

# New Pope, New Evangelization, New Return to Old (but Good) Ideas

Matt Halbach



Since the election of Pope Francis, questions concerning his future papal agenda have immediately begun to surface. What will this pope's priorities be? How will he understand his role as "papa" of the church? How will he choose to address the many crises facing the church today? While only time will tell

how this pope may or may not live up to the immeasurable concerns and expectations of Catholics, we can be assured that Pope Francis will continue the work of the 2012 Synod which focused entirely on the new evangelization, a theme which received much attention from his papal predecessors.<sup>1</sup>

The new evangelization is the church's effort to exercise its evangelical identity by "proposing anew"<sup>2</sup> the gospel to those whose Christian faith is flagging and to those who have already disaffiliated from the church. As Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, DC, and *relator* (i.e., "moderator") of the 2012 Synod writes in his most recent book *New Evangelization: Passing on the Faith Today*, "Among the propositions of the synod, there are several that speak to the fact that the new evangelization is all about announcing the good news about Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

As a sign of hope, many Catholics today are beginning to take hold of the new evangelization. This "new"<sup>4</sup> notion of *the church as missionary* has clergy and laity today describing themselves more as "evangelizers" and "witnesses" than ever before<sup>5</sup> — descriptors that at one time were uniquely associated with evangelical Protestantism. However, and not in

spite of (but precisely because of) these signs of new life in the church (e.g., new pope, new evangelization, and new enthusiasm) I wish to cast a critical eye to a longstanding problem that has yet to receive the attention it deserves.

## THE PROBLEM

The "Final Propositions" of the 2012 Synod together depict a view of new evangelization that begins with the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>6</sup> Though the Synod Fathers make explicit that what is envisioned is, in fact, a *new* proclamation along with a new evangelization that is new in "ardor, methods, and expressions"<sup>7</sup> but not new in content, the question still needs to be asked: Should the starting point of the new evangelization be new as well? And the answer is: yes. The starting point of the new evangelization, in terms of its impact on the level of the individual, ought to be a period of *pre-evangelization*, not the initial proclamation of the gospel. Why does this matter? We need to look back into the church's rich catechetical heritage for our answer.

## EAST ASIAN STUDY WEEK (1962)

The modern catechetical renewal, with its many luminaries and study weeks, has provided a veritable storehouse of catechetical wisdom for the church in the new evangelization. Convened at Bangkok in 1962, the East Asian study week was an incredibly fruitful and timely gathering of missionaries and catechists from all over the world. The primary focus was on how to evangelize and catechize adults in cultures experiencing increasing secularization. (Today, this is precisely the concern the new evangelization is attempting to meet.) The Study Week concluded that an evangelization process that begins with an initial proclamation of the gospel risks sowing the seed of God's word in untilled soil, which places the quality of the conversion in jeopardy.<sup>8</sup> In other words, before the

1. While a cataloguing of papal pronouncements is not possible here, two major works regarding the new evangelization are Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001) and Pope Benedict XVI's motu proprio, *Ubicumque et Semper* (2010). Both are available at: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).
2. Pope Benedict XVI used these words during his First Vespers homily for the Vigil of the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul (June 28, 2010). (Available at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20100628\\_vespri-pietro-paolo\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20100628_vespri-pietro-paolo_en.html)).
3. Donald Cardinal Wuerl, *New Evangelization: Passing on the Faith Today* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2013), 31-32.
4. The term "new evangelization" was first used at the 1968 General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia. See, General Conference of Latin American Bishops, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in Light of the Council* (Bogotá, Colombia: CELAM, 1970), 41.
5. The "New Evangelizers" is another term that has emerged. See, <http://newevangelizers.com/>.

6. Synodus Episcoporum, "Final Propositions," no. 9. (Available at: [http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino\\_25\\_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02\\_inglese/b33\\_02.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html)). This proposition situates the New Evangelization between the initial proclamation of the Gospel and catechesis. Moreover, the Synod Fathers call for a *Pastoral Plan of Initial Proclamation* to help establish greater continuity between these poles.
7. John Paul II, Address to CELAM (Opening Address of the Nineteenth General Assembly of CELAM, March 9, 1983 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition (April 1983), no. 9.
8. Alfonso Nebreda, S.J., "East Asian Study Week on Mission Catechetics," *Lumen Vitae* XVII (1962), 723-724.



good news is proclaimed, time is needed to prepare others to fully receive its message.<sup>9</sup> The study week described this time as *pre-evangelization*.<sup>10</sup>

### PRE-EVANGELIZATION: THEN AND NOW

What became crystal clear to those gathered at the study week was that the *kerygma*, which can be thought of as *the seed of the word of God*, requires healthy soil to support its implantation and growth. Without this, the seed will not take root and will eventually be rejected. One could say as a result of this discovery that the missionaries attending the study week began to see themselves not only as cooperative “sowers of the word” but also as “tillers of the soil.” And tilling precedes sowing. We, today, who are heralds of the new evangelization, should also consider this dual role if we hope to gain any spiritual traction on the slippery slopes of secularized culture.

Attempting to evangelize highly secularized cultures by beginning with the proclamation of the *kerygma* — which is the *word of God* or *message of salvation*<sup>11</sup> — proves ineffective

because the intended recipient struggles to find the *kerygma* meaningful on a personal level. Perception is everything when it comes to evangelization. During pre-evangelization, what matters most (or initially) is not that the message is understood to be objectively true and good (though the gospel is both of these), but that the recipient *perceives* the message as true or good for himself. To be sure, pre-evangelization is not intended to reinforce a moral relativism. It is intended to lead one to gospel living in the church. Pre-evangelization more effectively leads to conversion because it begins by first recognizing an individual’s own dignity and conscience, making attempts to meet people where they are at intellectually and existentially.

### ALFONSO NEBRED A ON PRE-EVANGELIZATION

The cultural milieu of today, as it was during 1962, is one of de-Christianization and increasing religious pluralism, moral relativism, along with the many other foreboding “-isms” which accompany modern secularization. This new human climate demands a re-thinking about how the church evangelizes. Personal witness must bear the burden of not only demonstrating that *the faith is worth having*, given the uniquely modern and increasingly popular “spiritual but not religious” crowd; it must also demonstrate that faith is worth having — *in and through the church*. In a Eucharistic sense, the church today, *en masse*, has to demonstrate to its own and to the world that Christ is most richly and fully encountered in Mass.

In his pioneering work *Kerygma in Crisis?*<sup>12</sup>, which was somewhat of a post-script to the East Asian study week, Alfonso

9. While the East Asian Study Week did not address youth or adolescents specifically, there is no indication that a pre-proclamation period of preparation is not warranted.

10. Though Father Nebreda and the East Asian Study Week developed further the principles and methodologies of pre-evangelization, Fr. André Liégé is credited as the innovator of the concept. See, André Liégé, “Évangélisation,” in *Catholicisme* (Paris: 1954) cols. 755-764. There, Liégé writes, “C’est l’oeuvre de la préévangélisation — point forcément distincte chronologiquement de l’évangélisation—que de travailler les milieux humains pour les ouvrir à l’annonce évangélique.” “This is the task of pre-evangelization, quite distinct chronologically from evangelization: to work in the human milieu to open it to the Gospel proclamation.”

11. “Final Propositions,” no. 9. The 2012 Synod described *kerygma* as the “foundation of all initial proclamation” and central to making “an explicit announcement of salvation.”

12. Alfonso Nebreda, S.J., *Kerygma in Crisis?* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1965).



Photo by Tim van Vliet

Nebreda describes pre-evangelization as primarily interpersonal in nature, which means that personal witness is at the core of pre-evangelization.<sup>13</sup> (Incidentally, Christian witness is also critical to the new evangelization.<sup>14</sup>) Nebreda understood that in order to be taken seriously as a witness on an interpersonal level and in the cultural milieu, the pre-evangelist who, now, is operating as a new evangelist, must identify himself with the culture (i.e., he must look and sound like everyone else, be abreast of what's going on locally). He cannot appear as a living anachronism or as someone out of touch with the struggles of human living. He must, like Jesus, be seen as one who lives among the people, one who can sympathize with others.<sup>15</sup> As Christians, we are all called to be in the world but not of it. Thus, Nebreda reminds us that pre-evangelization is not primarily a time when we examine others, but rather when they examine us, testing our mettle and our veracity.<sup>16</sup>

Stressing solidarity with others and mutual understanding through lived witness, pre-evangelization concerns itself primarily with the communication and exchange of human “values,” not “truths.”<sup>17</sup> Nebreda suggests that values are identified in terms of the importance one places in any given thing. The key for the pre-evangelist is to determine how close to the center does a given thing reside in the other's constellation of

being. What are the other's priorities? How important is this or that truth to the other?

What is important in the pre-evangelization period is to understand what the other person values, not necessarily what they believe or think they believe. This is also to determine the other's reasons for inquiring about, taking hold of, or abandoning the faith — what Nebreda calls a “discernment of motives.”<sup>18</sup> Values bespeak what is personal and subjective, which is why Nebreda describes pre-evangelization as necessarily anthropocentric.<sup>19</sup> Its goal is not to achieve cultural ascent or cultural *theosis* but that the pre-evangelist achieve personal condescension, personal *kenosis*—or the “coming down” to the other's level so that the other may be ennobled and buoyed up. Pre-evangelization, therefore, is concerned with building positive, human relationships which are the bedrock of conversion. Inevitably, these fledgling human relationships will be tested. Therefore, the pre-evangelist must always be on guard not only to give a defense of the truth that is within him<sup>20</sup> but also witness this truth to be personally valued.

Those who need to receive a new evangelization today need to first be convinced of the authenticity of the witness, and only time and interpersonal experience can provide this, which is why a pre-evangelization must precede initial proclamation. The many flagging Catholics, and the many who populate the “spiritual but not religious” crowd, must first discover (re-

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13. Ibid., 116.

14. “Final Propositions,” no. 8.

15. Heb 4:15.

16. *Kerygma in Crisis*, 115.

17. Ibid., 118.

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18. Ibid., 110.

19. Ibid., 102.

20. 1 Pet 3:15.

discover) that the church is something they desire to belong to, not necessarily that Christ loves them personally or the Catholic truth of transubstantiation. What is being implied here is that we are not only witnesses to a particular tradition, creed, and way of worshiping Christ; we are (primarily) witnesses of *the church as a community of faith living in the world*. Again, as people will continue to observe and judge the veracity of our witness, we must always be concerned with how we are being perceived by others.

This leads us to a question of paramount importance:<sup>21</sup> “Are others able to trust us?” Trust is the foundational quality of any relationship that may lead towards conversion and, thus, it is the dynamo, the power source, for pre-evangelization. To earn another’s trust, we must first remove all prejudices and self-interest, which are blocks to establishing a healthy, mutual relationship, one that is sturdy enough to support the moral weight and demands of the gospel. By the same token, we must strive to find a way to approach others in sincerity and charity, not as “neo-pagans” or as the “unenlightened,”<sup>22</sup> if we are to win their hearts.

### THE NEED FOR PRE-EVANGELIZATION TODAY

The kerygma is the “foundation for all initial proclamation”<sup>23</sup> and, consequently, for the new evangelization. It is also the touchstone for any catechesis, as catechesis is a “remarkable moment”<sup>24</sup> in the process of evangelization. But much work needs to be done before one is disposed to the saving truths of the gospel. Thus, in his relatively recent assessment of the

kerygmatic model of catechesis, Cardinal Avery Dulles notes that a kerygma-driven catechesis would “seem to require a considerable process of pre-evangelization that would dispose students to respond to the Christian kerygma.”<sup>25</sup> The need for pre-evangelization today was also recently affirmed by Sherry Weddell in her book: *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* — which examines what dynamics precede conversion and points to new vistas of ecumenical cooperation in the total Christian effort to evangelize. Weddell writes, “We typically presume that pre-evangelization and initial proclamation just happen automatically during basic catechesis. All the evidence suggests that even if true evangelization once worked that way, it is not working that way anymore.”<sup>26</sup> Weddell also notes that though the term “pre-evangelization” is found in the current catechetical literature,<sup>27</sup> the church has provided little instruction on how to do it.<sup>28</sup>

### PEDAGOGY OF PRE-EVANGELIZATION

As Weddell noted, there is little structure given to pre-evangelization in the catechetical directories. Because of this, more ecclesial energies need to be channeled towards re-discovering the import and the dynamics of pre-evangelization. Is there already, in fact, a pedagogy for pre-evangelization? The answer is yes and no. Yes in the sense that, as Nebreda points out,

21. Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012). See her chapter titled, “Thresholds of Conversion: Can I trust you?”  
 22. *Kerygma in Crisis*, 16,  
 23. “Final Propositions,” no. 9.  
 24. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, no 18.

25. Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), 105.  
 26. *Forming Intentional Disciples*: 126.  
 27. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 49.  
 28. *Forming Intentional Disciples*, 126. To be sure, elements of pre-evangelization are found in various ecclesial documents and papal pronouncements (e.g., the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, nos., 3, 6, 11-12; GDC no. 47. However, the term “pre-evangelization,” aside from being mentioned in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), no. 51; *Sharing the Light of Faith* (1979), no.34; and the above cited *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005), is fairly absent from the official catechetical literature.

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pre-evangelization follows the “divine pedagogy.”<sup>29</sup> No in the sense that there are no specified parameters or set time limits for it, which is problematic for evangelists as Weddell noted. So what does the divine pedagogy look like and how does pre-evangelization fit into it?

The divine pedagogy demonstrates that God reveals himself overtime and through words and deeds<sup>30</sup> which point to his divinity and to his love for creation. The Scriptures depict God the Father in an ongoing posture of condescension (*condescendere*; that is, God lovingly “stoops down” to meet us where we are, as we are), and creatively and progressively prepares his people to receive his Son. God did not begin his redemptive work by sending the Messiah. He began with a conversation with Adam and Eve.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, pre-evangelization also aims to approach others by meeting them where they are.

The scriptures show that after the Fall, God was invested enough to condescend to meet Adam and Eve where they were, and that he was genuinely concerned with their welfare. One could say that God even played dumb in an attempt to draw out their goodness and lead them to repentance and conversion.<sup>32</sup> Even that God was being rather *anthropocentric* in his desire to evangelize humanity. Anthropocentrism is also a key dynamic of pre-evangelization. Becoming more anthropocentric is a lesson for new evangelizers today, though the anthropocentrism must be balanced by a healthy theocentrism. Too often evangelists are overtly theocentric when they witness to others. They tend to talk with others about God *but not to them* — not in a way that the other might perceive as personally meaningful.

As stated earlier, God did not begin to evangelize by sending Jesus. The Incarnation was an historical point of culmination, which irradiates and gathers together all the words and deeds of the divine revelation that preceded it into a unique, living witness: the Emmanuel, “God with us.” Today, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the church, which is a “sacrament”<sup>33</sup> of God in Christ, has been populated with many potential witnesses to the Incarnation alive and at work in the world. Through faith, the church, like Mary, embodies the word of God. Its members are called to become a unique manifestation of the living word in the world. A greater understanding of this dynamic needs to be achieved in the preparation of catechists.

However, our voices, our words, and deeds will not be heard or seen unless we give a full, *incarnate* witness of faith, which is demonstrative of our ability to be in the world but not of it. This means that when evangelizing we, like God, must become

anthropocentric before we can expect others to become theocentric. We must truly be people who begin to proclaim the kingdom of God by first testifying to the kingdom’s influence and value in our own lives, in a way that shows a permanence, a constancy, and in a way that does not demean others but ennobles them.

## CONCLUSION

Before the gospel can be proposed anew, before “new ardor, methods, and expressions” can be given — before the new evangelization can begin in earnest — *people must first be prepared to receive the gospel*. Therefore, the art and purpose of *pre-evangelization*, needs to be retrieved from the church’s catechetical sub-conscious if the new evangelization is to effectively reengage flagging Catholics and the disaffiliated.

In a special way, Pope Francis, in his unique, no nonsense, man-of-the-people style, will potentially be a powerful agent for pre-evangelization going forward. To complement his witness, church leaders need to urgently consider directing some of their energies and the energies of their countless and wonderful *co-workers in the vineyard*, to probing more the dynamic of pre-evangelization and the real need for it in the work of the new evangelization, which is a work aimed at helping others to believe once again that faith is worth having and having in and through the church. ■

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29. *Kerygma in Crisis*, 104; See also, Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997), nos. 139, 143

30. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 2.

31. Gen 3:9ff.

32. The questions God asks Adam and Eve are not for his own sake but theirs.

33. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1.