

New Evangelization in an Asian Context Towards a Renewed Missionary Enthusiasm

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“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” (John 14:6)¹

Human Life, an Open Question

My Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Day!

I am very pleased to be with you today and would like to begin with the words of author Bill Bryson, from his book *A Short History of Everything*, by way of greeting:

Welcome. Congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn't easy, I know. In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize. To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and curiously obliging manner to create you. It's an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years [we hope] these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, co-operative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally under-appreciated state known as existence.²

The reasons given by Bryson perhaps sound rather odd, but they are interesting. I say “odd”, because each of the tiny particles is mindless, but nonetheless manages to oblige you to comply to the laws of physics; and “interesting”, because, individually, each of

¹ Scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) 1989, Catholic Edition.

² Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, London: Doubleday, 2003, p.1.

them is lifeless, but together they make up the physical components of a human person - so creative, alive, and open to seemingly infinite possibilities.

Why is this so? Human life cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of atoms. It is an open question, an incomplete project, still awaiting a realization. What is it to become fully human? To this question, the Gospel offers an answer: The fullness for human life is “being with God” or partaking in God’s life (cf. *2 Peter* 1:4). God is love. God sent his only Son into the world to make manifest his love so that through Him we might abide in God. (cf. *1 John* 4:7-16). It is in His Son, Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word, that every human person will ultimately satisfy his or her quest to find love, salvation and perfect happiness, to the point of participating in the divine life. In Christ, everyone will be united according to the plan set forth by the Father in the fullness of time (cf. *Eph.* 1:10).

We all know that God’s way is so inscrutable, and His love is so infinite (cf. *Romans* 11:33), that I can only make a small attempt to heighten our awareness of it today. My intention is to consider the power of God’s Word to communicate itself to various peoples or groups through the preaching of the Gospel, and to assimilate and to transform their cultures. Through this perspective, terms such as Gospel truth, mission, evangelization, new evangelization, and missionary enthusiasm prove to be very useful. Within this context, I also wish to highlight some of the insights that may be gleaned from the experiences of those who founded the *Propaganda Fide*, and their lasting effects on the promotion of the Church’s missionary activities, and upon the efforts to promote the New Evangelization.

The Gospel Truth

Jesus is “*the way, the truth, and the life*” (*John* 14:6). He is the Living Word with the Father in the beginning. He has been creatively present from the very foundation of the world, and became Incarnate by the power of the Holy Spirit. His name -

Jesus Christ – is a name above all others, “*for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). This is the Good News for all.

Christ gratuitously revealed the truth of God to the Apostles and entrusted to them the mission of preaching this truth, making it accessible to everyone. This truth, which is Jesus Himself, is to be received in faith. As Christians, having received this gift of faith, we are called to spread the Good News of Jesus, *the Truth*, and we can do this because being the Word, He is in the Father, and through the Holy Spirit, is in our hearts as well as on our lips.

The Proclamation of the Good News in the Old Testament

Before the coming of Christ, God had already chosen a number of prophets to announce the Good News of salvation.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns” (Is. 52:7).

This verse refers to the herald who goes ahead of the people returning from slavery in Babylon. It is not only an announcement of a simple return from exile, but also a proclamation of the Lord God, Who will shape the history of mankind with His liberating grace: “*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...*” (Is. 61:1).

It is important that we bear in mind the two dimensions of this prophecy. One is the historical, referring to a certain events in time, like the return to Jerusalem from the exile. Another is the eschatological, pointing to the universal salvation yet to be fulfilled (*already but not yet*) at the end of the world. The latter dimension became known eventually as the New Testament, which reveals the salvific work of Jesus Christ. He historically came two millennia ago, but will come again at the end of time.

These two dimensions give rise to mixed feelings towards the heralds or those who bring the Good News. They experienced joy and anguish at the same time.

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart... I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? (Jer. 15:16-18)

This verse allows us to glimpse into the personal experience of Jeremiah's joy in "finding" and "eating" the words of God. Once the prophet experienced this joy, he could not help but become the Lord's servant and announce His words. Jeremiah, however, suffered from contemptuous refusal by his hearers, loneliness, and even violence.

Jesus, the Evangelizer

In preaching the Kingdom of God, Jesus evangelized the poor. (cf. *Luke* 4:18). The deepest poverty is the inability to experience joy. How tedious it would be, if life were considered merely an endless movement of atoms! How sad if life were viewed as meaningless immanence within a perpetual cycle of time, devoid of any breakthrough by the transcendent.

The poverty of being unable to experience joy means instead the pain of emptiness, which produces all of sorts of arrogance that can devastate life with violence and cruelty, as seen in the tragic story of Cain's murder of his brother, Abel (cf. *Gen.* 4). This poverty has been widespread ever since the Original Sin was committed, and has recurred throughout the different ages and in taken on different forms, in countries both materially rich as well as economically poor. This is why we are in need of evangelization at every moment in history.

The evangelization of Jesus consists in His Revelation and Redemption offered to us through His Death and Resurrection.

For the work of evangelization, He not only rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “*I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...*” (Luke 10:21), but also experienced extreme agony while praying on the Mount of Olives (cf. Luke 22:39-46). He alone is the Savior of the world, and to believe in Jesus Christ is all that matters.

And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14-15)

To accomplish His work, the Lord Jesus was to send His disciples to the ends of the earth:

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. (Matt. 28:19)

Mission and Missionaries

Ever since this Great Commission from the Risen Lord, the Church has engaged in what we now call “missionary activity”: the evangelization of those who do not yet know Christ and the building up of the local Churches. However, the way we speak of this activity has undergone changes over two millennia.

By the time of St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century, the term “mission” started to assume a more juridical and territorial sense, and through the distinctive fourth vow of their religious profession, each Jesuit promises a special obedience to the Roman Pontiff with regard to the missions (“*Insuper, promitto specialem obedientiam Summo Pontifici circa missiones*”). The term “mission” bore a markedly Euro-centric approach; namely, that the Jesuits from Europe would be sent to mission lands such as those in Africa, America, Asia, where people had not yet heard of Christ, or to countries where the Protestant movement threatened the faith of Catholics.

As for the mission territories, the missionaries themselves were considered agents vested with the authority of the Pope in order to propagate the Catholic Faith. St. Francis Xavier was one of the earliest among them, followed later by Father Matteo Ricci. According to the jurisprudence of those days, when Catholic missionaries came to mission lands, the Pope had a certain authority over all those peoples not yet embraced by Christendom. For historical reasons, the Pope, at times, even delegated his authority to a secular power, as in the case of the “royal patronage” (*patronado real/padroado real*) conceded to the Kings of Spain and Portugal.

This “royal patronage” contained many privileges with regard to the missions. For example, St. Francis Xavier was sent to mission lands under the protection of the Empire of Portugal, appointed as the Papal Legate for the entire Far East. After some time, however, the inconveniences of this *padroado* became readily apparent. In the lands conquered by the powerful maritime nations, there was a tendency to confuse missionary activity with colonial expansion. Besides, many missionaries had not received adequate spiritual formation, resulting in their being drawn into more political and commercial interests. As these problems became more serious, Rome began to take a more active role in protecting the genuine missionary spirit from contamination.

Propaganda Fide

The idea of founding a Roman Congregation for mission lands was discussed as early as the 15th Century. Following upon the spiritual renewal initiated by the Council of Trent, subsequent Roman Pontiffs, such as Popes Pius V, Gregory XIII, Sixtus V, and Paul V, tried to renew and reform the Church. It was finally Pope Gregory XV (1621-1623), elected to the Chair of St. Peter at the age of 67, who took action. Knowing that his pontificate would not be long due to his poor health, he concentrated his efforts on the foundational work for the new Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*), hoping that this

project, so near to his heart, would be realized even if he should die before its completion.

Various establishments of such a Congregation had been attempted earlier, but each survived only a short time, the longest managing to endure less than five years (1599-1604) under the Pontificate of Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605). Attempting to avoid past difficulties, Pope Gregory XV acted swiftly, decisively, and effectively. He did not even have adequate time to draft the foundational document, known as a Pontifical Bull (*Bolla*), but simply convened a meeting of hand-picked Cardinals and prelates, all chosen by the Pope himself. According to the *Acta* of that meeting, the Congregation was supposed to be created, most appropriately, on the Feast of the Epiphany, the Memorial Feast of the call of the Gentile Magi into the Kingdom of Christ and His teachings. The text of the *Acta* further note:

*The Holy Father in Christ, and Lord Gregory XV by Divine Providence Pope, perceiving that the principal work of the pastoral office is the propagation of the Christian faith by which men are led to know and worship the true God and so to live seriously, piously, and justly in this world, erected a Congregation composed of thirteen Cardinals and two prelates and also a secretary, to whom he committed and recommended the affairs of the Propagation of the Faith.*³

The expression “to know and worship the true God” enshrined the centrality of the Christian Faith in God’s love for humanity. With this in mind, the Pope wanted clearly to exclude any outside, non-ecclesiastical influence in the choosing the members of the

³ *Memoria Rerum*, Vol I/I. p.86; After attempts by several Popes following the Council of Trent, Pope Gregory XV founded the “Sacred Congregation of *Propanganda Fide*” in 1622 (Epiphany), with the overall responsibility for the propagation of the Faith: *Missionibus ad praedicandum et docendum evangelium et catholicam doctrinam* [“to preach and proclaim the Gospel and Catholic doctrine to the missions”] (*Collectanea S. Congr. De Propaganda Fide*, 1,3).

Congregation. They worked together so as to ensure the long-term survival of the newly-formed dicastery. At last, a Bull officially erecting the Congregation was drafted, listing its faculties and privileges. By October 6, 1622, the text (dated June 22) entitled *Constitutio*, was printed, and began with the words, “*Inscrutabili divinae providentiae arcano*”.

The first part of the Bull presented the primary theological reasons for which the Pope had established the Congregation: the implementation of Christ’s missionary mandate, as well as to draw attention to the Pope’s responsibility for the missions. It also highlighted the fact that once the faithful were incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ (the Church) through Baptism, they were then called and obliged to imitate Christ. As a result, they should not only hear the Word of God, but also spread it to others by putting it into practice. If this applied to the faithful, it applied even more to Bishops; and if more to Bishops, then all the more to the Pope. Christ’s command to His Apostles to go and preach the Good News to the whole world was of particular concern to Peter, to whom was assigned, both individually and principally, the task of tending the flock of Christ. The preaching of the Gospel is intimately tied to grace and apostleship.

The vision of the linen cloth that was let down from heaven with all kinds of animals (cf. *Acts* 10), indicated that Peter and his successors were given the Office charged with gathering those from afar, bringing them in to become members of the Body of Christ, and so to share in His life and attain to salvation. This was an increasingly urgent matter, in view of the number of those who had never known Christ and His Church, or who, through the wiles of the devil, had separated themselves from the true Church.

Aware of this responsibility and of the failed previous attempts, the Pope provided a very solid foundation for the Congregation and oriented its purpose in three distinct directions: to regain, by way of interior reform, the countries that had fallen into Protestantism; to nurture close relationships with the Orthodox; and to spread the Catholic Faith in America, Asia, and Africa. By

means of these directives, the Holy Father manifested clearly that the Gospel is indeed for *all*, and that the preaching of the Gospel to *all* was to remain at the heart of the activities of the Congregation.

Pope Gregory XV also did not undervalue or ignore the consequences of sin on the human condition, briefly but clearly insinuating that the divisions that afflicted the Faith were a punishment “for our sins”. As such, this was perhaps the first “confession of fault” formally made by a Pope. The conversion of people to the true Faith always brings about love and peace, thus empowering the Church community to proclaim the Gospel. Missionary activities derive joy and initiative from the Church as the Body of Christ, and have as their aim the building up of the Church, through all of the various means at their disposal.

In order to foster this activity, the Congregation began to equip itself with concrete, central structures for the support of missionary action. In fact, under the leadership of its first Secretary, Francesco Ingoli, the official policy for the missions of the *Propaganda Fide* preserved the ancient missionary vision, which asserted that the Church’s mission should enjoy independence and should be an essentially spiritual endeavor. “*The Christian faith,*” Ingoli wrote, “*must be delivered from those colonial associations which condemned it to be everywhere and in permanence a foreign religion.*”⁴

While maintaining the purity of the Gospel, the Church in every place was to always follow the example of the Incarnate Word and to assume the features of the local community. Of course, this was to be done without jeopardizing or losing her universality or catholicity. To this end, the Congregation employed four strategies from the beginning of its work.

⁴ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, London, Penguin Books, 1964, p.79.

The first strategy was to insist on the superior quality of the missionaries themselves, who were to have reached a certain human and Christian maturity prior to undertaking the daunting tasks that would be required of them in the missions. Secondly, the Congregation increased the number of the Apostolic Vicariates in the mission territories, to be headed by Vicars (of the Holy Father) and ordained as Bishops. This new Vicariate structure was to replace the *padroado* system, thereby giving the Pope the possibility of being able to better care for the Missions in missionary territories, as well as greater freedom in the appointment of Bishops for them. The idea behind installing Bishops in the missionary lands was that they might ordain local clergy and form indigenous local Churches. Thirdly, the Congregation encouraged the establishment of missionary colleges for the training of native priests (like the Pontifical Urban College founded by Pope Urban VIII in 1627). Since they would have intimate familiarity with the local languages and cultures, it was hoped that they would be able to preach well, administer the Sacraments fruitfully, and, to some extent, avoid being persecuted by non-believers. It was further hoped that indigenous priests would live out their love for the Church and for their nations more effectively, whereas a foreign missionary might be suspected of having other interests incompatible with the Gospel. Fourthly, the Congregation created the “*Polyglot*” printing press in Rome, to facilitate greater dissemination of Bibles, catechisms, missals, liturgical books, grammars, linguistics, dictionaries, and whatever else was needed.

Another historical illustration of this clear-sightedness of the Holy See is found in the *Instruction*⁵ to the Apostolic Vicars of China and Indochina, published in 1659 and described as being the *magna carta* of the *Propaganda Fide*. It is divided into three parts, and contains a concise summary of the strategies of the

⁵ The Latin text is taken from *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum, 1622-1972*, vol. III/2 – 1622-1700, ed. J. Metzler, Herder, Rome – Freiburg – Wien, 1971, XXIX, 696-704; ivi, 697. This document is referred hereafter as *Instruction* in this essay; numeration mine.

Congregation, based on the missionary strategies noted above, namely:

- To identify candidates - endowed with physical strength, exceptional charity, and prudence - to be missionaries;
- To shape the lives of candidates into those of ~~the~~ missionaries, so that they be generous, courageous, and irreproachable;
- To free missionary activities from colonialism;
- To defend missionaries' separation from political affairs;
- To forbid missionaries' engagement in commerce;
- To form the youth, so as to foster an indigenous clergy to serve the local communities;
- To promote adaptation or accommodation when possible;
- To prioritize activities for evangelization and pastoral care of Christians.

It called for formation of an “autochthonous”, or native clergy and promoted respect for cultures and local customs as long as they were not contrary to Catholic faith and morals. The *Instruction* provides a magnificent example of “inculturation” far in advance of the contemporary invention or discovery of the term, as readily seen in a brief extract:

*“...do not practice coercion, or force of persuasion in order to lead these nations to change their rites, their ways and their customs, unless they are openly contrary to religion [...] what could be more absurd than to transplant France, Spain, or Italy or any other European country into China. It is not this which you must introduce, but the faith, which does not reject the rites and customs of a nation, unless they are erroneous.”*⁶

⁶ *Instruction*, n. 38; the text continues: “It is normal for human nature to prefer, to value, and to love its own customs and its own traditions to those of others; there is nothing which generates hatred and resentment more than the desire to want to change the customs of a nation and especially those customs to which the people have been accustomed since time immemorial, and this is especially true if one seeks to introduce the traditions of one’s own country.”

Evangelization

From the time of the Council of Trent, the Catholic world maintained a certain reluctance in the use of the verb “to evangelize”, largely because it had been liberally employed by Protestant writers and preachers. Instead, preference was given to the word “mission”. The Documents of the First Vatican Council (1869–1879), use the term “Gospel” only once, and the term “evangelization” never occurs. In contrast, the Documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), use the word “Gospel” 157 times, “to evangelize” 18 times, and “evangelization” 31 times. It is thus no surprise that these words have now become an ordinary and normal part of our language, signifying the sense of an initial proclamation of the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ. In fact, this reality has contributed to a heightened awareness within the Church’s activity of the priority of this proclamation to the contemporary world.⁷ It is important here to point out some of the more salient passages from the Documents of the Second Vatican Council concerning the Church, her missions, missionary activities, and evangelization.

One must first consider the fact that the Church’s missionary activities originate in the Father’s loving initiative in sending His Son and the Holy Spirit to communicate divine life to humanity. The Church’s members, through Baptism, participate in the very life of the Trinity, and thus share in the same mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature.⁸ Thus, “mission” is not just something the Church *does*; rather, it is constitutive of her very *being*. To be a Christian is to be totally involved in the very life of God, Who, by reaching out to us, constitutes His loving and saving presence in the world. Mission, ultimately, is not something done because of a command or the Great Commission

⁷ See Rino Fisichella, *La Nuova Evangelizzazione. Una Sfida per Uscire dell’Indifferenza*, Mondadori, 2011, p.20.

⁸ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes* (AG):AAS 58 (1966), n. 2.

(cf. *Matt.* 28:19-20; *Mark* 16:15-16). Mission is a privilege and a grace, and the very identity of the Church.

Secondly, mission should not be confined merely to a juridical-territorial mentality, but as a basic attitude of the Church wherever she is. Crossing boundaries and moving beyond perceived limitations is at the center of the Church's life.

Thirdly, the Document *Ad Gentes* admits the practical utility of the juridical-territorial description of the mission territories and of the so-called "young Church" (*Ecclesia novella*). In this sense, the proper end of missionary activity is the evangelization of all nations, and the *plantatio Ecclesiae* where the Word of God has not yet been sown and established roots.⁹

Fourthly, *Ad Gentes* distinguishes missionary activity from pastoral activity. The former is directed towards the evangelization of those peoples or groups that do not yet know Christ, and among whom no mature local Church exists. The latter is directed towards the ongoing evangelization of those who are already Catholic. While pastoral care is certainly of great importance, it must not eclipse the Church's outreach towards and making a difference in the world around it.

The New Evangelization

Thus far, we have spoken of the evangelization of all peoples as a primary and permanent concern. It is noteworthy that *Ad Gentes* resonates significantly with the founding experience of the *Propaganda Fide*. Why, then, is the term "new evangelization" used?

The term "new evangelization" first appeared around 1968 in Latin American documents;¹⁰ the idea was present, but it was still

⁹ Cf. *AG*, n. 6.

¹⁰ See the article by John F. Gorski, M.M., *From "Mission" to "New Evangelization": The Origins of a Challenging Concept*, p. 8, (cf. <http://www.maryknollvocations.com/Mission.pdf>)

a rather vague concept. In 1969 and 1970, it was used in the context of the indigenous apostolate in Latin America; later, the term was used once again in the *Puebla* Document of 1979, accompanied by the claim that new situations, emerging from socio-cultural changes, called for a “new evangelization”.¹¹

While talking about these “new situations”, one must also presume the ubiquitous and potentially permanent situation of those people yet to be evangelized. *Ad Gentes*, therefore, affirmed that the pilgrim Church is, by her very nature, missionary¹², but has never overlooked the emerging “new situations”.¹³ Here, then, we have the confluence of new situation and new evangelization, permanent situation and permanent evangelization.

In 1983, Pope St. John Paul II continued this theme in his Address to the Bishops of Latin America during his Visit to Haiti, in which called for the commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Evangelization of the New World (1492-1992). Such an important milestone called for a commitment “not to re-evangelization, but to a new evangelization,” he said. It would be new in its ardor, new in its methods, and new in its expressions.¹⁴

Here the term “new evangelization” is used in the sense of renewing the evangelizing impetus within the context of Latin America. As such, it should be borne in mind that popular religious piety still plays an important role to sustain the faith of many people in Latin America.¹⁵ Thus, there is a need to stress

¹¹ *Ibid.*; see also the Documents of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla (1979): 2941 (368).

¹² Cf. *AG*, n. 2.

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 6. “Moreover, the groups among which the Church dwells are often radically changed, for one reason or other, so that an entirely new set of circumstances may arise. Then the Church must deliberate whether these conditions might again call for her missionary activity. Besides, circumstances are sometimes such that, for the time being, there is no possibility of expounding the Gospel directly and forthwith.”

¹⁴ See Fisichella, p. 23.

¹⁵ See Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*), Nov. 24, 2013: AAS, 2014, nn.122-126.

the proclamation (*kerygma*) of the Risen Lord, with Whom one's relationship should deepen through the reading of Scripture and Sacramental celebrations, no matter how indispensable and valid popular devotions may be. This becomes part of the program of the new evangelization.

*Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a locus theologicus which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization.*¹⁶

The term “new evangelization”, when used in different contexts, needs to be nuanced, however. In June of 1979, Pope St. John Paul II used the term to stress the notion of “a second proclamation” during his visit in Poland.¹⁷ Later, he used the concept again in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), reaffirming that within the singular mission of the Church, there are different exigencies, thus accounting for the distinction made between missionary activity and pastoral activity, echoing the teaching of *Ad Gentes*, n. 6. The Holy Father also added an intermediate situation in which “entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith”. They must also be included in the new evangelization.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 126.

¹⁷ See Fisichella, pp. 21-22.

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio (RM)*, Dec. 7, 1990: AAS 83 (1991), n. 33: “*The fact that there is a diversity of activities in the Church's one mission is not intrinsic to that mission, but arises from the variety of circumstances in which that mission is carried out. Looking at today's world from the viewpoint of evangelization, we can distinguish three situations. First, there is the situation which the Church's missionary activity addresses: peoples, groups, and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups. This is mission ad gentes in the proper sense of the term. Secondly, there are Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures. They are fervent in their faith and in Christian living. They bear witness to the Gospel in their surroundings and have a sense of commitment to the universal mission. In these communities the Church carries out her activity and pastoral care. Thirdly, there is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the*

On the other hand, for both the *missio ad gentes* and the new evangelization, there is a practical utility to maintain certain territorial concept. For example, the former is employed mainly in Asia; the latter in Europe. In principle, however, the Church - or better, each local Church - has to go beyond geographical limits and engage both aspects of the same Church Mission according to needs.¹⁹

Thus, the particular nuance as applied to different contexts must be considered when using the term “new evangelization”. Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, summarized this well:

*In this jungle of interpretation, I consider it best to avoid the neologism “re-evangelization,” to allow us to speak of the new evangelization as a form by which the Gospel is proclaimed with new enthusiasm, in a new language, which is comprehensible in a different cultural situation and with new methodologies that are capable of transmitting its deepest sense, that sense which remains immutable.*²⁰

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”.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 37: *Missionary activity has normally been defined in terms of specific territories. The Second Vatican Council acknowledged the territorial dimension of the mission ad gentes, a dimension which even today remains important for determining responsibilities, competencies and the geographical limits of missionary activity. Certainly, a universal mission implies a universal perspective. Indeed, the Church refuses to allow her missionary presence to be hindered by geographical boundaries or political barriers. But it is also true that missionary activity ad gentes, being different from the pastoral care of the faithful and the new evangelization of the non-practicing, is exercised within well-defined territories and groups of people [...] The growth in the number of new churches in recent times should not deceive us. Within the territories entrusted to these churches - particularly in Asia, but also in Africa, Latin America and Oceania - there remain vast regions still to be evangelized.*

²⁰ Fisichella, p. 25.

The New Evangelization in Asia: Towards a Renewed Missionary Enthusiasm

To what extent and *in* what sense can the New Evangelization be concretely realized on this immense continent? A detailed answer to this question is surely beyond the scope of this brief treatment. Given the extreme minority of Christians in Asia, it is clearly evident that the urgency for the mission *ad gentes* - directed to peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ, among whom the Church has not yet taken root,²¹ and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel,²² - remains a constant challenge to believers to embrace that greater love of neighbor by bringing all people to Christ.

The Centrality of Love

At this point, allow me to return to what I said earlier about human life being an open question. God is love; God cannot do anything but love. No human person can cease to raise questions about or abandon the quest for transcendence until he or she encounters the loving God.

To this end, there is a relevant insight worth mentioning in the Apostolic Letter *Ubicumque et semper* of Benedict XVI, by which he promulgated the establishment of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. He wrote:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction (Deus Caritas Est, 1) [...] Likewise, at the root of all

²¹ AG, n. 6.

²² Blessed Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Dec. 8, 1975, AAS, 68 (1976), nn. 18-20.

*evangelization lies not a human plan of expansion, but rather the desire to share the inestimable gift that God has wished to give us, making us sharers in his own life.*²³

With this in mind, he expressed concern for the three particular situations of the present time. The first concerns a widespread abandonment of the Faith or a “de-Christianization” in traditionally Christian societies. The second notes the huge social changes that have profoundly altered our way of looking at the world, with a particular reference to the strong influence of secularism, which effectively puts God to the side. The third focuses on the interior strength of the Church, which calls for renewal, so as to allow her members to form relationships between themselves and others in the world, *ad extra*, thus moving them from the ones being evangelized to becoming the ones evangelizing. Again, these three situations transcend geographical limits and occur everywhere to varying degrees.

Regarding these developments, Pope Benedict continued along the path of St. John Paul II, who affirmed, “*I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission ad gentes.*”²⁴ From this standpoint, one can understand that both the mission *ad gentes* and the new evangelization aim at proclaiming the Gospel truth that God’s merciful love is at hand and that the Church has been commissioned to make it known to all peoples or groups, whether they belong to those who do not yet know Christ or those who ~~are~~ have been de-Christianized.

In the midst of all of this, there is yet another factor to take into account: population growth. At the time of the promulgation of the *Ad Gentes*, the world population was around three billion persons, of whom two billion did not know Christ; today, it is

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Motu proprio, Ubicumque et semper*, (Sept. 21, 2010), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010.

²⁴ *RM*, n. 3.

seven billion, of whom four and a half billion do not know Christ. Thus, as St. John Paul indicated, the actuality and urgency are even greater for the mission *ad gentes*.²⁵

*For missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!*²⁶

The New Evangelization is thus considered a long-term program for the Church's concern for the spread of the Gospel. In 2012, the Synod of Bishops offered a further reflection on this theme in terms of the transmission of faith, and that same year, the Bishops of Asia also offered an initial response in the FABC message to the people of God, entitled "Renewed Evangelizers for New Evangelization in Asia". In this latter, the Bishops wrote:

*At the core of the New Evangelization initiated by Blessed Pope John Paul II and reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI is the clarion call to be authentic and credible witnesses of Jesus the Lord and Savior [...] If we exist for mission, we need to have a passion for mission [...] "A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire... (we) have to be on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known more widely, loved more deeply, and followed more closely" (Ecclesia in Asia, 23).*²⁷

Enthusiasm for Apostolic Virtues

²⁵ AG, n. 11: "Even as Christ Himself searched the hearts of women and men, and led them to divine light, so also His disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, should show the people among whom they live, and should converse with them, that they themselves may learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth."

²⁶ RM, n. 2.

²⁷ Message of X FABC Plenary Assembly (40th Anniversary, 1972-2012), "Renewed Evangelizers for New Evangelization in Asia", Vietnam: Xuan Loc & Ho Chi Minh City, Dec. 16, 2012, p. 2.

The images of “clarion call” and “fire” used by the Asian Bishops are clearly connected with a renewed missionary enthusiasm. These images remind me of the above-mentioned 1659 *Instruction*, and its concern over finding good candidates for the missions, directing that they be imbued with “...great zeal, intense religious **enthusiasm** and profound spirit of piety [...], not believing everything lightheartedly, but making sure that it really comes from God”.²⁸ Recall that this was to be accompanied by good physical health for enduring fatigue, along with “exceptional charity and prudence”.²⁹

Their sole purpose was to spread the Word of God (*Verbum Dei*) through the personal witness of the missionary himself, who embraced “...charity and the disdain for human things, modesty and the simplicity of life, patience, prayer and the other **apostolic virtues** typical of brave apostles”.³⁰ Their holy examples would also show the people the real spirit of the Holy See, in stark contrast to that of the colonizing nations.

Enthusiasm for Cultural Studies

In the context of the *Instruction*, the missionaries were considered servants of the Word of God (*Verbum Dei*). This was a favorite theme of St. Justin Martyr, for whom the divine plan of creation and salvation was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the *Logos*: that is, the Eternal Word, creative Reason. He taught that each person shares in the rational nature of the *Logos*, carrying within himself a “seed of the Word”, and therefore can perceive glimmers of the truth. Thus, the same *Logos* also manifested himself partially in “seeds of truth” within Greek philosophy or Chinese wisdom. St. Justin thus concluded that, since Christianity is the historical and personal manifestation of the *Logos* in his totality, it follows that

²⁸ *Instruction*, n. 1: *Quoniam ea estis diligentia [...] religionis zelus et pietatis [...], nolite facile omni spiritui credere sed probate spiritus si ex Deo sint*; emphasis mine.

²⁹ *Instruction*, n. 2: *Non mediocri charitate, ac prudentia*.

³⁰ *Instruction*, n. 32: *Verbum Dei [...] charitate, rerum humanarum contemptu, modestia, frugalitate victus, patientia, et oratione aliisque virorum apostolicorum virtutibus disseminandum est*.

“whatever things were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians.”³¹

That is why, in spreading the Word of God, a missionary needs to discover the seeds of the Word already present within the local culture. For this reason, cultural studies for a missionary become an indispensable aid to the search for favorable “soil” in which the Gospel might take root. As such, it is not that the Gospel is to be adapted to the cultures it encounters, but rather the recognition and embrace of that already belonging to Gospel discovered within the culture. With the help of the likes of St. Justin, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas, Christianity has taken from Greek Philosophy whatever was found to be true to the Gospel, transforming it into a “railway” conveying the message at its heart.

An outstanding example of this can be found in the work of the great Jesuit missionary, Father Matteo Ricci, who left exceptional examples of such skillful evangelization. As he read and interpreted Confucian texts, Ricci admitted to having made every effort to interpret the ambiguous ideas in Confucius’ writing “in our favor”.³² Interpretation was not meant to be a purely intellectual exercise without any purpose, but done with the intention of interpreting the text “in our favor”, that is, the bringing of the Gospel closer to his hearers. Christians have the right to expose the hidden truths so as to make Christianity more attuned to Confucian ears. On this point Ricci was clear. A few decades later, the *Instruction* followed the same reasoning, advising the missionaries to “*admire and praise whatever merits praise.*”³³ This meant that whatever was admirable and praiseworthy in other forms of wisdom, be it Chinese or Greek, possessed a certain universal validity because of its origin in the

³¹ St. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, 13: 4.

³² “*Procurò molto di tirare alla nostra opinione il principale della setta de’ letterati, che è il Confutio, interpretando in nostro favore alcune cose che aveva lasciate scritte dubbiose.*” See *Fonti Ricciane, Documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle prime relazioni tra l’Europa e la Cina (1579-1615)*, edite e commentate da Pasquale M. D’Elia, sotto il patrocinio della Reale Accademia d’Italia (Edizione Nazionale delle Opere Edite e Inedite di Matteo Ricci), vol. II, n.709, p.296.

³³ *Instruction*, n. 39.

Eternal Word, and thus could be considered a pathway to Christian Faith.

Joy in Hope

Thanks to the admirable way in which culture was studied and scrutinized by the missionaries for inroads to the truth, the local Churches in the so-called mission territories underwent a marked transformation over the course of time. In the majority of cases, the clergy has become indigenous, and the Gospel truly speaks all languages. What is more, an adequate liturgical sensibility and a more uniform catechetical instruction have been achieved, new experiences of Consecrated Life have emerged, formation programs for all groups (laity, clergy, and religious) have expanded, and the inculturation of the Faith has been given greater attention. Besides this, in comparison to fifty years ago, the number of missionaries today originating in the West has greatly diminished, while missionary vocations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are on the rise.

The Joy of Knowing Christ

Allow me to conclude with a parable of Jesus regarding joy:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Matt. 13:44).

The parable is telling. Jesus *Himself* is the treasure personified. Those who look only upon the surface of the field will not find Him; their glance and desire are too superficial. Those who search more deeply with an ardent love will find Him, and will, in turn, be filled with a joy that makes them willing to go out and sell everything, to have Him Whom they love. Only in this sense is there more joy in giving than receiving (*Acts 20:35*). The eschatological dimension is also vividly present in this parable as

well, as the man had *already* discovered the treasure, but was *not yet* in full possession of it.

Yes! Christ is the treasure of truth and center of life, so that human beings can in no way be destined to a simple dissociation of trillions of atoms, aimlessly dissipating. Christ, *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*, is the source of human joy, so that here on earth we have Someone to love, something to do for Him, and thus, something for which to hope. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis put it succinctly:

*The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.*³⁴

³⁴ EG, n. 1.