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MODELS OF EVANGELIZATION

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The Church always has to combat the danger of becoming too turned in upon herself, preoccupied with internal ecclesiastical problems, and oblivious of her mission. At times the Church appears more like the apostles before the Resurrection cowering in the Supper Room with locked doors than like the apostles boldly preaching the risen Christ on Pentecost. Thanks to the Great Commission given to her by the Lord before his Ascension, the Church is charged with the task of proclaiming the good news everywhere and to all.

We cannot simply wait for people to find their way into the Church on their own initiative. The message to be believed is a story to be told. Unless people hear it, they cannot be expected to believe it. Who except us, who are within the community of faith, can tell the world about Jesus Christ the Redeemer?

In our own day the Catholic Church is growing, but hardly keeping pace with the growth of world population. In this country the Catholic population would probably be shrinking except for immigration from Catholic countries. Meanwhile Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal churches are rapidly expanding. They have retained the missionary spirit that belongs to Christianity by right.

Vatican II, or rather the popular interpretation of Vatican II, has something to do with the

decline of Catholic evangelization. In spite of its strong statements on the primacy of Christ and the urgency of missionary activity, the Council seems to have drawn attention more to internal Catholic questions, such as collegiality, synodal structures, and regionalism. In speaking of persons and groups other than Catholics, the Council seemed to emphasize dialogue more than proclamation. In its efforts to be friendly to all, the Council encouraged a very optimistic view of other churches and religions, and even of secular movements, unintentionally giving the impression that there were many parallel ways of salvation available for those who were not Catholic.

In countries such as the United States, where individualism is dominant, the Council was heard as though it had been content to treat religion as a private matter to be settled by each individual in the intimacy of his or her own conscience. But in fact the Council was not content to remove religion from the public order and allow secular governments to ignore religious truth and revealed morality.

In their authoritative interpretation of Vatican II, Popes Paul VI and John Paul II corrected many of the misunderstandings. In his admirable Apostolic Exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, published in 1975 to mark the tenth anniversary of the close of the Council, Paul VI declared that all the objectives of the Council are "summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century" (EN 2). Evangelization, he asserted, is "the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity" (EN 14). John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio (The Mission of the Redeemer)*, agreed with Paul VI's interpretation of Vatican II. He called again for a renewal of missionary evangelization, describing it as "the

primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world" (RMis 2).

The recent popes, like Vatican II before them, have tirelessly proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Without him individual persons and societies cannot find the true way that leads to life. Those of us who been privileged to hear and believe the Christian message have a solemn responsibility to bear witness to it, for the glory of God and for the salvation of the world.

Many Christians, I believe, grant the importance of evangelization in theory but shy away from it in practice. Very often, I suspect, they have a narrow and inadequate conception of the meaning of the term. Perhaps they are put off by certain styles of evangelism. Sectarian Protestantism, they often feel, uses methods that are too aggressive; often it settles for merely verbal or emotional responses in which people profess an experience of Christ as their personal Savior.

In sharp contrast to this narrow concept, Catholicism looks upon evangelization as a complex process consisting of many elements. Among these elements, wrote Paul VI, are "the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative" (EN 24). For this reason it may be useful to reflect on the different dimensions or styles of evangelization - the "models," if you like. In my own reflections I have profited immensely from a doctoral dissertation recently completed at Fordham University, where I teach. The dissertation, written by Father Timothy E. Byerley, will soon be published by the Paulist Press under the title, *The Great Commission*. While using my own titles, definitions, and examples, I would like to borrow from Father Byerley his six models of

evangelization. In my own terminology the six means of evangelization will be: personal witness, proclamation by word, worship, community, inculturation, and works of charity.

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The first model, then, is personal witness, by which I mean the good example of a life totally dedicated to Christ. According to Paul VI, “The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal” (EN 41). He also declares: “Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization” (EN 21).

Referring back to Paul VI, John Paul II asserts that “People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission” (RMis 42).

The preeminent form of personal witness is martyrdom. Beginning with Stephen, whose stoning seems to have made a deep impression on Paul, the martyrs have provoked admiration and won many to the faith. But witness more often takes place in less dramatic ways. One thinks in this connection of St. Francis of Assisi, who is said to have told his companions: “Preach the gospel every day, and if necessary use words.” When he invited a friar to accompany him to preach in a neighboring village, the two of them walked to the village, passed through its streets, and returned without having addressed the people. The friar asked St. Francis, when are we going to preach? And St. Francis replied, we have already done so by our appearance and demeanor. “That was a more powerful sermon,” he added, “than if we had gone into the market

place and harangued the people.”ⁱ

I recall some years ago reading a brief memorandum by Walker Percy on his conversion. He mentioned particularly the example of a college classmate who used to steal off quietly each morning before breakfast to attend Mass. The manifest devotion of this classmate was a kind of silent sermon, more effective perhaps than any spoken admonition.

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The second model consists of verbal testimony in its various forms: initial proclamation, catechesis, apologetics, and the like. After discussing personal witness as the first form of evangelization, Paul VI adds that “even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified ... and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus. ... There is 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 explained.” (EN 22).

John Paul II, taking up this idea from Paul VI, states: “Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission. The Church cannot elude Christ’s explicit mandate, nor deprive men and women of the ‘Good News’ about their being loved and saved by God” (RMis 44).

Beginning with Paul, Christianity has a long series of heralds who have courageously and tirelessly preached the gospel in difficult and dangerous circumstances. In this connection we remember Saint Dominic, founder of the Order of Preachers, who labored among the heretics of southern France, and Francis Xavier, who traveled half way round the globe in order to proclaim Christ in India, the East Indies, and Japan. Closer to our own time, we remember Pope John Paul II, who made himself a pilgrim pope in order to evangelize every continent.

Under the rubric of evangelization by word we should include the great writers who

evangelized not so much by the spoken word as by the power of the pen. Countless converts owe their Christian faith to authors such as John Henry Newman, G. K. Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis.

In opposition to the idea that dialogue has become preferable to proclamation, the popes have asserted that there can be no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. While acknowledging all that is true and good in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, for example, the Church insists that Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life, and that membership in the Church remains the ordinary means of salvation (RMis 55; cf. EN 53). Dialogue does not require that these contentious points be withheld.

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The third model of evangelization is Christian worship. Worship is of course an activity of the believing community directed primarily to God; it is not conducted for the sake of making an impression on outsiders. But perhaps for that very reason it does make an impression on outsiders who become aware of it. They are struck by the intensity and sincerity of the Church's relationship to God.

As a first example I may mention the letter of John Adams to his wife Abigail in which he speaks of the Catholic service he attended in Philadelphia at the time of the Constitutional Convention. After describing the service he commented: "Here is every Thing which can lay hold of the Eye, Ear, and Imagination. Every Thing which can charm and bewitch the simple and ignorant. I wonder how Luther ever broke the spell." Although he personally resisted the attraction, Adams felt the power of the liturgy to communicate a sense of mystery and raise the spirits of the congregation to God.ⁱⁱ

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, when she was in Leghorn with her dying husband, observed

with wonder and with a kind of envy the devotion of the Catholic population to the Blessed Sacrament. When it was carried in procession beneath her window, she found herself kneeling in adoration. Her admiration for Catholic worship led her to study Catholic doctrine and eventually to become a dedicated Catholic and a sainted religious.

If a third example be needed, I can mention John Henry Newman. In the course of his voyage to Italy and especially to Sicily in 1833, he was deeply impressed by the crowds attending Mass in the early hours of the morning, raising their voices in hymns to God. Without yet being able to accept the truth of Catholic doctrine, he came to the realization that the Church of Rome was capable of arousing "feelings of awe, mystery, tenderness, reverence, devotedness, and other feelings which may especially be called Catholic."ⁱⁱⁱ The pious worshipers who so impressed Newman had no realization that they were engaged in evangelization; they would have been greatly surprised to learn that they were playing a part in the conversion of the most celebrated theologian of the century.

In the course of the next few years, Newman came to feel that he and his colleagues in the Oxford Movement were erecting a "paper church" - one that existed in the writings of theologians but had no living congregations behind it. The Church, he knew, must be a worshipping community.

Worship is connected with evangelization not only because of its influence on outsiders, but also because of what it does for the community itself. The liturgy of the sacraments, which includes the homily, immerses the participants in the mystery of Christ and thereby helps them to center their lives on Christ and to become heralds and bearers of the gospel message when they return to their ordinary occupations.

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As a fourth model of evangelization, Father Byerley proposes community. Confronted by the anonymity of our secularized and mechanized world, many people find themselves searching for interpersonal community. In the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity originally developed, much the same was true. The Protestant sociologist Rodney Stark in his historical study, *The Rise of Christianity*, points out the cruelty and inhumanity of ancient paganism. Women, children, and elderly persons were treated without respect and without mercy. Christianity, Stark maintains, grew because "Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate the 'invincible obstinacy' that so offended the young Pliny but yielded immense rewards. And the primary means of its growth was through the united and motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share 'the good news.'"^{iv}

In the twentieth century a similar dynamic came to the surface. A variety of new movements originated in the Catholic Church. In Europe and the United States we saw the birth of the Focolare, the Neo-Catechumenal Way, the Charismatic Renewal, and others. Something of the same motivation, I suspect, accounts for the success of enterprises such as San Egidio in Rome and the basic ecclesial communities of Latin America. Communities such as these evangelize not so much by going out and recruiting new members as by exercising a force of attraction that makes people want to come in. If the Church is seen as a cordial community of love and mutual support, in which all have but one heart and one soul. it will attract new members almost without trying.

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As his fifth model of evangelization, Father Byerley proposes inculturation, meaning the incarnation of the gospel in the cultural forms familiar and intelligible to those being evangelized. A paradigmatic instance of inculturation is the transposition of Christianity from Jewish to Greco-Roman soil, which began already when Paul had a vision bidding him to come to Macedonia. When Paul visited Athens, he was invited to speak at the Areopagus, the cultural center of the intelligentsia. His sermon, as summarized in the seventeenth chapter of Acts, is a model of inculturated evangelization. After referring to the altars to the Greek gods and quoting Greek poetry, he went on to challenge them the good news of Christ's bodily resurrection.

In the early Middle Ages Benedictine monks such as Augustine of Canterbury showed great sensitivity to the cultures and traditions of England and Gaul. As Pope John Paul II explains in his encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli*, Saints Cyril and Methodius did much the same for the parts of Eastern Europe they evangelized. In early modern times, Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci and Roberto di Nobili were extraordinarily successful in clothing Christianity with the cultural forms of China and India. In the United States authors such as Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker in the nineteenth century and John Courtney Murray in the twentieth did much to make the Catholic faith at home on the American scene.

Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization called attention to the problems of relating the Christian message to contemporary culture. Conscious that modern culture is in many ways resistant to the gospel, Paul VI avoided terms such as "inculturation," which could be taken to suggest that the culture is a satisfactory vessel for Christian faith. On the ground that cultures need to be regenerated by an encounter with the gospel, he spoke by preference of the evangelization of cultures as an imperative for our time (EN 20). John Paul II in his missionary

encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* uses the term "inculturation," but defines it in such a way as to include the transformation of the values already present in the culture and their integration into Christianity (RM 52).

John Paul raises questions about the Areopagi of our day. Where, he asks, are the cultural sectors in which the gospel still needs to be proclaimed (RMis 37)? The first such Areopagus, he says, is the world of communications, including the mass media which exert an enormous influence on everyone, perhaps especially the young. Among other new cultural sectors he mentions scientific research, human rights, and international relations. These fields of study and action have immense potentialities for good or evil. To prevent our civilization from sinking ever deeper into consumerism and materialism, the Pope warns, these Areopagi need to be transformed by contact with the gospel. They cannot be evangelized simply from outside, by words of admonition; the evangelization must come from within, by committed Christians thoroughly familiar with the relevant disciplines.

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The sixth and last of the models of evangelization I am proposing may be called works of charity, or perhaps the social apostolate. In the New Testament itself we read of Paul's efforts to bring material aid to the Christians of Jerusalem by means of a collection from the missionary communities. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* reminds his readers that Julian the Apostate, the fourth-century emperor who abandoned Christianity in favor of a revived paganism, singled out the Church's charitable activity as the prime reason for the popularity of the "Galileans." In a spirit of competition, he strove to make similar good works a feature of his restored paganism (DCE 24).

Down through the centuries, the Church has been a leader in caring for orphans and widows, for the sick and the aged. She has been conspicuous for establishing schools, hospitals, and relief programs. In recent memory, Dorothy Day through her Catholic Worker movement drew many to the Church. Even more recently, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta captured the attention of the world by her apostolate to the sick and the dying. She did not seek to make her patients Catholics, but the example of her selfless charity drew many to the Church. Malcolm Muggeridge, for instance, describes her as a major influence on his conversion. But above all, he wrote, "It was the Catholic Church's firm stand against contraception and abortion which finally made me decide to become a Catholic." The following paragraph is so eloquent that I cannot resist quoting it:

Contraception and abortion have made havoc for both the young and the old. The terrible things that are going on, the precocious sexual practices of children, the debaucheries in universities, making eroticism an end and not a means, are a consequence of violating the natural order of things. As the Romans treated eating as an end in itself, making themselves sick in a vomitorium, so as to enable them to return to the table and stuff themselves with more delicacies, so people now end up in a sort of sexual vomitorium. The Church's stand is absolutely correct. It is to its eternal honour that it opposed contraception, even if the opposition failed. I think, historically, people will say it was a very gallant effort to prevent a moral disaster.^v

The Catholic Church's opposition to abortion was crucial also in the conversion of Bernard Nathanson, who had been the director of the largest abortion clinic in the United States and had overseen some 75,000 abortions in his pro-choice career. The development of

ultrasound led him to reconsider his opinions and join the pro-life movement. Attending a number of protests sponsored by Operation Rescue, an ecumenical organization, he noted what he later described as the "indefinable air of selflessness, even genuine altruism" with which the protesters sang hymns and prayed. Their faith enabled them to sit "serene and unafraid at the epicenter of legal, physical, ethical, and moral chaos."^{vi} The experience led him to think seriously about God and before long to join the Catholic Church.

The stance of the Church on public issues such as abortion raises the question of Catholic social teaching. In his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and elsewhere John Paul II declared that social teaching is a means of evangelization (SRS 41). Evangelization in its full amplitude includes the doctrine of human rights, the promotion of the common good, and everything that can help to build a civilization of love. Although evangelization may never be reduced to the dimensions of a mere temporal project, the gospel has necessary implications regarding peace and justice in the human community. It goes far beyond the limits of the sanctuary and the cloister. Lay persons have a special responsibility to evangelize secular society, including the work place and the public square. The values of the gospel can vivify and transform human relations in law, politics, business, and all the professions.

Once evangelization is seen in its full dimensions, it becomes evident that it is not the concern of one special group of Christians. Some may have an aptitude and inclination to engage in explicit proclamation, which is always necessary. But others may evangelize in unobtrusive ways, by living out their Christian vocation to the full. You may be called to give silent witness, prompting others to wonder why your fidelity to the rule of prayer is so important to you. You may be gifted in building up small communities of Bible study or works of charity toward

persons in need. You may be gifted as a writer or a scientist, as a politician or a statesman, as a master of electronic communications, or as a financier. Every one of these callings, pursued with a Christian inspiration, has its place within the panoply of missionary endeavors.

Notwithstanding the varieties, evangelization has one and the same center and driving force. It flows from the love of Christ, who continues to act every day through the Holy Spirit. By returning constantly to him as its source and goal, evangelization can always remain fresh and vibrant. When you leave the campus, you can and must retain your identity as a witness and herald of the faith. Pope John Paul said once that faith is strengthened when it is given to others. Conversely, we may add, faith is weakened when we hoard it to ourselves.

NOTES

ⁱI have found a couple of versions of this legend on the internet, thanks to Yahoo.

ⁱⁱJohn Adams, Letter to Abigail of October 9, 1774, in *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family 1762-1784* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 78-79.

ⁱⁱⁱJohn Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994), 157. Newman is quoting from a letter written by him at the time.

^{iv}Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 208.

^vMalcolm Muggeridge, *Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Pilgrim* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 140-41.

^{vi}Bernard Nathanson, *The Hand of God* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1996), 191-93.