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Bishop's Pastoral Letters

The New Evangelization in Brooklyn and Queens
A Pastoral Letter by
Most Reverend Nicholas DiMarzio
Bishop of Brooklyn
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Introduction

This first pastoral letter during my Episcopal ministry in the Diocese of Brooklyn, serving the people of Brooklyn and Queens , deals with the New Evangelization. After one year's experience in the Diocese and observing its particular needs, I have built on the theme of my homily at the Vesper Service at the Cathedral Basilica of Saint James prior to my Mass of Installation, namely, the scene in Luke's Gospel (Lk 5, 1-11) in which Jesus encourages the Apostles and disciples after a night of futile fishing. He bids them to "put out into the deep," to try again, and promises an abundant catch as He will teach them how to become fishers of men. To put out into the deep has become the title of my weekly column and, I believe, my Episcopal ministry among God's faithful here in the Diocese of Brooklyn.



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That Gospel scene is a powerful one that witnesses the effective and attractive preaching of Jesus, so much so that He must put out into a boat in order to teach the crowd gathered on the shore. Jesus then turns His attention to the frustrated fishermen who were His first chosen Apostles and disciples. Their catch is so miraculous that Simon Peter, who would become the leader of the apostolic band, realizes that the future will hold more miraculous and challenging events. Peter bids the Lord to leave him, since he is a sinner and not worthy or capable of this type of mission. Jesus assures Peter that he should not be afraid because Peter makes an act of obedience and he becomes the Lord's instrument. So they left everything and followed Him. How realistic this scene is as it is repeated time and time again in the course of the history of the Church. We, too, must "put out into the deep" again, in a new era of evangelization. Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has called for this

in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Beginning of the New Millennium). How important is this time in the history of our Church.

In 1992, on the occasion of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of the evangelization of the Americas, my predecessor, Bishop Thomas V. Daily, issued a pastoral letter entitled *An Epiphany of Faith, Pastoral Letter on the Occasion of the Fifth Centenary of the Evangelization of the Americas*. Shortly after his arrival in 1990 as the sixth Bishop of Brooklyn, Bishop Daily encouraged the faithful to evangelize the Diocese, especially through the new ecclesial movements. In a particular way, he encouraged efforts to evangelize our culture so much in need of a Christian presence. God's people in Brooklyn and Queens heeded his request. His pastoral letter became the subject of much discussion and implementation. Building on this solid foundation, I too ask that this present pastoral letter become an instrument to spur on the New Evangelization through discussion of its contents with thoughtful and meaningful action.

This pastoral letter is addressed to all people of good will, to all Christians and, most especially, to the Catholics who are members of the Diocese of Brooklyn. As we witness to our faith, we respect the faith of others. Yet, we cannot hide what we believe and sincerely wish to share our faith with others. The New Evangelization must be lived especially in how we show deep respect for the human person in his dignity and freedom to determine himself religiously before God. This is also true regarding other Christians and those of other religions.

Towards an Understanding of the New Evangelization

The invitation to begin the New Evangelization comes to us from Pope John Paul II at the beginning of a new millennium. Our Holy Father asks us to address the challenges that the world presents to us. One of the major challenges is that words often do not carry deep meaning in our lives because we have lost the sense of ourselves in using them. We must remember that Christianity is more than a religion of words. It is most importantly the revelation of a Person who is God and man. The Divine Word through Whom all things were made is a Divine Person - Jesus Christ. The New Evangelization is the full preaching and hearing of the Person of Jesus in a living encounter for everyone in this third millennium.

This and other challenges offered by the world are numerous. The New Evangelization, however, is

neither a specific program nor a plan of action. Rather, it is a call to a personal encounter with Christ, to find His face, to show it to the world and to allow Him to identify us with Him. Such an encounter with the Lord leads us to rediscover the truth in a new and deeper way and provides us the strength to resist the mistaken belief that truth is relative and open to any interpretation. 1

It is precisely to counteract this relativistic mentality and restate the primordial mission of Christ, and, therefore, the Church – which is to teach Himself as the content of the revelation of God – that our Holy Father has set the mission of the Church at the beginning of the millennium to be the re-evangelization of the Person of Jesus Christ. He is “the Way, and the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14, 6) for all humanity, and not just for Christians. The novelty of crossing the threshold of the millennium consists in the experience that Jesus Christ, true God, is not an exception for man, but the revelation of man; that He is the norm of human existence and the very meaning of what it means to be human. Hence, the revelation of Jesus Christ cuts across all religious, political and ethnic borders to be the privileged and only way to achieve eternal life. “Christ is the one mediator between God and humankind: ‘For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all...’” (1 Tm 2, 5-7). Therefore, “No one ... can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit.”²

Indeed, we must preach His message by our lives to all men and women of good will, so they may see Christ as the unique and only Savior of humankind.

What the New Evangelization Is Not

The New Evangelization can be described in many ways by what it is not. First of all, it is not a new message. The message is the Word made Flesh, the Word spoken by the Father. It is Jesus who is the message and the medium. It is He alone who is proclaimed as the Good News to humankind.

The New Evangelization builds on the former generations of evangelizers. It also seeks to avoid the pitfalls of the past, such as forced proselytism. For many, “proselytism” tends to be a pejorative word. If, however, proselytism is understood as a zeal to make new converts to faith in Jesus Christ, then it is an essential word since there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ (although there is salvation outside the visible Church).³ The first converts in the

Church were called proselytes. Coercion must have no part in the new effort to bring the message of Christ to the world.

Nor is the New Evangelization a separate or new program with goals and objectives that must be met. The Kingdom of God is not a matter of meeting goals and objectives. The Kingship of Jesus Christ cannot be established by external structures. The Kingdom of God is within us; the Kingdom of God is a pearl of great price for which we are willing to sacrifice everything.

It is important to be clear on the meaning of the terms Kingdom and the Church as they relate to Christ in the course of time. In his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (Mission of the Redeemer), John Paul II reminds us that Christ is not the Church, but its Head and Bridegroom. The Church is not Christ, but His Body. The humanity of Christ is the "sacrament" of God as the Church is the "sacrament" of Christ to the world which brings about the Kingdom of God . Furthermore, the Kingdom of God is constantly expanding. It is here and now, within us and in our actions, by the gift of self we make in the world, especially as we follow the sacred teaching of the Church. But the fullness of the Kingdom is achieved only at the end of time. The Kingdom of God is neither Christ nor the Church, but cannot be separated from either and still be the Kingdom of God . The New Evangelization must make us more aware of the Kingdom of God , whose coming we pray for each time we recite the Our Father.

The New Evangelization is not a review of the doctrines of faith, although the substance of belief is critical. The New Evangelization presumes the content of faith and seeks to teach it by our lives of faithful service to Christ.

The New Evangelization is not solely directed to those who have never heard of Christ, which fits the more traditional definition of evangelization. The New Evangelization addresses those who are in need of being re-evangelized, of hearing the message again in a new presentation and new language, with a new zeal and a new captivating presence of Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

What Is the New Evangelization More Specifically?

More specifically, what can we say is the New Evangelization? The New Evangelization begins with a radical encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ. In the post-Synodal apostolic exhortation on bishops,

Pastores Gregis (Shepherd of the Lord's Flock), we read, "Christ is in fact the heart of evangelization... and is the very program of the New Evangelization which ultimately has its center in Christ Himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated so that in Him we may live the life of the Trinity and with Him transform history to its fulfillment in the Heavenly Jerusalem."⁴ Indeed, all evangelization is about encountering the Resurrected Christ through the ministry of the Church.

The New Evangelization might best be described as the "enrichment of faith," a term used by our Holy Father when, as archbishop of Krakow, he returned from the Second Vatican Council and wrote a book entitled Sources of Renewal to explain the message of Vatican II to his people. He wrote that the human person as a believing person of faith becomes an evangelizer: "Rather than understanding faith as 'a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent' concerned with questions like 'What should we believe?' or 'What is the meaning of this or that truth of faith?' we must ask the more difficult question, 'What does it mean to be a believing member of the Church?'"⁵ This question is difficult and complex because it is deeply personal. It can only be answered by a sincere gift of self. The new evangelizers will not only enrich their own faith, but also share it with others.

In order to accomplish the New Evangelization, however, which in a certain sense is "beginning over again," we must wipe the slate clean of past sins and errors, particularly when we have not respected the freedom and dignity of every human person. We must seek the forgiveness of those who have been offended down through the centuries, especially those who were harmed in the past by deviant means of evangelization. As we began the new millennium, Pope John Paul II has effectively listed the many errors and faults of the past for which he personally sought forgiveness in the name of the Church. We, too, as the Diocese of Brooklyn, must seek the forgiveness of those who may have been hurt in any way during the past one hundred and fifty years of our existence.

We cannot forget incidences of institutional and individual racism against people of color, nor the rejection and prejudices which excluded earlier groups of immigrants from our parish communities. Also, we call to mind the lack of inter-religious dialogue and ecumenical encounters. While some efforts have been made in the past in these regards we recognize that more must be done. Thus, for our

lack of understanding and for our failures, we seek forgiveness.

In a special way, we must seek forgiveness for the moral failures of the past by those who represented the Church, most especially for the great evil of the sexual abuse of minors. For this abuse, we cannot apologize enough and we must redouble our efforts to prevent any future sexual abuse of anyone entrusted to the care of the Church.

As each of us encounters anew the presence of the Risen Christ in our hearts, families, neighborhoods and faith communities, we necessarily must confront our personal faults and failings. When we encounter the love of God, we must also acknowledge our sins and seek the Lord's forgiveness. It is a forgiveness that is always available for the asking in the sacrament of Reconciliation. The renewed use of the sacrament of Penance is a necessary condition for those who would be evangelizers. We must also ask forgiveness from one another for the times we have chosen division, jealousy and fear over unity, collaboration and mercy. If we are to walk the road of the New Evangelization, we can only do so together, reconciled to the Lord and one another. If there is no conversion, there will be no New Evangelization.

The Focus of the New Evangelization

Re-evangelization is the revitalized proclamation of the Gospel as a lived experience in the concrete events of daily life for those already baptized and active in the Church. It is the encounter with Christ offered in the New Evangelization that gives us an opportunity to transform our own personal relationships with Christ.

First, it is a call to formal prayer and to pray the ordinary work of each day. Only then can we deepen our faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ gained through catechesis, faith formation, conscience formation, and an adherence to the moral teachings of the Church. Through prayer, we must integrate both the practice and knowledge of the faith so that every aspect of our lives is transformed.

There must also be an ongoing process of faith formation in our lives, nourished by education and prayer that will transform us into new disciples who bring the Gospel into the world by example and not solely by words. This transformation is especially needed in the lives of our children, teenagers and young adults as they begin their journey of faith.

Thus, the works of Catholic education on behalf of children and adults in our Catholic schools and religious education programs are the best and greatest means to achieve this aspect of the New Evangelization.

In a special way, our Catholic schools have been and must continue to become more effective instruments in evangelization. The evangelization of non-Catholics and the re-evangelization of students and families not practicing their faith can be accomplished through a renewed emphasis upon the values that give our Catholic schools their unique identity. Our school curriculum must reflect the current need for both the re-evangelization of believers and the evangelization of those who do not yet share our faith.

Second, we are called to love the Lord more deeply through the pastoral care of our fellow Catholics and the love of our neighbors, no matter who they may be. Many times we exercise this love of neighbor by providing social services, health care, housing programs and education in our Catholic schools. In the New Evangelization, the social teaching of the Church must become part of what we proclaim. We manifest our concern for all humanity and the whole human person through enunciating the social teaching that comes from the Gospel itself. When Jesus gave His inaugural sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4, 16-21), He commented on the passage of Isaiah (Is 61, 1-2) which described the mission of the Messiah to bring good news to the poor and liberation to captives, the heart of the Church's social teaching. All of these concrete actions are ways in which we can love the Lord more deeply and show that love to others.

Third, we must deepen our understanding of and encounter more fully the person of Christ in the sacraments of the Church – in particular, the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist) and the sacraments of witness (Marriage and Holy Orders). Through these sacraments we are sent out to be the primary evangelizers in the world. It is in these sacraments that a profound encounter with Christ begins and develops. Also, we must share our knowledge of and encounter with Christ with all whom we meet. This is the witness that is particular to the New Evangelization.

Re-Evangelizing Non-Practicing Catholics

Other recipients of the New Evangelization are those who have been baptized and have fallen away from

the practice of the faith. It is a chance for them to fall in love again with the Lord Jesus who lives in their hearts. They never will consider knowing the Lord better, however, unless they see this relationship with the Lord in the lives of fellow believers. Hence, the New Evangelization demands that each of us live an authentic life of witness to Christ in order to rekindle the faith of those who are non-practicing Catholics.

In many ways, the New Evangelization seeks greater opportunities to deepen the personal relationship that believers share with Christ through the sacrament of Baptism, even if they stop practicing their Catholic faith for a time. Many, so-called former Catholics, have been attracted to evangelical sects because they are attracted by the missionary zeal of the members and have their personal needs fulfilled. As the Lord directed the disciples to seek first the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Mt 10, 6), so, too, we must seek out those who have been lost in various ways. They must be restored to full participation in the life of the Church.

All the various opportunities of contact with non-practicing Catholics are teachable moments. The presence of many non-practicing individuals during the celebration of the sacraments, especially Baptism, First Eucharist and Confirmation and the preparation programs for these sacraments, are unique opportunities to enliven faith. Marriage preparation programs also offer great possibilities to rekindle dormant faith. Renewal programs of catechetical instruction for children should include parental participation. Imaginative programs of adult education can also reach many who are searching for ways to deepen the practice of their faith.

Evangelization of the Whole World

The New Evangelization also asks us to reach out to those who have never known the Lord and offer them a message of hope and life in Christ. John Paul II, in his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (The Mission of the Redeemer), gave a clear presentation of the perennial validity of the missionary mandate of Jesus Christ in the life of the Church. He reminds us that the essence of the message of salvation is none other than eternal life. Jesus Christ, by incorporating us into the Church, through Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, and in the celebration of the other sacraments, enables us to acquire the on-going gift of conversion. The various salvific events in the life of Christ all lead us to conversion and change, which is the heart of all evangelization.