

A few thoughts on New Evangelisation

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The aim of evangelisation is life "in Christ". Evidence of effective evangelisation involves repentance and conversion from pre-Christian ways of thinking.

The aim of New Evangelisation is the same: life "in Christ". But it takes place in the context of faith having been neglected or abandoned. And so evidence of effective New Evangelisation would involve conversion from various 'post-Christian' ways of thinking.

I use the term 'post-Christian' because in many cases that is what we are dealing with. However, not all those who have abandoned the Church have abandoned the Christian faith. Such as these cannot be called 'post-Christian', and so I use the term 'post-Catholic' to include those who sometimes look to other Christian churches for the nurture of their faith. Their life "in Christ" exists without the support of certain ministries, sacraments and teachings that are *constitutive of Catholic faith*. A New Evangelisation would need to invite their return to all these elements of life "in Christ", as well as aim to prevent leakage from the Church.

Diversity within post-Christian and post-Catholic ways of thinking, and diversity within people's reasons for slipping into those ways of thinking, means that New Evangelisation is not reducible to some new method or technique. Rather it is multi-faceted, and ultimately involves the renewal of the Church itself. This is frankly acknowledged in the *Lineamenta*, n.2:

New Evangelisation.... places at the centre of discussion the entire Church in all that she is and all that she does. Perhaps in this way the problem of unfruitfulness in evangelisation and catechesis today can be seen as an ecclesiological problem which concerns the Church's capacity, more or less, of becoming a real community, a fraternity and a living body, and not a mechanical thing or enterprise.

For this same reason, a New Evangelisation should not be narrowly focused on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, personal conversion, witness, inculturation, sacramental life, doctrine and social action are all named (each is emphasised) as components of evangelisation. *Together* they make up the Church's evangelising activity.

The starting point for conversion can be any one of these different facets. It might be one person's witness/example that attracts another person to the faith. Or it might be an experience of the liturgy that has this effect. Or it might be the Church's involvement in work for the poor and for social justice that leads others to conversion. For some it will be a particularly good explanation of the Church's teaching that appeals and convinces – though probably most people will come to conversion, or to re-conversion, by experiencing those *other elements* of the Church's evangelising activity.

But whatever the starting point, each of these elements is oriented towards the others. What kind of personal conversion would it be if one held aloof from the liturgy? Participation in the

liturgy should naturally lead to action for justice. So too, participation in the life of the Church leads to a desire for better understanding of the Church's teaching. It is in this way that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a key role.

My aim in these notes is limited to identifying some specific post-Christian and post-Catholic ways of thinking that will need to be targeted by New Evangelisation, and some of the cultural and social characteristics of the environment in which evangelisation has to be carried out today.

1. Noise

One of the distinctive characteristics of our social environment is noise. I am referring to the Church's difficulty of competing with other voices coming through the mass media and the social networking websites. People are being bombarded with information, opinions and trivia, and are caught up in a pace of life that literally leaves them little time to think for themselves, let alone to reflect or mediate. To some extent, their thinking is done for them by those with the loudest voices – predominantly commercial and consumerist.

Instead of being yet one more voice competing for people's minds and hearts, the Church would do well to emphasise the need for silence and stillness. The Second Vatican Council recognised this need when it wondered how in today's circumstances we might "preserve the ability to contemplate and to wonder from which comes wisdom" (GS, 56).

Teachers in our schools assure us that even little children respond positively to opportunities for silence and stillness. The retreat movement, and especially Retreats in Daily Life, provide counter-cultural opportunities for prayer and reflection for people living busy lives. These are time-honoured ways of getting to know Christ personally and more deeply – out of which comes *the desire to make Him known* to others. This is the ultimate meaning of Evangelisation – old or new.

The retreat movement and practices such *Lectio Divina* should be given a place of honour in any description of a New Evangelisation.

2. "Spirituality" – the way it is often intended today

There is something straight-forward, albeit difficult, about the conversion required of those whose alienation from the Gospel is rooted in a sinful way of life. On the other hand, the conversion required of those who want to live good and responsible lives but who feel no need for the Church is a more complex process.

The All Black winger John Kerwin's philosophy of life seems generally representative of such people:

For me, spirituality is about adhering to your philosophy in life, applying it to where you're heading and what you'd like to be seen as. It's about the personal rules, morals and ethics you live by – about sticking to those rules and not breaking them for anyone. It's about what you really care about, and what makes you feel good. It's about being the best person you can be. These things all add up to peace and happiness.

Confucius has something to say about this, as well. He says that the things we should aspire to are to be the best person we can be; to have a properly functioning family; to be of benefit to our community; and to bring peace to the world. There's a lot to think about in that, but it's really about personal fulfilment, about being at peace with ourselves and at peace with our place in the world. Those are the things that bring true happiness, and that will nourish our souls.

I was brought up in a strong Catholic family and, like most religions, there are good things about that, and bad things. I'm not a Vatican Catholic. I believe contraception is a good thing; I believe that priests should marry; and I believe a whole lot of other things that aren't the way the Vatican sees things. But I also notice that wherever there's trouble in the world, Catholics are always there doing their best.

But, for me, old-style Catholicism encouraged guilt as a way to make sure you don't do bad things – and this wasn't good for me. For a while there, it was swallowing me up. I don't think guilt's a good part of life.

I still believe in God, though,....

We all have our own preferred ways of recharging our spirit. For you, it might be prayer, or painting. It might be yoga, or meditation – whatever suits you. But it needs to be done regularly so that you keep feeling good spiritually, and you continue to grow... (*All Blacks Don't Cry*, pp 15 & 17).

The "spirituality" intended by people like JK does not have to be linked with anything that has ever happened in history. It is simply about taking one's place within the universe and trying to be in harmony with it. Fundamentally, it is an ethical position. Catholic faith, on the other hand, is intrinsically linked to historical events, and its core activities (liturgy and sacraments) are about being personally *linked to those events*. "Spirituality" would be the same even if those events never happened.

An effective New Evangelisation would need to provide evidence of our claim that spirituality is not sufficient even for its own intended purpose of providing a full and fulfilling life. We need to be able to show that certain historical events are *decisive* – for the outcome of all history, and for each person's own "fulfilment".

Like Paul with the Athenians, we need to start with what good people already intuit, i.e. that life is meant to be good, and that their deepest best longings are meant to be fulfilled. But next they need to discover that life is unable to fulfil its own promise. At its best it allows us to possess life's joys only in fragmented moments, separated by time and place, never all at once and together and for keeps. Death, if nothing else, is the ultimate spoiler. In answer to "what now?", the grave, in fact the whole cosmos, is mercilessly and relentlessly mute.

Somehow death itself needs to be overcome, and people's ability to live fully depends on their knowing that it has been, or will be, and that "all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise in this life we will find again, cleansed and transfigured..." (cf GS, 39). It is against this background that the *events* portrayed in the Gospel can be recognised as entirely relevant, and as *good* news. The Church needs to be recognizable as the herald of that good news (not just "a mechanical thing or enterprise").

3. "Religion"

John Kerwin's views also reflect the widespread assumption that one religion is as good as another, and it's the individual's right to pick and mix. So long as we act as if Christian faith were a "religion", we make it part of the smorgasbord from which to choose. But we don't have to do that. Religion is characteristically about the various ways human beings have looked for God and for salvation (however that might be understood). Judeo-Christian faith on the other hand is not ultimately about human efforts to find God or about attempting to appease God or to make up for sin in the ways that religions do. Instead, it is – wonderfully – about *God coming to us*, and about what *God has done in and through Christ*.

In this sense, Judeo-Christian faith is unique, and it is this uniqueness that needs to be given a higher profile in New Evangelisation. This will require the subordination of any Church practices, institutions and customs that in any way eclipse or obscure what is primary in the Church's very reason for existing, i.e. announcing the good news of what God has done and is doing, and inviting people's response to that.

4. Worship

A pastor of the Apostolic Church once told me that many of his congregation were Catholics who found Catholic liturgy "over their heads" and who preferred the forms of worship he provided. (He also explained that he encourages them to move gradually back to their home church – he did the same for Anglicans – but in the meantime he was happy to provide the nurture they needed). That was in the 1970s. Forty years later, a letter in *The*

Tablet describes young Catholics preferring the Pentecostal Churches, for similar reasons. We have all seen echoes of this in our own country.

Losing the young to Pentecostalism – Edd Bartlett's letter (10 December) on the reality of how young people experience the Church really touched me. I am a school chaplain and regularly take students on retreat. They all return having had a really memorable experience. They are moved by the prayers, peer support and liturgies they experience in the fantastic Catholic youth retreat centres around the country. On these retreats, the liturgies are organised by young people themselves. The music is contemporary and speaks of things the young people understand. Students often return saying they want to go to church again and can I recommend somewhere good. At this point I often don't know what to say. I can recommend a fantastic church down the road where they will feel welcome, where the liturgy, music, preaching is really moving and speaks of God actively working in our lives... but it is a Pentecostal church. The truth is that the average Catholic parish is no longer relevant, or attractive, to young people today.

Hence, many of my Catholic students now worship regularly in local Pentecostal or charismatic churches. And to be fair, I don't blame them. What keeps me going is my experience of two years' voluntary work in the Philippines. Here, I saw a Church where the laity are empowered as co-workers in mission, the churches are packed for all seven or eight Masses every Sunday, the hymns are played with guitar and drums and are basically love songs of God to his people, and are often followed by clapping and dancing.

All this nonsense about the words we say at Mass, about what we eat on Fridays, about speaking a dead language in liturgy, is of no relevance to young people. It does not speak of their lives, questions, doubts, experiences. We speak of being a universal Church; then why aren't we learning from our brothers and sisters in Africa, the Philippines and Latin America, where the Church is alive and growing? We have to ask ourselves why so many of our young people, along with Catholics who come to make a new life in England from the developing world, end up worshipping in Evangelical churches. This is the elephant in the room which we dare not speak about; because it touches on key issues of lay empowerment, clericalism and liturgy which, in the European Church, is very differently lived out. (Ian Farrington, *The Tablet*, Jan 2012).

A New Evangelisation, or catechesis, aimed at attenuating this phenomenon calls for a two-way movement:

(i) Catholics, and especially younger Catholics, need to be gently reminded that liturgy is not about what appeals or entertains; it is not about putting our own preferences ahead of what the Church provides for us;

(ii) Appropriate accommodation to the needs of our congregations is a matter of respecting the ancient maxim: "grace builds on nature". For example, in the order of nature, young people are not yet adult, and so their participation in liturgy that has been designed by adults for people with adult experience and understanding is bound to be problematic. I am perplexed by the claim made in the *Lineamenta* where it says that "the transmission of the faith... (is not about) analytically concentrating on the hearers, for example the young" (n.2). All catechetics adjust to age groups, and sensitive pastors make similar adjustments in the celebration of liturgy. On the one hand we do not want to carry over into liturgy the commercially-inspired construct of a 'youth culture'. But we must nevertheless take seriously those loyal and responsible Catholics in youth ministry, many of them parents of teenagers, who emphasise the need for liturgy to be such that young people can relate to. We cannot tell young people how important they are to the Church – as young people – and then expect them to be adults ahead of their time.

After all, there is another group of Catholics who really do put their own preferences ahead of what the Church wants for them, namely those who insist on celebrating the liturgy according to the unrevised Missal, and we accommodate them to the extent of endorsing their preferred way of celebrating the liturgy as an "extraordinary" form of the Roman Rite.

Those young people who go off to Pentecostal Churches, and those mainly older people who decline to participate in the Church's liturgical reform, do not necessarily sever their links with the Church. But they do *loosen* their connection with it just by the fact of putting their own preferences ahead of the Church's preferences. And so a New Evangelisation must *include sound liturgical catechesis*.

5. Mixed Signals

Slogans such as "reforming the reform" and calls for all Catholics to return to the 1962 Missal (including recently by a Cardinal), fall short of a loyal Catholic response to the teaching of a General Council of the Church. Serious commitment to the renewal intended by the Council is the more difficult, and in some quarters the less travelled, road.

The Council's teaching that the call to holiness is for all the baptised (not just the Religious), and that responsibility for the mission of the Church belongs to all the baptised (not just the ordained) has far-reaching potential for renewing and re-imaging the Church. It is this *renewed ecclesiology* that will provide the seedbed for a genuinely New Evangelisation – simply because *agere sequitur esse*. Old wineskins cannot hold new wine. A clerical model of the Church cannot sprout a New Evangelisation, probably because, as Einstein reminded us, a problem cannot be solved by the mindset that created it.

This suggests to me that the findings and recommendations of the General Synod on New Evangelisation should not be passed over to the Pontifical Council for New Evangelisation for any form of filtering, or for the drafting of the post-Synodal document. The composition of the Council reflects a narrowly clerical model of Church. One hopes that a hearing might be given to the kind of lay people whose research has been briefly reported in *The Tablet* under the heading: "The Revolving Door – Women who join, leave and then return to the Catholic Church". The reasons for their coming, their going, and their returning, are all pertinent to the subject of New Evangelisation, if it is permissible to "concentrate analytically on the hearers"). The following is part of that report:

...it would be wrong to assume that women are just abandoning Catholicism. Adults' practise of their religion is becoming more fluid – they are constantly joining, leaving and returning.

It is still the case that females make up the majority in congregations in many Catholic churches in Britain and Ireland and they also have important roles in parishes and dioceses as catechists, teachers and pastoral assistants.

Professor Tina Beattie, theologian and a convert, believes that a number of women are attracted to Catholicism because of the emptiness of contemporary society.

"In quite a nihilistic consumerist age, when secularism by no means affords a meaningful alternative, the Catholic Church becomes very attractive as a repository not only of meaning and hope but of art and culture. There is always a romance about Catholicism," she said.

Despite institutional failings, Professor Beattie, director of the Digby Stuart Research Centre for Catholic Studies at Roehampton University, says the Church still speaks to people "about cosmic meaning and redemption".

This means that Catholicism is able to attract both those women disillusioned with feminism and liberalism "who would embrace quite a conservative type of Catholicism as a reaction against that" and also those "feminist in their sympathies... who say this [the Church] is better than any of the alternatives".

The encounters that women have with the Church "on the ground" are also important.

Caroline Dollard, convenor of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults network in England and Wales, said: "In my experience it is not so much a desire for escapism but, more positively, that the Church offers a fresh perspective on life".

Providing a space for people to explore the faith, such as enquiry groups, are extremely important. She gives the example of Cathy, a woman who joined her local parish's bereavement group after the death of her son. There, "they listened, week after week". Later she prayed in front of an image of the pieta – Mary holding her dying son – and "felt Christ, and the whole family of the Church understood her and shared in her suffering:" Soon afterwards she was received.

There are also those Catholic women who return to their faith. Sheila Keefe, who has designed the programme Keeping in Touch specifically for lapsed Catholics, explained that a number of women return after a personal visit from a parish priest, an invitation from the parish or simply a conversation.

Other moments are perhaps the more obvious times such as when a child receives the sacraments or when someone is old or ill.

The liturgy can also be powerful: Mrs Dollard says that simply listening to Scripture, silence of lighting a candle can bring about a recognition of the need to return.

While many share Olivia O'Leary's concern about the role of women, the clerical sexual abuse scandal has also created disillusionment. One woman, a journalist who wished to remain anonymous, explained that she stopped going to church for a time as a result. "I used to sing in the choir, but felt that I had nothing to sing about." Professor Beattie puts it starkly: "It is the grind of exclusion and moral hypocrisy of a regime which will jump to attention if someone whispers about contraception, homosexuality or abortion and lets abuse go hidden for decades."

Mrs Dollard explains that women find it hard to remain in the Church "if their gifts are consistently rejected". "Within an institutional all-male hierarchical model of leadership, it would be important to ensure that women's voices are very much part of the conversations," she said. At a recent study day she led for the Diocese of Middlesbrough's Women's Commission those who attended felt strongly that more dialogue was needed with them over a whole raft of issues. These include the disconnect between the institutional Church and spirituality, abuse, clericalism, divorce and remarriage and the quality of preaching and teaching.

For Julia Palmer, a former Anglican vicar who is now in charge of adult formation in the Diocese of Nottingham, women's ordination delayed her decision to become a Catholic. But in the end she decided it was not enough for her to remain in the Church of England.

"It boiled down to a stark choice. Either I accept the Roman Catholic Church and its authority and give up my ordained role, or carry on as I was and feel that I had second best." (*The Tablet*, 7 January, pp 4 & 5).

6. Evangelisation begins at home

The most intimate and most lasting knowledge of Christian faith is generated in Christian homes. Perhaps a key part of New Evangelisation should be an invitation and challenge to practising Catholics to make their homes *more visibly environments of faith*.