those who are served by missionary activity is implicit in the Council. John Paul II makes it explicit (RMis 34). The pontiff calls attention not only to traditional cultures but also to new socio-cultural situations. He speaks of three "spheres of mission": territorial, social and cultural (RMis 37). What is interesting is that he considers these not only challenges to evangelization in general, but to mission *ad gentes* in its proper sense.

For John Paul, missionary activity can no longer be limited to the first announcement of the Gospel to peoples *not yet evangelized* in and from their cultural identity. This *territorial sphere* of missionary activity is still extensive. It encompasses two-thirds of humanity or more than four billion people, mainly, but not exclusively, in Africa and Asia. The pope admits that this situation exists also in traditionally Christian regions, like Latin America (consider the urgent missionary situation of so many indigenous peoples and Afro-American and Asian American populations, perhaps one third of the continent's inhabitants).

Whereas the territorial sphere is perduring, related to people with centuries-old religions and cultures, these are new situations, one "social" and the other "cultural". The distinction I see is this: The "social sphere" refers to new ways of living together or of structuring relationships among human groups; the "cultural sphere" refers to new value systems and new ways of thinking.

The first non-geographical sphere that demands missionary activity is that which pertains to new *social* worlds and realities. It is the situation of those human groups involved in the phenomena of urbanization and migration, and particularly the new cultures of the poor, the marginalized and of youth. John Paul even dares to affirm that big cities should be "the privileged places" of *ad gentes* mission today.

The third sphere of *ad gentes* mission, and the second non-territorial sphere, are the *cultural areas or modern "Areopagi"*, toward which the Church's missionary activity should be directed. A modern "Areopagus" (a public meeting place) is the world of social communication, which shapes and diffuses new modern and post-modern cultural models. Another "Areopagus" of the modern world is constituted by the phenomena of generalized awareness (John XXIII and *Gaudium et Spes* call them "signs of the times") regarding human rights, promotion of women and

children, integrity of creation, and the culture of politics, economics and scientific investigation.

In the teaching of John Paul II, all of these human situations or “spheres of mission”, whether historic-geographical or socio-cultural, demand *ad gentes* missionary activity. The traditional territorial sphere refers broadly to *traditional cultures*, the peoples of Africa and Asia and the culturally non-Western populations of America, perhaps somewhat “Christianized” historically, but hardly evangelized. The new, non-geographical spheres, the social and cultural spheres, refer to *new cultures* or new cultural situations. All of these require the attention and response of the missionary Church.

Conclusion: Is the “New evangelization” a dimension of missionary activity?

I believe that Pope John Paul II, in an effort to urge new forms of missionary activity toward those distanced from the Church because of new socio-cultural and religious situations, uses two original ways of speaking, “the new evangelization” of RM 33 and the “new spheres” or “modern Areopagi” in number 37. While *ad gentes* mission is directed toward those who are “not yet evangelized” in their traditional culture or new cultural situation, there is another situation, that of those who are “no longer Christians,” for whom a “new evangelization” is necessary. These are entire groups of baptized people in the countries of ancient Christendom for whom Jesus Christ is not that important, who maintain their distance from the Church and have lost the living sense of the Christian faith. Does this “new evangelization” of the de-Christianized qualify as missionary activity *in its specific sense*? It certainly does not fit into the ordinary pastoral attention to the faithful who belong to mature ecclesial communities and who are already committed to universal mission. Missionary activity in the specific sense is an evangelization of groups that do not believe in Christ and do not belong to the visible Church, whether these groups are “not yet Christians” or “no longer Christians.” Because of this, many of us Latin American missiologists are convinced that the “new evangelization” of Pope John Paul II is a form of missionary activity in the specific sense.

Fr. John F. Gorski is a Maryknoll Missioner and has been assigned to Bolivia since his ordination to the priesthood in 1963. From 1964 to 1974 and also 1979 and 1980 he served in La Paz and the surrounding Altiplano in catechetical and liturgical renewal and in the formation of Aymara evangelizers. He was Executive Secretary of the CELAM Mission Department from 1975 until the Puebla Conference (1979). In 1984 he earned a Doctorate in Missiology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. From 1985 to 1989 he served as National Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Bolivia. Since 1989 he has been teaching and research professor of Missiology, Ecumenism and Inculturation at the Catholic University of Bolivia in Cochabamba. He was elected the first President of the new International Association of Catholic Missiologists in 2000 and served in that post until October, 2004. Since 2005 he has also served as “Staff Missiologist/Theologian” at the National Office of the Pontifical Mission Societies in the U.S. (New York).