

PART I: CURRENT CULTURAL CONTEXT

*“While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion.
He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.”*

—Lk 15:20

The Ministry of Jesus

Christ calls all people to himself. Throughout his public ministry, the Lord Jesus welcomed the stranger,² healed the sick,³ offered forgiveness,⁴ and expressed his eagerness to give rest to the weary and burdened.⁵ How do we, today, follow the call and summons of Jesus to seek out the stranger, heal the sick, and welcome the weary? Jesus, in and through his Church, wants us to experience the urgent vigilance of the father of the prodigal son so that as we anxiously await the return of missing family and friends, we will be ready to run to greet and embrace them.

Our Current Situation

Today, through the ministry of the Church, Jesus continues to call all people to himself. It is estimated that only 23 percent of U.S. Catholics attend Mass each week.⁶ Those 77 percent absent from the eucharistic feast each week are not strangers: they are our parents, siblings, spouses, children, and friends. According to a recent Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) study, the most common reasons given by Catholics who do not regularly attend Mass are *not* related to controversial issues. The reasons given instead point to a gradual slipping away from the faith. Most Catholics stop attending Mass because they (1) have busy schedules or a lack of time, (2) have family responsibilities, (3) have health problems or disabilities, (4) have conflicts with work, (5) do not believe missing Mass is a sin, or (6) believe that they are not very religious people.⁷ In other words, many of our brothers and sisters have simply drifted away from the Church. This is due in part to the busyness of modern life and to a changing culture. There are also Catholics who attend Mass on a regular basis but who feel unconnected to the parish community.

² Jn 4:4-42.

³ Mt 20:29-34.

⁴ Jn 8:1-10.

⁵ Mt 11:28.

⁶ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), “Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics,” CARA, cara.georgetown.edu/sacraments.html (accessed February 15, 2011).

⁷ CARA, “Missed Mass Chart of Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics,” CARA, cara.georgetown.edu/missmass.jpg (accessed February 15, 2011). For the detailed analysis of reasons why Catholics do not regularly attend Mass, please see “Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics,” CARA, cara.georgetown.edu/sacraments.html.

The reasons for not attending Mass highlighted in CARA's study also point to an increased secularization, materialism, and individualism.

Secularism influences all aspects of society, claiming religion is merely a private matter. Pope Benedict XVI has cautioned, "Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel."⁸ Materialism also presents an obstacle to Christ. The ability to acquire limitless goods and an overreliance on science create a false sense of hope that we alone can fulfill our deepest needs. However, without God, our deepest needs cannot be fulfilled. "Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 31), our lives are ultimately empty. People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10)."⁹ Individualism leads to harmful forms of freedom and autonomy. After all, "we were created as social beings who find fulfillment only in love for God and for our neighbor."¹⁰ Our personal relationship with Christ does not hinder our participation in the community of believers—the Church.

In addition, there is an unsettling ignorance of the Eucharist as well as an erosion of Sunday as the Lord's Day dedicated to prayer and rest. The reasons that Catholics cite for missing Mass can be met and overcome by parishes that foster a welcoming environment for adolescents, young adults, singles, married couples, parents, families, the sick or disabled, and anyone who is no longer active in the faith. The means for fostering a welcoming environment is the New Evangelization. The New Evangelization places a special emphasis on welcoming back to the Lord's Table all those who are absent, because they are greatly missed and needed to build up the Body of Christ.

The New Evangelization

The New Evangelization is a call to each person to deepen his or her own faith, have confidence in the Gospel, and possess a willingness to share the Gospel. It is a personal encounter with the person of Jesus, which brings peace and joy. The New Evangelization provides the lens through which people experience the Church and world around them.

The New Evangelization invites people to experience God's love and mercy through the sacraments, especially through the Eucharist and Penance and Reconciliation. Evangelization is the essence of the Church's identity: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the holy Spirit."¹¹ Pope Paul VI reawakened the Church's evangelizing mission, Blessed John Paul II championed the call for the New Evangelization, and Pope Benedict XVI has reaffirmed the need for the New Evangelization. In *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, the Catholic bishops of the United States have expressed a sincere desire to invite all of God's children to their place in the Church: "We want to let our inactive brothers and sisters know that they always have a place in the Church and that we are hurt by their absence—as they are. . . . we want to help them see that, however they feel about the Church, we want to talk with them, share with them, and accept them as brothers and sisters."¹²

8 Benedict XVI, Address of the Celebration of Vespers and Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080416_bishops-usa_en.html.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 *Ad Gentes*, no. 2.

12 *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002), no. 40.

Positive Developments

Dioceses and parishes have already responded to the call of the New Evangelization by creating evangelization formation programs. This formation helps prepare parish leaders to initiate catechetical and reconciliation initiatives, which are meant to invite back to the faith and welcome our brothers and sisters who have been away. Sources of hope in the Church include diocesan and parish efforts to continually strengthen high school-level catechetical programs and to re-energize youth ministry programs and young adult ministries so as to reach these populations before they stop practicing the faith. Currently, dioceses focus their efforts on marriage preparation programs for young couples discerning marriage and on programs for couples becoming new parents. Diocesan and parish leaders also make an effort to welcome immigrants and attend to the needs of diverse groups. Opportunities to live the Gospel through concrete action, and thus to transform our culture, are numerous through advocacy and social justice ministries. Direct service opportunities frequently bring people back to the faith; this is especially true of young adults who value service projects. Many parishes offer not only Masses but also religious education, formation programs, and other pastoral services for cultural groups in their native languages. Additionally, new ecclesial movements and communities are flourishing, and they are eager to join dioceses and parishes in evangelization efforts.

Areas of Growth

Even though much has already been done to welcome our missing brothers and sisters back to the Lord's Table, there is still so much more that can be done. Catholics may desire to take on the call to evangelize but feel ill prepared to explain Church teachings. Some believe they lack the formation to be personal witnesses to Christ. Also, our brothers and sisters who have drifted away from the faith may be unable to vocalize why they stopped regularly attending Mass and parish activities, or they may not know with whom they can speak about why they left. Adolescents and young adults need active and engaging ministries and formation opportunities, including direct service.¹³ Communication and attention to cultural differences need to be addressed in ministry with diverse groups. Cultural factors, including the lack of Masses and sacraments celebrated in languages other than English, also contribute to people slowly slipping away from the Church.

The task before the Church is to form Catholics who are willing to communicate and witness the faith to those who are no longer actively practicing. By taking up the call of the New Evangelization, we will do as St. Paul commands us: "Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you."¹⁴

13 Statistics point to a median age of twenty-one when Catholics are more prone to stop practicing their faith. Please see "The Impact of Religious Switching and Secularization on the Estimated Size of the U.S. Adult Catholic Population," CARA, cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/FRStats/Winter2008.pdf (accessed February 15, 2011).

14 Rom 15:7.

PART II: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NEW 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.”

—Mt 28:19

The Church’s *ad gentes* (“to the world”) mission given to her by Christ is the proclamation of the Good News to those who do not know him. The historical and social circumstances of the twentieth century prompted the Church to renew her mission to evangelize. This renewed vision of evangelization includes, as Pope Benedict XVI has stated, the challenge to “propose anew”¹⁵ the Good News to all of the Christian faithful, most especially to those of the faithful who are absent from the Lord’s Table.

Pope Paul VI’s Call for Evangelization

Ten years after the close of the Second Vatican Council and a year after the 1974 Synod of Bishops, Pope Paul VI issued *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Pope Paul VI stated that the Church “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 sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of his death and glorious Resurrection.”¹⁶ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* describes the essential aspects of evangelization as well as its effects on the one evangelizing and the one being evangelized. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God and salvation for all people through Jesus Christ is at the very core of the Church’s mission and the essential aspects of evangelization.¹⁷ To evangelize, one bears witness to God’s Revelation in Jesus through the Holy Spirit by living a life imbued with Christian virtues, by proclaiming unceasingly that salvation is offered to all people through the Paschal Mystery of Christ, and by preaching hope in God’s love for us.¹⁸ Pope Paul VI recognized that the first proclamation of the Good News is directed *ad gentes*. However, he also recognized the need for the evangelization of the baptized who no longer practice their faith.¹⁹ He called upon the Church to evangelize these two groups, to invite them to a life of conversion, and to add new meaning to their life through the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

15 Benedict XVI, Homily of First Vespers on the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20100628_vespri-pietro-paolo_en.html.

16 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1975), no. 14. (Also available online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html.)

17 Cf. EN, nos. 8-9.

18 Cf. EN, nos. 26-28.

19 See EN, nos. 52-53; 56-57.

Blessed John Paul II and the New Evangelization

Blessed John Paul II renewed the call to all of the Christian faithful to evangelize in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI. “No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.”²⁰ Blessed John Paul II made evangelization a focus of his pontificate and emphasized man’s need to be evangelized by the Church. Evangelization occurs most effectively when the Church engages the culture of those she evangelizes. In 1983, he addressed the Catholic bishops of Latin America in Haiti and called for a New Evangelization: “The commemoration of the half millennium of evangelization will gain its full energy if it is a commitment, not to re-evangelize but to a New Evangelization, new in its ardor, methods and expression.”²¹ This marked the first time Blessed John Paul II used the term “New Evangelization” as the theological concept of proclaiming the Gospel anew to those already evangelized. He called for new “ardor, methods and expression” of evangelization, ones that engage the present-day culture and modern man. Blessed John Paul II, in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, provided three circumstances in evangelization: (1) preaching to those who have never heard the Gospel (*ad gentes*), (2) preaching to those Christian communities where the Church is present and who have fervor in their faith, and (3) preaching to those Christian communities who have ancient roots but who “have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization.’”²²

Blessed John Paul II alluded to the New Evangelization again in his opening address to the Catholic bishops of Latin America in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, as well as in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Although Blessed John Paul II did not develop a full theological scheme of the New Evangelization, his writings reveal central themes of the New Evangelization, including the implementation of the call of the Second Vatican Council to proclaim the Good News of Christ by the engagement of the present culture and to accompany individuals on their journey from this life to eternal life. For Blessed John Paul II, evangelization must proclaim the Good News, which when appropriated into one’s life, leads to conversion. This conversion provides a life of witness to the Good News and compels one to fulfill his or her vocation to the universal call of holiness. One’s vocation to holiness is strengthened through the gifts of the Church, namely the grace of the sacraments, prayer, Scripture, and the Church’s teachings and traditions.

Pope Benedict XVI and the Future of the New Evangelization

During his homily on the Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls on June 28, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI renewed the Church’s call to the New Evangelization. Pope Benedict XVI called for the *riproporre* (“re-proposing”) of the Gospel to those regions “still awaiting a first evangelization” and to those regions where the roots of Christianity are deep but that have experienced “a serious crisis” of faith due to secularization.²³ He clarified that the New Evangelization is new, not in its content but rather in its inner thrust; new in its methods that must correspond to the times; and new because it is necessary to proclaim the Gospel to those who have already heard it.²⁴ Pope Benedict XVI calls the Church to evangelize by entering into dialogue with modern culture and confronting the cultural crisis

20 RM, no. 3.

21 John Paul II, *Address to CELAM* (Opening Address of the 19th General Assembly of CELAM, 9 March 1983, Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *L’Osservatore Romano* English Edition 16/780 (18 April 1983), no. 9.

22 RM, no. 33.

23 Homily on the Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul.

24 Ibid.