

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 7, 2013 at 5:37am

What's this 'new evangelization' thing, anyway?

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NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Rome — So far, when cardinals have been asked what they want in the next pope ? back in that brief moment, that is, before yesterday's clampdown on talking to the press ? they typically mention all sorts of things, including global vision and a capacity to govern.

Quite often, however, they also refer to wanting a pope for the "New Evangelization." While that phrase may mean something to insiders, it typically leaves normal people, including the vast majority of the 5,000 journalists now accredited to cover this election, scratching their heads.

Herewith, a primer on the "New Evangelization."

Let's start with the official Catholic argot, where "evangelization" is synonymous with missionary efforts ? meaning the effort to convert people, get them into church, and draw them deeper into the life of faith.

Croatian Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, who organized a synod of bishops on the New Evangelization last fall, has defined New Evangelization by distinguishing three different kinds of missionary effort:

- Evangelization as a regular activity of the church, a lifelong process directed at practicing Catholics;
- The mission *ad gentes*, meaning the first proclamation of Christ to non-Christian persons and peoples;
- "New Evangelization," meaning outreach to baptized Catholics who have become distant from the faith.

Defined that way, the New Evangelization aims to reach out to alienated Catholics who in many cases have become secularized. Europe and North America are a special preoccupation, because that's where a

disproportionate share of these "distant Christians" are found.

Now, let's translate all that into language that non-theologians can understand.

In a nutshell, the "New Evangelization" is about salesmanship. The idea is to move the Catholic product in the crowded lifestyle marketplace of the post-modern world.

When cardinals say the next pope has to be committed to the New Evangelization, therefore, what they mean is that he should be a pitchman, someone who can attract people to the faith.

Just as in other markets, there are different ways of doing that ? some salespeople are brash and in-your-face, some much kinder and gentler. Some work the street, others work the high-end markets. The key, however, is to be always be closing.

This may be the first time reporters have heard about the New Evangelization, but in recent years it's become the buzzword par excellence in Catholic circles. Books are being published, lectures given, conferences organized, diocesan offices created, and whole courses of study put together, all devoted to the ways and means of the New Evangelization.

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In March 2011, for instance, St. John's Seminary in the Boston archdiocese announced the launch of a "Theological Institute for the New Evangelization," which will offer a Master's of Theological Studies for the New Evangelization. The institute brings together the seminary's formation programs aimed at laity, deacons, and professed religious, meaning everybody not training for the priesthood.

(You can tell it was a quintessentially American initiative, if for no other reason than this: An Open House to promote the new institute promised not only an overview of the theological content, but also "ample parking.")

Whether the New Evangelization will work remains to be seen, but at least it seems to have the church's finger on a real problem.

In the United States, there are now 22 million ex-Catholics, big enough to be the largest religious denomination in the country. The church drops four members for every one member it gains, and if it were not for Hispanic immigration, it would have been declining for decades. Yet the Catholic church in America also holds on to almost 70 percent of its members into adulthood, a higher retention rate than any other Christian denomination.

Those statistics suggest the problem for Catholicism isn't so much what happens once people are actually in the church, but getting them through the door in the first place. To return to the marketing metaphors, the problem isn't customer service but new sales.

That's where the New Evangelization enters the picture.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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