

REFLECTIONS ON *EVANGELII NUNTIANDI*

Thomas W. Jodziewicz

IT WOULD BE REMARKABLE if one of the faithful could remain unmoved by Pope Paul VI's 'meditation' on evangelization, published in 1975. As he writes early in the document, the occasion for his reflection was the deliberations of the 1974 Synod of Bishops that he had called to discuss 'the evangelization of the modern world'.¹ During the ten years since the close of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic world had been busy with matters of liturgical reform, ecumenism, social issues and, given *Humanae vitae* in 1968, sex. Pope Paul has been called 'an evangelizing pope', although his successor would appear to cast a very large evangelical shadow in the later twentieth century.² Paul was the first pontiff to travel abroad since Pope Pius VII in 1809, and the first to travel outside Europe. Pope Paul would make visits during his nine trips to such places as India, Indonesia, Colombia, Turkey and New York City. John Paul II would, of course, spend far more time travelling about the globe, but Pope Paul led the way.

Evangelii nuntiandi has travelled far as well. Responses, positive and negative, were not in short supply. The Pope himself had earlier looked to the issue when, in 1967, he renamed the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples. This was not a subtle initiative, as Paul was attempting to fulfil what he saw as the larger meaning of the Vatican Council: the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples, non-Christians and Christians alike: 'to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the gospel to the people of the twentieth century'.³ In their response to the Apostolic Exhortation, the Catholic bishops of the United States set up the Bishops' Committee on Evangelization and published *Go and Make*

¹ These first two paragraphs are heavily dependent on Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist, 2009), chapters 1 and 2.

² Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*, 14.

³ *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 2 (subsequent references in the text).

Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States.

The Catholic, and Christian, mandate to evangelize the world is neither newly discovered nor newly announced, however. It is an old, and ever new, and joyous, duty. As Benedict XVI reminded us in *Porta fidei*, his apostolic letter proclaiming the Year of Faith that began on 11 October 2012: ‘The “door of faith” (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church.’⁴

From the time of Christ, the gospel has been offered to all. The last few verses of Matthew exhort the faithful to the baptism of the world in the name of the Triune God. Missionary activity was not limited to St Paul in his vocation to venture outside the Holy Land with the Good News. The point was not to guard the Christian dispensation and exclude

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all but the truly initiated and perfected few. Today the location of Christians in a largely post-Christian world should not be that of an inward-looking, individual and communal ghetto (seen as a place of safety) but rather something like that of the early Christians in the Roman catacombs, individually and communally revived, looking to rejoin the larger society in charity. This faith was, and is, not simply a way to well-being or prosperity. These things are not unimportant, but the faith is far more than this. Paradoxes abound: God becomes man, dies and is literally resurrected; to become truly mature one must become childlike; the first shall be last, the lowest the highest; one finds oneself, one’s true and authentic self, by denying one’s self; the wisdom of the apparently wise is foolishness. Conventional categories of meaning are continually turned upside-down. And then there is the matter of the cross:

It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. For to this you have been called,

⁴ The paragraph continues: ‘It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace. To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime. It begins with baptism (cf. Romans 6:4), through which we can address God as Father, and it ends with the passage through death to eternal life, fruit of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, whose will it was, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, to draw those who believe in him into his own glory (cf. John 17:22). To profess faith in the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is to believe in one God who is Love (cf. 1 John 4:8): the Father, who in the fullness of time sent his Son for our salvation; Jesus Christ, who in the mystery of his death and resurrection redeemed the world; the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church across the centuries as we await the Lord’s glorious return.’ (*Porta fidei*, n. 1)

because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2: 19–24)

Or, consider Jesus' own words to his followers:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? (Matthew 16: 24–26)

Or, again, St Peter:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good. (1 Peter 4:12–19)

If suffering were all there were, one would wince with St Teresa of Ávila in her celebrated remark that the reason Christ seemed to have so few friends was fairly obvious!⁵ She was, though, smiling. Good Friday is always followed by Easter. Perhaps if human beings had been in charge of the economy of salvation after the Fall, it would have been far simpler: God forgives and forgets, no need to lose a Son and to invite his followers to shoulder burdens that are too testing. Suffering and death are the twin suspects in so much discussion of the existence of a benevolent God. There have been many efforts to explain God's ways, and God. God's own explanation of the gravity of sin, and God's ultimate response, is the Son's life, death and resurrection, and an invitation to be baptized into that same death and resurrection. These are not easy truths to accept or to live.

⁵ This saying appears in *Histoire de Sainte Thérèse, d'après les Bollandistes* (Nantes: Mazeau, 1882), volume 2, 348–349.



Pope Paul VI

As Pope Paul emphasizes throughout the Exhortation, the point of it all is eternal salvation, a salvation offered to everyone, a salvation that casts the shadow of God's wings over the human condition. And to all who hear the offer and respond, there is the additional call to share it with others (n.29). This Good News, especially in an age of brevity, novelty and distractions, can sometimes seem less than appealing. It is old news, it evokes old pieties, it seems not to have done all that much for the contemporary moment. Yet St Augustine reminds us always, out of his own exhausting search: 'The

thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you'.⁶

Evangelii nuntiandi might be summed up in that one sentence. But there are many more sentences. I should like to highlight several of the topics and issues discussed by the Pope here: the primary meaning of, and need for, the Church; the responsibility of the faithful regarding evangelization; the relationship of the universal Church and local churches; liberation and development; base communities; and popular piety.

The Primary Meaning of the Church

The Church has one purpose: to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is, evangelization.

Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

sinner with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection. (n. 14)

An attitude of moral neutrality is often regarded today as the civil and adult approach to public debate. The purpose of the Church, as presented in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, suggests quite a different engagement with the world, both institutionally and personally:

... for the presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved. This message is indeed necessary. It is unique. It cannot be replaced. It does not permit either indifference, syncretism or accommodation. It is a question of people's salvation. It is the beauty of the Revelation that it represents. It brings with it a wisdom that is not of this world. It is able to stir up by itself faith—faith that rests on the power of God. It is truth. It merits having the apostle consecrate to it all his time and all his energies, and to sacrifice for it, if necessary, his own life. (n. 5)

To evangelize, then, is to offer the truth about man and God. But, to whom?

The Responsibility of the Faithful

First of all, 'the Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself'. Those evangelized will be all those within the Church:

She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love. She is the People of God immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols, and she always needs to hear proclamation of the 'mighty works of God' which converted her to the Lord; she always needs to be called together afresh by Him and reunited.

Therefore 'this means that she has a constant need of being evangelized' (n.15).

The vast majority of those being evangelized in this first instance, and expected in their own special ways to be evangelizers, are the laity. If evangelization were restricted to the proclamation of the gospel to the heathen, wherever they might be encountered, the task could be happily left to those specifically trained as evangelizers: the heroic missionaries whose names are often found in the lists of martyrs for the faith. But the Pope is emphasizing the Vatican Council's reaffirmation that all are to be evangelizers.

Lay people, whose particular vocation places them in the midst of the world and in charge of the most varied temporal tasks, must for this very reason exercise a very special form of evangelization. Their primary and immediate task is not to establish and develop the ecclesial community—this is the specific role of the pastors—but to put to use every Christian evangelical possibility latent but already present and active in the affairs of the world. Their own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, suffering.

The language here gives the impression of a vast conspiracy—a conspiracy founded in the person of Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life. And those picking up their crosses and following in his way are in fact, then, conspirators in charity. The burden is never theirs alone, as difficult as it often is to believe this. Moreover, our own immersion in the evangelizing of the Church is to participate not only in an identifying of the burdens of belief, but also in a simultaneous offering of sacramental graces and other encouragements to persevere, to endure and to hope.

The more Gospel-inspired lay people there are engaged in these realities ... the more these realities will be at the service of the kingdom of God and therefore of salvation in Jesus Christ, without in any way losing or sacrificing their human content but rather pointing to a transcendent dimension which is often disregarded. (n. 70)

There is one further point here: the Pope offers a distinction that confronts the old adage of being in, but not of, the world.⁷ This is often misunderstood to mean that the world is ephemeral and not to be taken so very seriously. But Pope Paul distances *secularisation* from *secularism*: the former,

... is the effort, in itself just and legitimate and in no way incompatible with faith or religion, to discover in creation, in each thing or each happening in the universe, the laws which regulate them with a certain autonomy, but with the inner conviction that the Creator has placed these laws there.

⁷ An extrapolation from John 17:11–16: ‘... they are in the world They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world’.

The world is God's creation, marked by God's presence (as Gerard Manley Hopkins would remind us, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'), and is to be enjoyed.

Secularism, by contrast, is

... a concept of the world according to which the latter is self-explanatory, without any need for recourse to God, who thus becomes superfluous and an encumbrance. This sort of secularism, in order to recognize the power of man, therefore ends up by doing without God and even by denying Him. (n.55)

The laity, then, walking about *in* God's world are called to witness to the credentials of that world as divinely created, and its importance in their own work and social relations.

One more challenge to the laity is that ours is most often a 'wordless witness': our example of holy living should be noticeable, and at least a matter of curiosity to a spectator. And the challenge is an enduring one, as the Pope reminds:

Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live. Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way?

But:

... even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified—what Peter called always having 'your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have'—and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus.

The Pope is clear that 'the Good news proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life' (nn. 21–22). That is, one's faith must be 'an adherence to a program of life—a life henceforth transformed—which He [the Lord] proposes'.

This 'adherence, which cannot remain abstract and unincarnated, reveals itself concretely by a visible entry into a community of believers', that is, the Church, and access to the sacraments that confer grace (n.23). Simply, we are all called to holiness and the holy task of seeking

to live in the presence of the Lord, now and eternally, but always with a sense of a larger community that we will help to form.

The Pope notices a distinction that is sometimes drawn between theology and religion, on the one hand, and religiosity or spirituality, on the other. The former is clearly presented as the villain: the institutional, exclusivist, bureaucratic, nay-saying, uninvited, dour guest; the latter is a heroic, self-conscious and individualistic, benevolent one, tolerant and inclusive. But, on the contrary, according to the pontiff, the Church present in the world is the transforming presence of Christ Himself:

... it happens that not without sorrow we can hear people—whom we wish to believe are well-intentioned but who are certainly misguided in their attitude—continually claiming to love Christ but without the Church, to listen to Christ but not the Church, to belong to Christ but outside the Church. The absurdity of this dichotomy is clearly evident in this phrase of the Gospel: ‘Anyone who rejects you rejects me’ [Luke 10: 16]. And how can one wish to love Christ without loving the Church, if the finest witness to Christ is that of St Paul: ‘Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her?’ [Ephesians 5: 25] (n.16)

Discussing evangelization as the transformation of humanity from within, Pope Paul insists that such an ‘interior change’ is the heart of evangelization:

... if it had to be expressed in one sentence the best way of stating it would be to say the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs. (n. 18)

What of that ‘concrete milieu’ and the universality of the Church? Here is inculturation.

Local Churches and the Universal Church

In its simplest meaning, inculturation is the dialogue between the gospel, which is normative, and local human culture, which has within it both good and bad things. While both the good and the bad are to be challenged by the gospel, the good in the culture can be transformed and enter into the life of the Church. The possibility of learning in dialogue from other religious traditions, for example, is not rejected. Non-Christian religions are to be respected and esteemed ‘because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people’ who ‘possess an impressive patrimony

of deeply religious texts'. Within these traditions are 'innumerable "seeds of the Word"... [which] can constitute a true "preparation for the Gospel"' (n.53). Moreover the relationship of the universal Church and particular or individual churches that are part of that universal Church may also be considered as inculturation.

It is the universal Church that is called by its Lord to evangelize, but local circumstances vary, as

... this universal Church is in practice incarnate in the individual Churches made up of such or such an actual part of mankind, speaking such and such a language, heirs of a cultural patrimony, of a vision of the world, of an historical past, of a particular human substratum. (n. 62)

These local churches,

...have the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into the language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language. (n.63)

History, no less than contemporary situations, cautions that transposition of the universal into the local is a 'question [that] is undoubtedly a delicate one' (n.63). But universal truth and the local expression of the faith bond as a unity that has not only a divine focus but also a visible one:

The more an individual Church is attached to the universal Church by solid bonds of communion ... the more such a Church will be capable of translating the treasure of faith into the legitimate variety



Mass with the Nigerian Catholic Chaplaincy, UK

of expressions of the profession of faith, of prayer and worship, of Christian life and conduct and of the spiritual influence on the people among which it dwells. (n.64)

Here, then, is 'the role of Peter's Successor as a visible, living and dynamic principle of the unity between the Churches', along with 'our Brothers in the Episcopate, of preserving unaltered the content of the Catholic faith which the Lord entrusted to the apostles'. Different cultural expressions are appropriate as long as the 'content ... [is] neither impaired nor mutilated'. Different peoples will have different,

... outward forms proper to each people, and made explicit by theological expression which takes account of differing cultural, social and even racial milieu, [but] it must remain the content of the Catholic faith just exactly as the ecclesial magisterium has received it and transmits it. (n.65)

Liberation and Development

In an earlier encyclical, *Populorum progressio*, Pope Paul had argued for a robust improvement of the dire material circumstances of those, especially in the developing world, who were not sharing in the ever-increasing bounty of global economic and social progress. This demand is repeated in the Apostolic Exhortation, but along with a caution regarding a crucial issue in the 1970s: liberation. Again, human advancement must surely include the material side of life and social justice. The danger, according to the Pope, is that the faithful were,

... frequently tempted to reduce her [the Church's] mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project ... [to] reduce her aims to a man-centered goal; the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material well-being.

All interests and efforts, then, would become pre-eminently social and political:

But if this were so, the Church would lose her fundamental meaning. Her message of liberation would no longer have any originality and would easily be open to monopolization and manipulation by ideological systems and political parties.

The freedom proclaimed by the Church in its task of evangelization is more than simply the activity of human reform. It must be re-emphasized that at issue here is a 'religious axis that guides' the Church. The issue

is 'the kingdom of God, before anything else, in its fully theological meaning'. Or, more precisely, it is 'the specifically religious finality of evangelization' (n.32). Violence cannot be condoned in this activity, given that 'violence always provokes violence' (n.37). Justice, then, must be a near goal, but 'the Church strives always to insert the Christian struggle for liberation into the universal plan of salvation which she herself proclaims' (n.38).

Base Communities

Evangelii nuntiandi distinguishes between small groupings within larger Churches. Some can be quite wonderful, when acting in solidarity with the Church. Those drawn together by age or profession or particular social charisms can share 'a more humane dimension such as larger ecclesial communities can only offer with difficulty, especially in the big modern cities which lend themselves both to life in the mass and to anonymity' (n.58). Not acceptable, though, are those groups that would cut themselves off from the Church and claim the simple inspiration of the Gospel alone, a position often leading not only to bitter criticism of the Church, according to the Pope, but also to co-optation by political or ideological factions.

Popular Piety

Finally, popular piety, provided that it is not limited or undermined by distortions and superstitious, may be of great richness if well grounded in the faith. In this case:

It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. By reason of these aspects, we readily call it 'popular piety', that is religion of the people, rather than religiosity. (n.48)



A Living Faith

Even this small sampling of the document probably evokes some sense of the criticisms that were levelled at *Evangelii nuntiandi*: too Romish in its reiteration of the central and indispensable role of the Pope and his brother bishops; slighting of those sincerely disposed to follow their own spiritual path; insufficiently open, or too open, to other religious traditions as well as to the many cultures into which the gospel is to be carried; too quick to condemn liberation theology and small communities, both of which might have legitimate differences with the authorities; condescending towards the 'poor and simple' and their traditions.

Any pronouncement claiming authority in the modern or the postmodern age seems fated instantly to provoke criticism and dissent, but the true challenge to evangelization is identified in *Evangelii nuntiandi*: the faith must be a living, and not simply proclaimed and institutionalised, faith. As St James reminds us: 'Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves' (James 1:22). Or, as Pope Paul reaffirms: 'we are being asked: Do you really *believe* what you are proclaiming? Do you *live* what you believe? Do you really *preach* what you *live*?' (n. 76, emphasis added)

In 2012 the Pew Research Center, a US demographic organization, published "'Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation', a report into the increasing number of people in this position in the USA.⁸ These so-called 'Nones' represent a demographic group that continues to expand in Western societies. A variety of reasons are offered for this trend: the negative identification of religion with conservative ideas and groups, delayed marriages, individualism and social disengagement, and secularisation. These phenomena perhaps reflect the relative safety of modern, technological and affluent societies, which tends to undercut people's need to seek additional security outside themselves.

Interestingly, however, a majority of those surveyed who were specifically religiously unaffiliated did see some value in religion with respect to its traditional option for the needy and the poor, but, 'Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics'.⁹ There

⁸ "'Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation' (9 October 2012), available at <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf>, accessed 27 February 2014. See 9–28 ('Executive Summary'); 29–32 ('Some Theories about Root Causes of the Rise of the Unaffiliated').

⁹ "'Nones" on the Rise', 10.

appears to be some opportunity for authentic evangelization here, at least, if a firm and loving faith is connected with a selfless proclamation of the Good News.

One last, and most helpful, point. The faith is not a neo-Pelagian relic. We are not, in fact, modern, or postmodern, pragmatic orphans, autonomous and alone, lost in an ever-expanding cosmos. Pope Paul reminds us:

Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit It is He who impels each individual to proclaim the Gospel, and it is He who in the depths of consciences causes the word of salvation to be accepted and understood. (n.75)

Thankfully we are more than simply ourselves.

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