

Benedict & The New Evangelization

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 12, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI released his *motu proprio* erecting the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization this morning. This phrase "New Evangelization" was coined by Pope John Paul II but it has become a central part of Pope Benedict's agenda and he doubtlessly intends it to be part of his legacy. He has his work cut out for him because it is not yet clear, even to many bishops, what the phrase means.

(N.B. At Q & A this week, we will be continuing the discussion of Pope Benedict's contributions to the life of the Church with comments from some of the young theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project this past August. This discussion is intended "like all discussions" to be an end in itself, but also to highlight the publication of a new book about the Holy Father, published by the USCCB, [Pope Benedict XVI: Essays and Reflections on His Papacy](#) [1], which I highly commend.)

A few weeks ago, my own ordinary, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C. issued his [pastoral letter](#) [2] on the New Evangelization. He spoke about at the brunch following last week's Red Mass as well. In his talk, Archbishop Wuerl focused on one part of the New Evangelization agenda, the need for all Christians, in their every day life, to find ways of calling people's attention to Jesus Christ. He regaled the crowd with some funny stories to illustrate the simple ways people can spread the faith. My favorite: Wuerl was going through the airport security screening and the attendant noticed the cross in his luggage, that he uses when celebrating Mass while traveling, and commented on its beauty. The attendant then looked somewhat sheepish and confessed that she doesn't get to Mass very often. "I have to work on Sundays," the woman said. Just then, an older person came through the metal detector, and said, "Try going on Saturday night." It is a great story.

It is also only half the story. The New Evangelization is not just about new methods, more openness in discussing our faith, finding opportunities to "witness" to the Gospel. It is also about, to use one of Benedict's favorite words, re-proposing the faith in a culture that has lost the instinct to believe. What Walter Lippmann (in 1926!) accurately called the "acids of modernity" have eaten a way at the disposition to believe, and in proposing the Christian faith anew, we must realize that fact.

No one in the hierarchy is more conscious of the changed cultural and intellectual climate than Pope Benedict. [Last Friday](#) [3], I ran a quote from his 1968 work "Introduction to Christianity" that shows one instance of the future-Pontiff recognizing the unique challenge of proclaiming the Gospel in our time. Here is another. In 2004, he had a now-famous exchange with the great German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, which is published as [The Dialectics of Secularization](#) [4]. It is a fascinating read not least because of these words of then-Cardinal Ratzinger: "The natural law has remained (especially in the Catholic Church) the key issue in dialogues with the secular society and with other communities of faith in order to appeal to the reason we share in common and to seek the basis for a consensus about the ethical principles of law in a secular pluralistic society. Unfortunately, this instrument has become blunt. Accordingly, I do not intend to appeal to it for support in this conversation. The idea of the natural law presupposed a concept of nature in which nature and reason overlap, since nature itself is rational. With the victory of the theory of evolution, this view of nature has capsized; nowadays, we think that nature as such is not rational, even if there is rational behavior in nature." I confess, I wish he was

equally reluctant to appeal to natural law in conversation intra ecclesia, and not just with Habermas. Our moralism today now impedes our ability to proclaim the Gospel, it does not lead people to it. Too many pastors have become complicit in the reduction of the faith to morals (it gains them access to the public square!), in which Christianity ends up being equated with kindness, and the distinctive claim ? the Crucified Lives ? is lost.

Last night, in the PBS documentary ?God in America,? about which I will have a brief review later today, there is a scene at the beginning in which one of the experts says of the early colonists, ?For they believed theirs was the true path to salvation.? I know what the expert was trying to say: The colonial period did not place a high value on inter-religious dialogue and, because it was a brutal age as well as an intolerant one, the strength of the colonists? convictions often led them to horrible, and unchristian, atrocities. But, when I heard that comment I also said to myself, ?Well, duh?? Of course we believe that ours is the true path to salvation. Otherwise, why bother? I do not mean to suggest that ours is the exclusive path, but I do believe that in the person of Jesus Christ, we humans received the definitive self-revelation of the Trinitarian God. This is what the New Evangelization must be about: Recognizing that we live in an age that thinks it somehow worthy of comment that a religion?s truth claims are real. We live in an age that is does not stumble over the claim that we should be kind to our neighbors (except, of course, for our Latino neighbors, whom some think we should deport), but that somehow thinks it strange that a person should seriously believe that the most important event in the history of the world happened on a hillside in Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

This is what the New Evangelization must be about: Understanding our times, but also understanding our faith, and making sure that all of our moral claims somehow flow from the empty tomb on that hillside, not the other way round. If you wish to be a Christian because you want to defend traditional marriage, you have it backwards. It is because you are a Christian that you recognize the value of traditional marriage. Others can come to their moral conclusions by their own routes ? again, there need not be any sense of exclusivity here ? but the New Evangelization is about the empty tomb.

Where will it lead? One of my favorite documents issued by the USCCB actually shows how the New Evangelization can result in a quite bracing critique of contemporary culture. In their 1996 document ?The Hispanic Presence in the New Evangelization in the United States,? the bishops wrote this: ?In our country, the modern, technological, functional mentality creates a world of replaceable individuals incapable of authentic solidarity. In its place, society is grouped by artificial arrangements created by powerful interests. The common ground is an increasingly dull, sterile, consumer conformism ? visible especially among so many of our young people ? created by artificial needs promoted by the media to support powerful economic interests. Pope John Paul II has called this a ?culture of death.??The New Evangelization, therefore, requires the Church to provide refuge and sustenance for ongoing growth to those rescued from the loneliness of modern life. It requires the promotion of a culture of life based on the Gospel of life.? I would submit that most of the people talking about the ?culture of death? are not delivering this kind of trenchant criticism of the culture.

So, yet again, Pope Benedict is opening a door for us. He is asking us to consider what we believe and how we can bring it to a culture that is forgetful of its own traditions and almost instinctively suspicious of truth claims. The Holy Father is asking us to look past all the struggles and debates that animate us most days and recall, first to ourselves and then to our culture, the outrageous claims at the heart of our faith. God Himself was born of a woman, walked the earth, was crucified for our sins and raised from the dead that we might come to true holiness, to the belief, so hard to sustain when we are honest about ourselves and our hidden areas of sin and darkness, that His mercy is greater than our sins, and that in a world of uncertainty, we can be certain of that mercy.

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[1]

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[2] <http://www.adw.org/pastoral/default.asp>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/blast-past-early-ratzinger>

[4]

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