

Put Out Into the Deep: The New Evangelization

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"Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Jesus, St. Luke 5:4

“At the beginning of the new millennium, and at the close of the Great Jubilee during which we celebrated the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus and a new stage of the Church's journey begins, our hearts ring out with the words of Jesus when one day, after speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, he invited the Apostle to "put out into the deep" for a catch: "Duc in altum" (Lk 5:4). Peter and his first companions trusted Christ's words, and cast the nets. "When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish" (Lk 5:6). Duc in altum! These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8). Pope John Paul II, “At the Beginning of the New Millennium

The Gospel text of the Divine Liturgy on this Fifth Sunday in Ordinary time (in the Western Church Calendar) reminded me of the wonderful insights concerning those words written by Pope John Paul II in the letter that he wrote at the close of the Great Jubilee year of 2000 and the beginning of the new millennium. They are a call to every Christian, no matter what their state in life, to take up the missionary mandate of the Church.

Throughout his long and faithful service to the Lord, to the Church and to the world (into which the Church is still called to carry forward in time the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ), the Vicar of Christ, Pope John Paul II, has tirelessly called for this kind of missionary spirit in what he has called a “New Evangelization.” This call has implications for both the Church - which desperately needs such a new evangelization - and the culture, which has been deeply de-christianized and is also desperately in need of this new evangelization.

These two aspects of this one call are intricately connected. Only the Church can carry out this evangelical mission because she is the Body of Christ on the earth. She is called by the Lord to carry on His redemptive mission and continue His presence on this earth as a universal sign and “sacrament.” She is the missionary agent and –in the words of the fathers of the second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church- the seed of the kingdom of God.

To accomplish her mission she must be “Holy”, set aside for and configured to Christ. She must therefore, in every age and time, be renewed, reformed and repositioned in order to faithfully carry on the task of “putting out into the deep” waters of the world into which she is still sent on mission.

Let’s look at both of these aspects of this call to the “New Evangelization”

The “New Evangelization” of the Church:

The Catholic Church is reeling under a season of purification, brought on (at least in part) by the sin of some of her members, including her clergy. Our Church needs conversion at every level. As members of Christ’s Body, we are called to grieve, repent and work for the healing and authentic conversion and renewal of this Church that we love. We must also be honest about the reality we face. There is serious need for clergy reform. There is a desperate need for a new evangelization and solid catechesis within the Church and among all the faithful.

Many Catholic Christians do not know what the Church actually teaches and have instead embraced what some have called a “cafeteria Catholicism”- choosing what parts of their faith they will follow. Finally, in the worst cases, a practical atheism is abounding wherein those bearing the title Christian are professing the Creed but confining its influence only to Sunday.

Yet, this Church in such need is our Church and when we acknowledge her weakness, we must do so with genuine love and affection. After all, we are sons and daughters of the Church. It was Saint Cyprian (who died in A.D. 258) who is most often quoted concerning this vital truth: "He who has turned his back on the Church of Christ shall not come to the rewards of Christ; he is an alien, a worldling, an enemy. You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the Church for your mother. Our Lord warns us when He says: 'he that is not with Me is against Me, and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth.' Whosoever breaks the peace and harmony of Christ acts against Christ; whoever gathers elsewhere than in the Church scatters the Church of Christ." (On The Unity of the Catholic Church)

As Catholic Christians we believe that the Church is God’s plan for the entire world. The early Fathers called her the “world reconciled”. Through our Baptism, we live in the Church now and go into the world. We are called to love the Church with the affection of sons and daughters; she is our “mother”. We were reborn in Baptism through the fount of Baptism as through a second womb and we now live our Christian life –always as a part of this Church. When faced with the magnitude of our current crisis our proper response should be to “put out into the deep” by working for her authentic reform and healing.

We must pray for - and work for - the full, complete restoration of dynamically, orthodox, faithful to the magisterium, fully Catholic Christian teaching and life- both ortho-doxo (right doctrine) and ortho-praxy (right practice). This lies at the heart of the mission of the “New Evangelization.”

We cannot abandon the Church to the wolves within or without (and there are many) but rather we must sacrificially love her all the more as she undergoes this purification of love from the hands of her Founder. All such purifications of the Church come from the hands of a loving God and - even if intended for destruction - become opportunities for grace. After all, the promise of the Master is still true “The gates of hell will not prevail against her” This is, after all, Christ’s Church! There is no “plan B” through which He will save this world. He established one Church through which to continue His work until His return. She has undergone similar purifications and reform many times throughout her missionary journey over two thousand years. Her hull may be battered but she is still the Ark of Salvation.

Church history demonstrates that such seasons of purification are usually followed by – or in fact coincide with – times of great restoration and triumph for the Church. So it is in our day - in spite of what some may say. These “nay-sayers” do not understand what we must always remember; this Church that is called Catholic is not a mere human institution. If it were, it would have shipwrecked long ago. This is the Ark, the boat, presided over by the Lord. He is at the helm steering His redemptive course through time. He says to those of us who have joined His family through our Baptism what he said to those frightened followers we heard about in the readings at today’s Liturgy “Put Out Into the Deep, and lower your nets for a catch”.

The “New Evangelization” of the World:

The contemporary culture into which we are sent as members of this missionary Church has clearly lost its way, throwing off almost every remnant of Christian influence. It has embraced a “new” paganism. This phenomenon isn’t really all that new. It is just dressed up in the sophistry of an age that purports to be “enlightened” when it is lost. The growing embrace of license over liberty, death over life, the use and abuse of the goods of the earth over stewardship, are phenomenon that are all being fueled by a counterfeit notion of freedom as a raw power over others and the accompanying delusion that “freedom” implies some feigned “right” to choose even what is wrong.

The result of this rejection of the truth is tantamount to a practical atheism. It is also not new. It is simply Eden’s error written large in an age which has once again rejected God and His plan for the human race. Contemporary humankind, reeling from this rejection, like Cain, wanders aimlessly in a land of Nod, East of Eden. America (which consistently polls as one of the most “religious” of the Nations of the West) has little evidence of the influence of religious faith in its daily life. The principles derived from any past influence of that faith are no longer found in its increasingly coarse culture. It was Alsitair McIntyre who once explained this anomaly well: “The creed of the English” he wrote “is that there is no God but it is wise to pray to him from time to time.” Let’s be honest, this is also the “creed” of the West

“Religion” is acceptable as long as it is kept “private”. Yet, of all religious expressions, Christianity can never be “kept private”. It must be given away in love. The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is profoundly public. Christian faith may be personal but it cannot be private. It proclaims a God who loves the world that He created so much that He wrote the universal laws governing all men and women into the fabric of a natural law. This God who fashioned us also made us to reflect Him through our capacity for freedom, our ability to choose. He invites us now to choose what is right and true. Christians proclaim that there are some choices that are universally wrong. Also, that there is an objective truth for all men and women, all cultures and all times and that freedom must be exercised in reference to this truth and with regard for our neighbor (no matter how small) and his/her goods. Truth is truth for all men and women. The new pagans find this kind of “absolutism” to be offensive. However, its reassertion by a renewed Church is the only thing that will set freedom free. This task is part of the “New Evangelization.”

Throughout his writings, homilies, catechetical instructions and addresses, this Pope has opined over the emptiness and sadness of our age. He has noted the obvious, many cultures, formerly infused with a Christian culture, are now “post-Christian” and need to be “re- evangelized.” This is the mission of the “New Evangelization” When he last visited the Americas, just before the turn of the third millennium; he addressed this challenge in a letter entitled “ To the Church in America”:

“The new Evangelization calls for a clearly conceived, serious and well organized effort to evangelize culture. The Son of God, by taking upon Himself our human nature, became incarnate within a particular people, even though His redemptive death brought redemption to all people, of every culture, race and condition. The gift of His Spirit and His love are meant for each and every people and culture, in order to bring them all into unity after the perfect unity existing in the Triune God” (Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 70).

We who live in America know firsthand the sadness of the loss of this Christian influence. Only a holy, vibrant faith filled Catholic Church can bring this culture of death, use and darkness to a new conversion and transformation. This is the “New Evangelization”. Given the influence of Christian faith in the past and the current state of moral decline in our nation and indeed in all of North and South America, we need to view the entirety of the American continent now as "missionary territory".

Our Mission:

The challenge of this “New Evangelization” is clear; we are all called to live out our baptismal vocation through lives of sacrificial service within the Church. Then, as members of Christ’s Body, we are called into the world. All of the faithful, men, and women, lay, clergy and religious - ALL of the faithful – need to view themselves as missionaries. We need to fully grasp that the mission of the Church is OUR mission. It is not reserved for a group of “professionals” but is the task incumbent on all of the faithful. We are sons and daughters of the Church, which is a seed of the Kingdom, scattered in the midst of this field called the world. God still loves the world so much that He still sends His Son, through you and I.

Since the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church, the consistent emphasis of the teaching concerning missionary activity has been the fundamental truth that the Church is by nature missionary and that every baptized Christian participates in that missionary activity. Our task, no matter what our state in life or vocation, is to be missionaries, in every nation and to every culture. That understanding lies at the heart of what it means to be Christian - we carry on the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ.

All Christians need to hear once again the call to “put out into the deep” and lower our nets for a catch. This is a new missionary age and we are its new missionaries. Theologians and philosophers speak of asymmetry. As mere humans we often, we see life as “either/or” when it is truly “both/and”. The asymmetry of the purification and the springtime is an example of the application of asymmetry to our contemporary age. While we are proceeding as a Church through a time of deep purification, we are also, at the same time, experiencing a simultaneous springtime of missions.

The Lord of the harvest is calling workers for the New Evangelization of His Church. Then, as loyal sons and daughters of that Church, He is sending them into the fields for a New Evangelization of the world. Let’s all hear that call to “put out into the deep” and lower our nets for a catch!

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