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**“I give you hope and a future.” Jer. 29:11**

**Faith and the New Evangelization in the Metropolis of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Pope John Paul II first called for a "new evangelization" in 1983 in Haiti, a new evangelization that would be "new in ardor, methods, and expression." In fact, it became a major theme of his Pontificate, and continues to be a major theme with Benedict XVI.

In 1992 John Paul addressed all the bishops of Latin America on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the new world and its subsequent evangelization and again called for a new evangelization, explaining it more fully.

"The new evangelization does not consist of a 'new gospel' ...Neither does it involve removing from the Gospel whatever seems difficult for the modern mentality to accept. Culture is not the measure of the Gospel, but it is Jesus Christ who is the measure of every culture and every human action. The new evangelization has as its point of departure the certitude that in Christ there are 'inscrutable riches' (Eph 3:8) which no culture nor era can exhaust, and which we must always bring to people in order to enrich them...These riches are, first of all, Christ himself, his person, because he himself is our salvation."<sup>1</sup>

Pope John Paul II chose the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, in 1990, to issue the most important recent magisterial document on evangelization, the Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (Mission of the Redeemer). In this important Encyclical the Pope made clear that this “new evangelization” is not his own innovation but has its roots in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI all understand this Council to have been called for two main reasons: to foster renewal in the Church so that the Church can be more effective in showing forth Christ to the world i.e. renewal for the sake of evangelization.

In this Encyclical he makes a very strong statement:

“I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church, can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.” (RMis 3)

When the Pope speaks of the “new evangelization” he primarily means the need to re-evangelize those traditionally Christian countries that have been weakened by a process of secularization. In these countries or regions there may be many people who bear the name of Catholic but do not follow Jesus as disciples and friends. The Pope sees an urgent need to call to conversion the many millions of nominal Catholics who are in this situation throughout the world. He contrasts this “new evangelization” (or he sometimes calls it “reevangelization”) with

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<sup>1</sup>Pope John Paul II, "Address to Bishops of Latin America," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Language Edition, October 21, 1992, p.7., section 6.

primary evangelization directed, to those who have never heard the gospel before (*ad gentes*), and with “pastoral care” which is extended to those who are already members of the Church. In the document he issued at the end of the Jubilee Year 2000, that sums up what he understands the Spirit to have been doing in preparing us for the third millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, he makes the striking statement:

“Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a ‘Christian society’ which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on Gospel values, is now gone.” (NMI 40)

He asks the whole Church at every level to review its plans and priorities to make sure that evangelization is at the center, both the “new evangelization” and also evangelization directed to the unevangelized peoples of the world.

Evangelization in the Conciliar documents and the important post-Conciliar documents of Pope Paul VI and John Paul II has a broad meaning that includes many different activities that contribute to evangelization or flow from evangelization, including good example in the witness of our life, works of charity and mercy, catechesis and work for justice and peace. But there is a common theme in all these documents that insists that if the central activity of proclaiming Jesus with a view to leading people to conversion is missing, the most important element of evangelization is missing.

“Jesus’ encounters with Gentiles makes it clear that entry into the kingdom comes through faith and conversion (cr. Mk 1:125), and not merely by reason of ethnic background.” (RMis 13)

“There can be no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God are not proclaimed. (Evangelii Nuntiandi 22)

“Evangelization will also always contain – as the foundation, center, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy.” (EN 27)

“Preaching constitutes the Church’s first and fundamental way of serving the coming of the kingdom in individuals and in human society.” (RMis 20)

“The proclamation of the Word of God has *Christian conversion* as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith...Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple.” (RMis 46)

Cardinal Avery Dulles has commented that this focus on evangelization is one of the most important developments in the Church since the close of the Council.

“In my judgment the evangelical turn in the ecclesial vision of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II is one of the most surprising and important developments in the Catholic Church

since Vatican II...All of this constitutes a remarkable shift in the Catholic tradition...Today we seem to be witnessing the birth of a new Catholicism that, without loss of its institutional, sacramental, and social dimensions, is authentically evangelical...Catholic spirituality at its best has always promoted a deep personal relationship with Christ. In evangelizing we are required to raise our eyes to him and to transcend all ecclesiocentrism. The Church is of crucial importance but is not self-enclosed. It is a means of drawing the whole world into union with God through Jesus Christ...Too many Catholics of our day seem never to have encountered Christ. They know a certain amount about him from the teaching of the Church, but they lack direct personal familiarity...The first and highest priority is for the Church to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus Christ as a joyful message to all the world. Only if the Church is faithful to its evangelical mission can it hope to make its distinctive contribution in the social, political, and cultural spheres.”<sup>2</sup>

While this is not directly the topic of this paper, and will be the topic of tomorrow’s workshop, it must be mentioned that recent Popes have also seen clearly that there can be no “new evangelization” without a “new Pentecost.” As John Paul II puts it:

“Over the years, I have often repeated the summons to the *new evangelization*. I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardor of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel’ (1 Cor 9:16)

This passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of ‘specialists’ but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God. Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves; they must proclaim him. A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as *the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups.*” (NMI 40)

With this as our framework we can now focus on the issue at hand, the role of faith in the reevangelization of the metropolis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is a very broad topic that could be developed in a number of fruitful directions but I want to focus on only one of them here, the one I think to be most important, namely, the content of the faith that we proclaim, or in other words, what is the gospel?

In our efforts toward evangelization, we must be clear on the content and substance of the gospel message, or else the means chosen and the results obtained will be quite ambiguous. While programs, plans, and processes of evangelization are important, clarity of content is indispensable. What has been *revealed* to us about what it means to be a Christian? What is the *truth* which God wants us to communicate to others? Does it matter if we accept this message or not? In short, what is the gospel message?

### *Saved by Grace*

The Scriptures frequently summarize the most foundational elements of the gospel message. John 3:16 presents one such statement: “Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life.” Ephesians 1:7-8 is

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Martin, *The Catholic Church at the End of an Age: What is the Spirit Saying?* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1994) pp. 104-105.

another: “It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God’s favor to us.”

When we read these brief summaries of the good news, we are struck by the overwhelming love, mercy, and generosity at the heart of the plan of salvation. The most foundational element of the gospel is not *our love for God*, but *his love for us* (1 Jn 4:9-10). Just as his love initiated creation, his love initiates the chance for a renewal of creation. Scripture characterizes God’s love and mercy as great, immeasurably generous, rich, kind, and lavished upon us (see Eph 1:7-8, 2:1-10; Titus 3:3-8).

This saving gift of God’s Son is totally undeserved and unmerited on our part. It is purely and entirely by God’s free choice, by his favor, by his grace, that Jesus is given to us. “I repeat, it is owing to his favor that salvation is yours through faith. This is not your own doing, it is God’s gift; neither is it a reward for anything you have accomplished, so let no one pride himself on it” (Eph 2:8-9).

What we deserve, scripture tells us, by nature is God’s wrath, to die because of our sin. Apart from Christ, we would be “slaves of our passions and of pleasures of various kinds”, locked hopelessly in “malice and envy, hateful ourselves and hating one another” (Titus 3:3). We would be under the sway of “the present age and...the prince of the air”, “following every whim and fancy” (Eph 2:1-3).

God freely decided to give the human race another chance. And he chose a means designed to kill the root of pride at the origin of sin: Satan’s lie that “you shall be as gods.” At the heart of redemption is a profound act of humility, the self-offering of the Son of God as a sacrifice for us, and it must be met by an act of humility on our part, the acknowledgment of sin and the surrender of faith. We need humbly to receive rather than self-righteously think we can achieve salvation by our own efforts, so that pride can be broken, so that no human being can boast of anything except the Cross of Christ (1 Cor 1:27-31).

### *Saved through Faith*

We also read in these scriptural summaries how we *receive* this great gift of God’s saving love, his only Son, Jesus: we are *saved by grace through faith in Jesus and his saving death and resurrection*. “Whoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16). The baptism of new birth and renewal by the Holy Spirit both presuppose faith, which itself comes as a gift God offers to all people.

Faith normally comes from hearing the truth of the gospel preached, seeing or hearing about signs and evidence that confirm its truth, and a direct working of the Holy Spirit in the soul (Rom 10:8-15; 2 Cor 3:16-18; Jn 14:10-11; 1 Th 5:9). Faith itself, and the conversion that flows from it, are themselves gifts of God’s grace and favor, the unmerited working of his Spirit.

As John Paul II put it in *Redemptoris Missio*, a text we have already had occasion to examine in another context:

“The proclamation of the Word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his gospel through faith. Conversion is a gift of God, a work

of the blessed Trinity. It is the Spirit who opens people's hearts so that they can believe in Christ and "confess him" (cf. 1 Cor 12:3); of those who draw near to him through faith Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn 6:44)(no. 46).

What then is faith? Faith is a way of knowing and seeing with our spiritual eyes invisible realities that are infinitely more important than the realities we can see with our biological eyes. "Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for, and conviction about things we do not see. Because of faith the men of old were approved by God. Through faith we perceive that the worlds were created by the word of God, and that what is visible came into being through the invisible" (Heb 11:1-3).

Scripture invests the concept of faith with several different meanings. The "deposit of faith" (2 Tim 1:13-14, 2:2; Jude 3) refers to that body of truths revealed by God. This primary meaning of faith as a *knowledge of truth* is the one we have in mind when we talk about passing on "the faith" or teaching "the faith". Obviously, as essential as this kind of faith is, it is not enough. "Even the demons believe" (James 2:19) but lack both obedience and trust.

Scripture also speaks of "*the obedience of faith*" (Rom 16:26). Faith in this sense means knowledge of truth that contains an implicit or explicit call to obedience. A well known formulation of this concept would be "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). An aim and fruit of the gospel is a particular kind of human behavior that accords with the truth. Jesus said, "If you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

As we obey the truth that is revealed to us, we will understand still more of that truth and experience still more of its fruits in our lives. Real change becomes possible through the power of the gospel. Even years of habit, addictions, and the influence of a pagan world can be overcome by a living relationship with God.

Yet this obedience, this sign of authentic saving faith, this manifestation of faith working through love, this growth in moral perfection, prayer, a life of love, fidelity, and service, is itself brought about and perfected through the grace of God. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Even our "good works" are prepared in advance by God for us to walk in. We are once again humbled.

Even though salvation is a gift received through faith, Scripture exhorts us to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13). God's grace is at work to enable us to will and to do what he is calling us to do. He not only calls us to the obedience of faith but also enables us to obey. What grace!

Faith as *trust* is the third and perhaps most common use of this work in Scripture. "Blest is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:45). The basic thrust of Jesus' whole message is to trust in him and in the Father. He tells us to stop worrying about what we are to eat or drink and instead to seek out his kingship over us. The rest will follow in turn (Lk 12:28-31).

Jesus calls us to faith in the goodness of God, the power of God, the truthfulness of God, and most of all the personal love of God for each one of us in every aspect of our lives and needs. He calls us to the kind of surrender and abandonment possible only when we know who God is. This kind of faith is centered in a personal relationship with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Church leaders are recognizing that many Catholics are impoverished in their personal relationship with Jesus. In meeting with a group of American bishops, Pope John Paul II stressed this point: “Sometimes even Catholics have lost or never had the chance to experience Christ personally: not Christ as a mere ‘paradigm’ or ‘value’, but as the living Lord, ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:6).”<sup>21</sup>

Catholics have tended to stress faith as propositional belief and moral obedience, and not so much faith as a personal relationship of trust, surrender, and abandonment to God. I believe that tendency has diminished the worship, life, and mission of the Church and has limited the experience and working of the Spirit. In any event, Scripture clearly presents faith as our lifeline to God. Faith is what inaugurates, sustains, and deepens that relationship. It is as vital to our life with God as an oxygen line is to a deep-sea diver.

### *Saved from Hell*

The gospel is presented as a message with eternal consequences. Apart from Christ and faith in him, we are slaves to sin, to our own passions, “hateful ourselves and hating one another”, “foolish and disobedient” (Titus 3:3). Life apart from Christ amounts to hell on earth. Unless we are transferred, by grace through faith, from this kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the beloved Son of God, this state of hell becomes intensified and permanent.

Jesus had these grave consequences in mind when he commanded his disciples, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation. The man who believes in it and accepts baptism will be saved; the man who refuses to believe in it will be condemned” (Mk 16:15-16).

Vatican II clearly spelled out the Church’s position on the necessity of Jesus for salvation in its constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (no. 16). In summary, the Catholic Church believes that salvation is impossible apart from Jesus but that those who “through no fault of their own” have never heard the good news will be judged on the basis of the light God has given them in creation and in conscience (Rom 1, 2).

Despite this possibility, we should not be lax in preaching the gospel, since “very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator” (cf. Rom 1:21-25). Living and dying in this world without God exposes people to ultimate despair. To bring glory to God and the salvation of many, the Church is mindful of the Lord’s command to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:16) (LG, no. 16).

Jesus himself frequently spoke about the reality of hell (Mt 22:13; Mk 9:43; Mt 13:42, 50; Rev 20:15; Mk 9:48; Jn 5:25, 29; Rev 2:11, 20:14; Mt 25:46; 2 Th 1:7-10). Despite all the debate

about what is metaphorical and what is literal, one thing is undeniably clear: hell is real, unspeakably awful, and you really do not want to end up there. Jesus makes clear that hell is not exactly a long shot but is the way we all drift unless we cling to him. “Enter through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to damnation is wide, the road is clear, and many choose to travel it. But how narrow is the gate that leads to life, how rough the road, and how few there are who find it!” (Mt 7:13-14).

We have witnessed a virtual silence on the reality of hell as a consequence of people having rejected the gospel, not believing in it, or disobeying it—even in some notable official documents of the Church, where an exposition on the reality of hell was virtually required by the subject matter.

There are signs though that this silence will be remedied. Recently, Benedict XVI, in his address to a Roman parish, noted:

“Jesus came to tell us that he wants us all in Paradise and that hell, about which little is said in our time, exists and is eternal for those who close their hearts to his love.”<sup>3</sup>

Certainly we should make an effort to present the Christian message in a positive and attractive way. We are not at liberty, however, to falsify it by silence where it conflicts with our increasingly secular and pagan culture. To do so is to diminish the gospel’s power, distort its saving truth, and remove an essential motivation for evangelization.

If everyone ultimately will be saved and there is no real possibility of hell for the “average person”, why be concerned? Many Catholics are not. If it does not matter in the end whether someone repents, believes, and is baptized or not, why bother to preach the good news? Many Catholics do not.

### **Saved for Heaven**

God lavishes his love on all those who receive his gift of salvation through faith and baptism. Joined to Jesus, they become adopted as sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit makes his home in their hearts so that they begin to know the joy, peace, and love of heaven right away—in an imperfect, limited, but real way.

Scripture frequently speaks of the reality of heaven, which is described in various ways: eternal life (Mt 25:46); glory beyond compare (2 Cor 4:17); a place in which the redeemed participate in the life of God in glorified, immortal, incorruptible bodies (1 Cor 15:35-55); a dwelling in the heavens (2 Cor 5:1); the city of the living God which is filled with angels in festal garb (Heb 12:22).

While we taste a bit of that heaven here on earth, we await a glorious inheritance far beyond our imagining: a new earth, a new heaven, the new Jerusalem, the holy city, where God will personally wipe every tear from our eyes, where there shall be no more death or mourning, crying, or pain (Rev 21:1-4, 10-11; 2 Pet 3:13).

*Our faith is nourished by the body of Christ, by the Church and the Eucharist.* The gospel message is good news beyond human comprehension: we are saved by love, for love, for all eternity. And

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<sup>3</sup> Visit to the Roman Parish of St. Felicity and Her Children, Martyrs, Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Sunday, 25 March 2007.

yet there is more. God knows that this life of faith must be nurtured, like a tender shoot, lest it wither and die. Evangelization must lead to catechesis, learning what Christ teaches.

An essential part of the good news is that Jesus, through his Cross and Resurrection, is pouring out his Holy Spirit so we can become one body, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, the Church, his very body, and even his bride. He is gathering together his sons and daughters into a new family, the Church. As part of the way of life of the redeemed community, Jesus has asked us to celebrate the Lord's Supper in memory of him.

In the Eucharist we remember and make present the central realities of our redemption—the sacrificial death of Jesus on the Cross and his Resurrection—and we look forward to his return in glory. We proclaim the good news together: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. We are nourished through the sacramental presence of his Body and Blood. We worship the Father in Spirit and in truth.

Heaven is a *corporate* reality. Together, we begin to learn what it means to live for the destiny for which we were created, to “live for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:12). The Church and the Eucharist are essential elements of the good news. Christian initiation is not complete, and therefore evangelization is not complete, until the new convert becomes part of Christ's body, expressed in a local congregation, and is invited to participate in the Eucharistic feast.

Vatican II recognized the liturgy as the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed, as well as the fount from which all her power flows. “For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper” (SC, nos. 9-10).

Thus evangelization leads to incorporation into his body, the Church, and is consummated and expresses itself in the liturgy, the formal, public worship of the Church. In the Eucharist we remember that we are saved by grace, through faith, and give thanks and praise to the Father for the immeasurably generous gift of his Son, Jesus. John Paul II spoke about this inseparable link between evangelization and the Eucharist in his first encyclical:

The Church never ceases to relive his death on the cross and his resurrection, which constitute the content of the Church's daily life. Indeed, it is by the command of Christ himself, her Master, that the Church unceasingly celebrates the Eucharist, finding in it the “fountain of life and holiness”, the efficacious sign of grace and reconciliation with God, and the pledge of eternal life.

The Church lives his mystery, draws unwearingly from it, and continually seeks ways of bringing this mystery of her Master and Lord to humanity—to the peoples, the nations, the succeeding generations, and every individual human being—as if she were ever repeating, as the Apostle did: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The Church stays within the sphere of the mystery of the Redemption, which has become the fundamental principle of her life and mission (RH, no. 7).

The Eucharist is a *representation* of the gospel in a very special way. As we gather at the table of the Lord, we remember the unmerited free gift of redemption through the sacrifice of

Christ's life, death, and Resurrection and draw nourishment from his presence in the Eucharist according to our faith.

“Eucharist” in Greek means thanksgiving. The liturgy is supposed to be characterized by a spirit of profound gratitude and praise for the awesome love demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ. But how can we be grateful for something we do not know we have received or for something we think we deserve because of our own merits? How can we be grateful if we do not know what we have been saved from and saved for?

O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? I want to learn only this from you: did you receive the Spirit from works of the law, or from faith in what you heard? Are you so stupid? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so many things in vain?—if indeed it was in vain. Des, then, the one who supplies the Spirit to you and works mighty deeds among you do so from works of the law or from faith in what you heard? (Gal 3:1-5).

Faith in the crucified Christ is important not just in initially but is required daily if we are to follow the Lord, if the Spirit is to be continually poured out as we and the entire Church desperately need. A “new Pentecost” must accompany the “new evangelization”, and the key to both is the same: the basic gospel message. We are sinners saved by grace won for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus, through faith in Jesus and his saving deeds; saved from hell, for heaven, by Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Evangelization in the metropolis of the 21<sup>st</sup> will depend in large measure on great clarity about the content of the message we have been entrusted to proclaim.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, “New Catechism Will Promote National Recatechising Effort”, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed., March 24, 1993, p. 3.