

Vatican II and the 'New Evangelisation'

Dominic Robinson SJ

In calling us to a Year of Faith to mark 50 years since the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict has said that this is a significant moment in which the Church must engage in the 'new evangelisation'. But what does the new evangelisation mean, and how is it an authentic fruit of Vatican II? Dominic Robinson SJ explores the pope's call in the light of the Council's understanding of evangelisation and later developments of this teaching.

The Year of Faith is now upon us. Crucial to our understanding of what we are invited to do in this year is what the last two popes have called the 'new evangelisation'. 'Evangelisation' is still misunderstood by many British Catholics as being a Protestant idea, but for Pope Benedict it is vital, urgent and integral to the Church's life and future. Moreover, the pope's call to the 'new evangelisation' is rooted in a conviction that we are at a landmark time for the Church's mission. So what is the new evangelisation, and how does it relate to the understanding of evangelisation that was laid out fifty years ago at the Second Vatican Council?

The concept of the new evangelisation is rich, encompassing a variety of themes, but the key to them all is surely dialogue. The new evangelisation is the Church's response to the challenge of communicating the Christian faith in ever-changing societies and cultures. This involves a renewed impetus for ongoing dialogue with a secularity which pervades in societies which may or may not have been evangelised in the past.

The 'new evangelisation'

It was Blessed John Paul II who first coined the term, 'new evangelisation', describing it as the 'commitment not to evangelization, but rather of a new evangeliz-



Photo by AceFrenzy at flickr.com

ation; new in its ardour, methods and expression' [[Address to Latin American Bishops Conference, 1983](#)]. For John Paul II, the new evangelisation is not a matter of redoing something which has been done inadequately or has not achieved its purpose, as if the new activity were an implicit judgment on the failure of a 'first evangelisation'; nor is it taking up the first evangelisation again, or simply repeating the past. Instead, it is the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today. The necessity for this new approach drew heavily on the experience of the Church in Latin America, which had to undertake a process of discernment in response to the many and serious challenges that were being posed to its ecclesial culture.

John Paul II was calling the Church to a much closer appreciation of its particular cultural situation and in doing so was taking forward the call of Vatican II to dialogue. The term 'new evangelisation' seems to emerge from the ecclesial enthusiasm of this great missionary pope. But we are now entering into an era when our current theologian pope is calling us to a deeper reflection on what the call to evangelisation heralded at Vatican II and developed by the great missionary pontiff John Paul II really entails today.

Vatican II and the Catechism

The ecclesial understanding of evangelisation conceived of by the Second Vatican Council was confirmed and crystallised in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published twenty years ago. The twin anniversaries that the Year of Faith marks – of the opening of Vatican II and of the publication of the *Catechism* – are at the heart of the understanding of our call to new evangelisation.

Vatican II was the great Council of the Church which proclaimed the need for the faith to be communicated anew to the modern world. This was a call to renew our Catholic life and to evangelise beyond the confines of the Catholic community. *Lumen Gentium* sets the groundwork for this by laying out the Church's mission: 'that, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature... it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission... The present-day conditions of the world add greater urgency to this work of the Church so that all men, joined more closely today by various social, technical and cultural ties, might also attain fuller unity in Christ' (*LG* §1). For the Council, the Church is of her very nature missionary, shining the light of the Gospel of Christ to all. In the modern world this will necessitate dialogue with ways of living and thinking prevalent in societies today.

A whole document is devoted to this evangelising work: *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. In particular the Church dedicates herself to dialogue with a culture marked by spiritual uneasiness, changes in the social order and shifts in attitudes to morality and religion. If dialogue with modernity is one side of the coin, for *Gaudium et Spes* the other side of the coin is the unalterable content of evangelisation: '...while helping the world and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass... For God's Word, by whom all things were made, was Himself made flesh so that as perfect man He might save all men and sum up all things in Himself' (*GS* §45). In other words, Jesus Christ is the one whom the Church exists to show to the world. He is primary. The *means* of evangelisation are secondary.

A key element in understanding how we are to interpret the vision for evangelisation laid out in the pages of the Vatican II documents now, is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the summary of the living tradition that the Church seeks to spread. For the Church – that is, for all of us called to evangelise – the Catechism presents a coherent summary of *what* we are called to communicate, the truths of the faith.

What we are to communicate, however, is not in the first place a set of doctrines or a way of life. It is a person, Jesus Christ who is our joy and hope, the meaning to life: 'Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.' (*GS* §22). Indeed, this is also the aim of all catechesis: 'To catechise is "to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person..."' Catechesis aims at putting "people . . . in communion . . . with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity" (*CCC* §426). To evangelise then is to lead people to the central truth – to him. From that we are then called to convey his message, the message of the Kingdom he came himself to bring to earth.

If this is the *who* and the *what* of evangelisation, what about the *how*? The Vatican II document *Ad Gentes*, on the nature of missionary activity, presents Christ as the beginning and the end of all evangelisation. Developing the picture of the Church herself in *Lumen Gentium*, it goes further in linking the mission of the Church with the structure present in the life of the Trinity: 'The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father' (*AG* §2). *Ad Gentes* proposes that evangelising activity be carried out through every possible means at our disposal. Evangelisation should be an integral part of all ecclesial projects, communities, visions for parishes, dioceses, institutions. Above all it is a duty of the Church to encourage evangelisation in the world to be the key dimension of the lay apostolate. Training then should be provided for this.

Taking this forward in his encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, issued in 1975 on the tenth anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI exhorts the Church to foster the lay apostolate, especially through small lay communities in the midst of the world, and to engage with what cultures have to say about values and meaning in life. The Vatican II legacy is thus to place evangelising activity at the heart of the secular through respectful dialogue and immersion in the modern world, especially through the promotion of the lay apostolate.

Evangelisation of its very nature thus takes its place at the meeting point of unchanging truths about God and his Kingdom vision, and a world of constantly shifting cultural reality. The world has changed considerably in the last fifty years. Secularisation has taken root in societies. It is from the commitment to dialogue with these shifting trends that a theology of ‘new evangelisation’ emerges, taking forward the call of the Council but crystallising it and giving it a theological structure.

Pope Benedict and the new evangelisation

Pope Benedict’s theological motives for the new evangelisation take us back to the heart of the mystery of God himself and in particular the dogma of the Trinity. According to the preparatory document for the recent Synod of Bishops on New Evangelisation, the Church herself, in essence missionary, ‘imitates God who communicates himself through the gift of his Son to humanity, who lives in Trinitarian communion and who pours out the Holy Spirit so as to carry on a dialogue with humanity’ (*Lineamenta* §2). Thus evangelisation must be the echo of divine communication. The Church, founded to spread the Gospel, must therefore let herself be formed by the action of the Spirit to be configured to Christ crucified and risen. She rediscovers her maternal mission as *ecclesia mater*, who begets children for the Lord. In the dynamic process here envisaged by Benedict, revealed truth is primary and prior to formation of the mind and heart by mother Church in the central mysteries of the Christian narrative which give meaning to life; and the Church by her very nature has a duty to evangelise.

The Synod on the New Evangelisation has been guided by this theological structure. This will form

the basis of the understanding of dialogue with culture to which the key is ‘discernment’. The *Lineamenta* are intended to initiate a process of listening and understanding, and to broaden the horizons of the discernment already taking place in our Churches: discernment is to become more attuned, and even more ‘catholic’ and ‘universal’. But in the context of evangelisation what will discernment mean in practice? What might it mean here in Britain?

The new evangelisation in context

The reality in many urban Catholic parishes in Britain is very interesting. We are perhaps moving in many of our parish communities from multiculturalism to a process of interculturation where there is no dominant base culture as there once was. Up until two years ago I was working in a parish in north London where, when you looked out at the congregation each Sunday, you encountered folk from a vast array of ethnic backgrounds, but very few from that Anglo-Irish ethnic base which for decades had been the mainstay of parish life. Our parish communities are increasingly global: dialogue is not just unavoidable, but a necessity. This is a wonderful opportunity, gift and a great challenge for a Catholic parish which is vexing the minds of those charged with pastoring, doing ministry, planning liturgy, promoting the faith, and calling the community to an evangelising mission. This opportunity invites us to respond in a very concrete, practical way to the call to the new evangelisation.

The Church’s message will always be the same. This is the unalterable content of evangelisation. Here the thread from Vatican II back to Christ and forward to the second coming is constant and clear. This is the *who* of our Faith, Jesus Christ. As the *Instrumentum Laboris* (produced in response to the *Lineamenta*) for the Synod stated: ‘The goal of all evangelisation is to create the possibility for this encounter, which is, at one and the same time, intimate, personal, public and communal’ (*Instrumentum Laboris* §18). Quoting from Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, setting the tone for a programme of pontifical teaching at once both christocentric and missionary, the document reminds us that ‘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).

If the proceedings of the Synod help to call us closer still to Christ and to be renewed in our zeal to reveal him and his Kingdom beyond the Church's confines, it will surely serve its purpose, set in the living tradition of the Church proclaimed through the Council and confirmed for today's situation in recent papal teaching. It will help us heed Pope Benedict's call in this Year of Faith 'to rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith' (*Porta Fidei*, §7).

Dominic Robinson SJ teaches Systematic Theology at Heythrop College, University of London and works in adult religious education in the Archdiocese of Westminster. He is the author of Understanding the “Imago Dei”: The Thought of Barth, von Balthasar and Moltmann (Ashgate, 2011).