

How Must Catholics Evangelize? Evangelization and the Power of the Holy Spirit

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The call to evangelize is not a new call, even though Pope John Paul II coined the term “new evangelization.” What he said is that it must be new in method, new in expression and new in zeal. John Paul reiterated this call in 1991 in these words: “The new evangelization needs new witnesses,...people who have experienced an area of change in their lives because of their contact with Jesus Christ, and who are capable of passing on that experience to others.”¹

Jesus himself issued this call: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel”

(Mark 1:15). Before his ascension he commissioned the apostles to continue and extend his work of evangelization: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20).

John Paul II gave new emphasis to the call for evangelization and made us more aware of the urgency of our times. He exhorted us to a new zeal for unveiling the love of Christ toward all people. He called us to a new commitment to “sow Christian hope in hearts thirsting for the living God.”² As Cardinal Thiandoum of Senegal put it, “Every person has a right to the good news, and we should leave no stone unturned to announce it to them.”³

John Paul stressed the need for a new evangelization of society in a world torn asunder by war, so that “the liberating truth of the gospel will inspire the building of a new world of authentic peace and justice animated by love.”⁴ If the truth and life of the gospel were lived out more fully and proclaimed more effectively, then our society would reflect the values of the gospel more clearly.

The call is not just to evangelize but to evangelize *in the power of the Spirit with new boldness*. After commissioning the disciples to proclaim the Good News to all the nations, Jesus told them to wait for the coming of the Spirit promised by the Father. “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

BEING IN HARMONY WITH THE PLAN OF GOD

What does it mean to evangelize in the power of the Spirit? First of all, we must begin by acknowledging that evangelization is the plan of God and not simply a good idea. As such, our efforts to share the Good News will be effective to the extent that we are in harmony

with that divine plan. We can design all the evangelistic programs and outreaches we wish, but if the power of the Spirit is not the soul of our efforts, then we will be exhausted very soon—just like all those batteries left in the dust by the pink Energizer rabbit.

Pope Paul VI summed up the central role of the Holy Spirit in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

It must be said that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization: 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. But it can equally be said that He is the goal of evangelization: He alone stirs up the new creation, the new humanity of which evangelization is to be the result, with that unity in variety which evangelization wishes to achieve within the Christian community. Through the Holy Spirit the Gospel penetrates to the heart of the world, for it is He who causes people to discern the signs of the times—signs willed by God—which evangelization reveals and puts to use within history. (*EN*, 75)

How important is it for us to follow the plan of God? Let me share a story.

After Jesus ascended to heaven there was a great party celebrating what he had accomplished on earth. The angel Gabriel asked Jesus a question. What recognition had the world given to his divine suffering for its sake? Jesus replied that only a few people in Palestine knew of it. Believing the whole world ought to know, Gabriel asked, “What is your plan, Master, for telling them of it?”

Jesus replied, “I have asked Peter, James, John, Andrew and a few others to make it the business of their lives to tell others, and those others to tell others, until the last person in the furthest circle has heard the story and has felt the power of it.”

“But suppose they do not tell others. What then?” asked the angel.

Jesus answered quietly, “Gabriel, I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them.”

To begin to grasp more clearly the plan of God, we need to look at the life of Jesus, the greatest of all evangelists. What we see is an intimate relationship with the Father. Jesus in his humanity was so in love with the Father that he committed his whole life to doing his will and his work. It was not enough for Jesus to know this in his heart; he wanted to make public his relationship and commitment. He wanted his life to be a public witness of his union with the Father, not just a private, vertical relationship. He wanted his deeds to be a witness of the love of the Father for all mankind.

This profound intimacy with the Father and the Spirit did not happen overnight. Jesus spent the first thirty years of his life being formed in the religious environment provided by Mary and Joseph and by his covenant with Yahweh. He heard the Scriptures in the synagogue every Sabbath and was immersed in God's saving deeds through the various religious celebrations. God's laws were not just words for Jesus but his rule of life.

When the time came for his public ministry, Jesus did not devise his own plan for evangelization. He was impelled by the Holy Spirit to go to the Jordan River and be baptized by John, not because of sin but because of his consuming love and desire to do the will of the Father. We read in Luke's Gospel: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:21–22).

Observing the life of Jesus shows us that the effective evangelist must be rooted in a growing, personal love relationship with the Father, which is the call to holiness. Our relationship cannot be something that was experienced years ago as a child or as a young adult. It must be one that is alive and developing today, always open to the new gifts of God's personal love in the present moment. It must be nurtured daily in the quiet of prayer and intimacy, in word

and sacraments, in the desert of purification and the valley of restoration.

This call to holiness is parallel and prerequisite to the call to evangelize. How can we effectively proclaim God's love if that love is not effectively visible in our lives? How can the Spirit empower us to evangelize if the life of the Spirit is dormant or stagnant within our hearts?

EVANGELIZATION AND THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

Jesus began his three years of public ministry following the visible Pentecostal experience at his baptism and the hidden temptations in the desert. The initial response was quite positive. Scripture tells us that "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all" (Luke 4:14–15).

Jesus knew, acknowledged and acted in the power of the Spirit. Peter later attested to this fact when he proclaimed, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22).

Peter later evangelized Cornelius by relating the works of Jesus:

You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. (Acts 10:36–38)

The Scriptures establish the direct relationship between evangelization and the gifts of the Spirit. Jesus evangelized and confirmed the words he was sharing with signs and wonders. Recall the encounter he had with the Samaritan woman at the well. As he led her from the external fact that he was a male Jew to the internal faith realization that he was the Messiah, Jesus exercised the gift of word of knowledge, telling the woman that the man she was living with was not her husband. The power of the Spirit was evident in bringing her to the grace of salvation (see John 4:4–26).

At other times Jesus would heal and then evangelize, bringing the person into an acceptance and response to God's gift of his saving love and freedom. His way of ministering to the man blind from birth demonstrated this approach. Jesus first healed him. As the grace of God continued to work, he was able to bring this man from physical blindness to physical sight, from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight (see John 9).

We see the power of the Spirit manifested in the process of evangelization both when a person experiences a miracle or sign of wonder and when he makes a proclamation of faith in the saving work of Jesus. For it is the Spirit who opens the heart of the unbeliever, or the heart of one who seeks the fullness of truth, or the heart of the sinner and backslider or the heart of the indifferent and inactive believer.

Whatever the case may be, it is the grace of the Spirit that triggers the response of faith and deeper commitment in the person who freely chooses to say yes to Jesus' call and plan. The evangelist is merely a chosen instrument in the hands of God, though an important one.

What was evidenced in the life of Jesus was taught, learned, experienced and imitated by the apostles after their own anointing by the Holy Spirit. The fire of Pentecost still glowed in Peter and John as they said to the crippled beggar at the temple gate, "In the name of

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Acts 3:6). As the temple crowd rejoiced over the miracle, Peter proceeded to evangelize them, proclaiming that the healing was done in the name of Jesus.

Later, after receiving in a vision the message to go to the house of Cornelius, Peter addressed him and his household about God’s plan of salvation, culminating with the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He concluded: “To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). No sooner did Peter finish than the Holy Spirit descended on all who were listening, and they began “speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 10:46).

We see this same process, which is the plan of God for evangelization, played out over and over in other New Testament accounts. “Philip went down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ” (Acts 8:5). Because of the preaching and the miracles, many people accepted the word of God and were baptized in water and in the Spirit. Later, led by the Spirit, Philip was told to catch up with the carriage of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was passing by. Through the gift of interpretation, he proceeded to explain the passage from Isaiah fulfilled in the person of Jesus. The official asked for baptism in response to the grace of faith (see Acts 8:26–39).

Scripture tells us that Paul and Barnabas, “remained for a long time [in Iconium], speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (Acts 14:3).

HOW CAN WE RESPOND TO THE CALL FOR A NEW EVANGELIZATION?

I believe we can best respond to Pope John Paul’s call for a “new evangelization” by understanding and submitting to God’s plan as evidenced in the Scriptures. We do not have to reinvent the wheel or develop a new process. Our primary responsibilities are to be rooted

in our relationship with God, to be formed in our faith, to accept the empowerment of the Spirit already given to us and to trust in God. As we try to be attuned to the lead of the Spirit and respond with obedience, we need to speak out fearlessly but faithfully the word of God and our own faith tradition, share the gospel message of salvation in simple terms and exercise the appropriate gifts of the Spirit as he inspires us.

Like Jesus and the apostles, we need to continue to seek the face of the Lord and to enter into greater intimacy with the living God. Like Jesus, we need to be obedient children of the Father of all. Like the apostles, we need to come under the lordship of Jesus, to live consciously in the presence of the One who is the beginning and the end.

Like Jesus, we need to be a people of prayer so that our witness and evangelization may flow from union with the Father in the power of the Spirit. An example of this is found in the healing of the paralytic (see Luke 5:17–26). Prior to this miracle Jesus had gone to the desert to pray (see Luke 4:1–13, 42); it is out of this context that the miracle occurred. Our witness and evangelization then need to be brought back to the Lord in thanksgiving and praise, as we see after the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (see Luke 4:38–39) as well as the many sick and possessed brought to Jesus that evening.

Like the apostles, we need to pray for the continual infilling of the Holy Spirit, so that we may boldly proclaim the Good News of Jesus. They beseeched the Lord in the Upper Room, "Now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus." God responded in a dramatic way. "When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:29–31).

Like Jesus and the apostles, we need to be open to the leading and power of the Spirit if our work of evangelization is to be authentic and fruitful. How many divine appointments have we already missed because of fear, laziness, a sense of inadequacy, an unwillingness to be a disciple of Jesus at the moment or any number of other excuses? How many people have not been given a chance to respond to God's invitation to a new life? How many have missed the grace of repentance, conversion and sanctification because we did not respond to the grace of evangelization?

Like the apostles, in the words of Paul VI, we must share "the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God" (*EN*, 22). In all of this ours is a small part of the process, though by God's choice a necessary one. However, what the Spirit does through us and in the person being evangelized remains the heart of the matter, the essential part of the process of conversion.

We must always remember that the response of the person being evangelized is not the measuring stick God will use in judging *our* efforts. Whether someone comes to a saving relationship with Jesus and becomes a member of the community of faith is not our responsibility but that of the person evangelized. Our responsibility is to do the work of evangelization in the power of the Spirit.

To paraphrase a comment by Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta: God is not asking us to be *successful* but *faithful* to his command. We are not held accountable before the Lord for the number of people we actually evangelize but for how many times we obediently act on his lead and in his power to proclaim the Good News to others.

John Paul II saw the new evangelization as a sign of a new springtime coming for the church. "Despite the voices of the prophets of pessimism, I would like to repeat once again, with emphasis: . . . God is preparing a great Christian springtime, the beginnings of which can already be glimpsed."⁵

Having been blessed by the Lord and gifted by his holy and awesome presence, we need to hear his word to Isaiah uttered in our own hearts: “Whom shall I send?” The Lord is waiting to hear the fearless and generous response of Isaiah from our own lips: “Here am I! Send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

It is not enough for us to have our ears tickled, our minds instructed and illumined, our hearts challenged. God is looking for men and women who are committed to be evangelists in the power of the Spirit, who will pursue training if necessary, who will no longer be satisfied with being fed but who will seek to feed others the same Good News that brings them life.

To repeat Cardinal Thiandoum, “Every person has a right to the good news, and we should leave no stone unturned to announce it to them.” Because we have heard and experienced the saving power and love of God in Jesus, we have the duty and responsibility to share it with others. The reward and the consequences are explicit in the Scriptures: “Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32–33). Consider these questions from the Letter to the Romans a personal challenge: “For, ‘every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10:13–15).

If not you, who? If not now, when? If not the truth of the gospel, what? If not in the power of the Spirit, how? If not in your home or school or place of work, where? God needs us to do our part to help others to know his great love.