

## What Is Evangelization?

10. The simplest way to say what evangelization means is to follow Pope Paul VI, whose message *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*On Evangelization in the Modern World*) has inspired so much recent thought and activity in the Church. We can rephrase his words to say that evangelizing means bringing the Good News of Jesus into every human situation and seeking to convert individuals and society by the divine power of the Gospel itself.<sup>6</sup> At its essence are the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ and the response of a person in faith, which are both works of the Spirit of God.

11. Evangelization must always be directly connected to the Lord Jesus Christ. “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 proclaimed.”<sup>7</sup>

### Conversion

12. Conversion is the change of our lives that comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit. All who accept the Gospel undergo change as we continually put on the mind of Christ by rejecting sin and becoming more faithful disciples in his Church. Unless we undergo conversion, we have not truly accepted the Gospel.

13. We know that people experience conversion in many ways. Some experience a sudden, shattering insight that brings rapid transformation. Some experience a gradual growth over many years. Others undergo conversion as they take part in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults—the normal way adults become members of the Church today. Many experience conversion through the ordinary relationships of family and friends. Others have experienced it through the formation received from Catholic schools and religious education programs. Still others have experienced ongoing conversion in renewals, ecumenical encounters, retreats, parish missions, or through some of the great spiritual movements that have blessed church life today.

14. This is crucial: we must be converted—and we must continue to be converted! We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ. And we must be open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who will continue to convert us as we follow Christ. If our faith is alive, it will be aroused again and again as we mature as disciples.

15. We can only share what we have received; we can hold on to our faith only if it continues to grow. “But if salt loses its taste,” Jesus asked, “with what can it be seasoned?”<sup>8</sup>

### **Individuals and Society**

16. The continuing story of salvation in Christ involves each of us one by one as well as society itself. How else could it be? Conversion speaks of the change of heart that, as a member of the Church, each one must undergo. The Gospel speaks across time and space to each human being, each mind, each heart. It asks us what we think about our lives, how we hope, whom we love, and what we live for. If faith is not transforming each heart and life, it is dead.

17. But faith is not something that only happens to each of us individually or privately, within ourselves. The Gospel also speaks to society itself, with its values, goals, and systems. The Gospel must overflow from each heart until the presence of God transforms all human existence. Sometimes this means that, as believers, we must confront the world as did the prophets of old, pointing out the claims of God to societies that are blind to God. More often, however, this means that we must let our faith shine on the world around us, radiating the love of Jesus by the everyday way we speak, think, and act.

18. The fruits of evangelization are changed lives and a changed world—holiness and justice, spirituality and peace. The validity of our having accepted the Gospel does not only come from what we feel or what we know; it comes also from the way we serve others, especially the poorest, the most marginal, the most hurting, the most defenseless, and the least loved. An evangelization that stays inside ourselves is not an evangelization into the Good News of Jesus Christ.

### **The Force of the Gospel Itself**

19. Evangelization happens when the word of Jesus speaks to people's hearts and minds. Needing no trickery or manipulation, evangelization can happen only when people accept the Gospel freely, as the "good news" it is meant to be, because of the power of the gospel message and the accompanying grace of God.

20. Our message of faith proclaims an eternally faithful God, creating all in love and sustaining all with gracious care. We proclaim that God, whose love is unconditional, offers us divine life even in the face of our sins, failures, and inadequacies. We believe in a God who became one of us in Jesus, God's Son, whose death and resurrection bring us salvation. We believe that the risen Christ sends his own Spirit upon us when we respond to him in faith and repentance, making us his people, the Church, and giving us the power of new life and guiding us to our eternal destiny.

21. This gospel message gives us a different vision of what life is about. We see a pattern of love,

hope, and meaning because the intimate relationship with God in which we were created, lost through sin, has been restored by Jesus, whose death has destroyed our death and whose resurrection gives us the promise of eternal life.<sup>9</sup> We do not see a world of blind forces ruled by chance, but a universe created to share God's life; we know that following Jesus means we begin to share God's life here and now. We do not view life's purpose as the gathering of power or riches, but as the gracious invitation to live for God and others in love. We do not calculate what we think is possible, but rather, know the Spirit of God always makes new things possible, even the renewal of humanity. We do not merely look for many years of contented life, but for an unending life of happiness with God. In our faith, we discover God's eternal plan, from creation's first moment to creation's fulfillment in heaven, giving meaning to our human lives.

22. This vision we share is the power of the Good News. As it compels us, we believe it can compel, by its beauty and truth, all who sincerely seek God. How different our world would be if everyone could accept the Good News of Jesus and share the vision of faith!

### **Other Implications**

23. Evangelization, then, has both an inward and an outward direction. *Inwardly* it calls for our continued receiving of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our ongoing conversion both individually and as Church. It nurtures us, makes us grow, and renews us in holiness as God's people. *Outwardly* evangelization addresses those who have not heard the Gospel or who, having heard it, have stopped practicing their faith, and those who seek the fullness of faith. It calls us to work for full communion among all who confess Jesus but do not yet realize the unity for which Christ prayed. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical on missionary activity, summed up the three objectives of mission: to proclaim the Gospel to all people; to help bring about the reconversion of those who have received the Gospel but live it only nominally; and to deepen the Gospel in the lives of believers.<sup>10</sup>

24. We know that the word "evangelization" sometimes raises uncomfortable images for Catholics—especially in the culture of the United States, where evangelism has sometimes meant only an individual response to enthusiastic preaching, a style of mass religion, a contrived way to recruit new members, or, at its worst, a way to play on people's needs. Still, we use the word "evangelization" because its root meaning is "Gospel" (Good News) and because it calls us, even if it is uncomfortable, to live the faith of our baptism more openly and to share it more freely.

25. We want to make it clear that evangelization means something special for us as Catholics.

We can see what it means by looking at what happens to evangelized people. Not only are they related to Jesus by accepting his Gospel and receiving his Spirit; even more, their lives are changed by becoming disciples, that is, participants in the Church, celebrating God's love in worship and serving others as Jesus did.<sup>11</sup>

26. Some might think of evangelization solely in terms of Jesus and our relationship with him. Yet our relationship with Jesus is found in our relationship with the community of Jesus—the Church. The way to Christ is through the community in which he lives. Did not Jesus say, “I am with you always”<sup>12</sup> and “Whatever you did for one of these least [brothers and sisters of mine], you did for me”?<sup>13</sup> Did not the Jesus who met Paul on the road to Damascus say that he lived in his persecuted followers, the Church?<sup>14</sup> Jesus is present in and among his disciples, the People of God.

27. Evangelization, then, has different implications depending on our relationship to Jesus and his Church. For those of us who practice and live our Catholic faith, it is a call to ongoing growth and renewed conversion. For those who have accepted it only in name, it is a call to re-evangelization. For those who have stopped practicing their faith, it is a call to reconciliation. For children, it is a call to be formed into disciples through the family's faith life and religious education. For other Christians, it is an invitation to know the fullness of our message. For those who have no faith, it is a call to conversion to know Christ Jesus and thus experience a change to new life with Christ and his Church.

## Why We Evangelize

28. We must evangelize because the Lord Jesus commanded us to do so. He gave the Church the unending task of evangelizing as a restless power, to stir and to stimulate all its actions until all nations have heard his Good News and until every person has become his disciple.<sup>15</sup>

29. The Lord commanded us to evangelize because salvation is offered to every person in him. More than a holy figure or a prophet, Jesus is God's Word,<sup>16</sup> God's “very imprint,”<sup>17</sup> the power and wisdom of God.<sup>18</sup> He is our Savior. Becoming like us and accepting our human nature,<sup>19</sup> he addresses in himself, in his death and resurrection, the brokenness of our lives. He suffers through our sin; he feels our pain; he knows the thirst of our death; he accepts the limits of our human life so that he might bring us beyond those limits. “[H]e humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him! . . .”<sup>20</sup>