



# I. Evangelization:

Introducing the living Christ and his Gospel as an invitation to a conversion of mind and heart that is rooted in Christ

*Mary Magdalene went to the disciples. "I have seen the Lord!" she announced. Then she reported what he had said to her. (John 20:18)*

**T**he reaction of Mary of Magdala to finding the empty tomb was running back to the community to tell the other disciples what she had experienced, announcing: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). When Peter went to the tomb, Scripture says "he went home amazed at what had happened" (Luke 24:12). The two disciples on the road to Emmaus discovered the risen Jesus in the breaking of the bread and then ran back to Jerusalem to announce to the eleven and those gathered with them that they had encountered the Lord (Luke 24:33-35). There is a joy and excitement in these accounts. The disciples could not keep what they had experienced to themselves. Their experience lies at the heart of what evangelization means: to know the Living Christ and to share the Good News with others.

## Meeting the Living Christ

Have we met the Lord and heard his voice? We need to be clear that the heart of Christianity is not a philosophy or ideology, but the person of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is not only to be a believer in the Christ of the Gospels but to have a relationship with the risen Christ living and present among us. Perhaps we can find consolation in the apostles who seem to have been slow to understand and believe as they grew in their relationship with Jesus. Recall Thomas who said to Jesus: "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way? Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:5-6). Philip said: "Master, show us the Father and that will be enough for us" (John 14:8). Jesus had to tell him boldly, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Evangelization stirs up the desire to know Christ more intimately and to follow him more closely.

## Evangelization calls for bold witness and listening

When some Catholics hear the word "evangelization," they may think of TV evangelists or they may confuse evangelization with catechesis. Evangelization is sharing the Good News of our faith in words or actions so that Christ may be revealed through us. Evangelization leads to conversion, a surrender to Christ as the foundation of our lives. Too often we want to bypass evangelization and rush into catechesis before an individual

has met the Living Christ. Catechesis follows evangelization.

One of the most effective means of evangelization is openly sharing our relationship with the Lord and giving witness to his love at work within us. As Catholics, we tend to be rather shy or reserved when it comes to talking about our relationship with God. We may fear that someone might think that we are proselytizing or being overly religious. But it is only natural to share with others what we value and what we find hopeful and meaningful in our lives and for the good of society. Our witness to God's love and mercy needs to be so evident that others begin to ask us why we have so much joy and hope. As we read in 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope."

Has our witness to the Gospel been bold enough and joyful enough to break through the barriers and obstacles that keep individuals from discovering the Lord in our midst? Have we been clear enough that we are not followers of a spiritual philosophy but the followers of a person, the Living Christ? Do our actions match our beliefs? Is there an appealing simplicity to the way we follow Jesus that leaves others wondering what makes us tick? Are we prepared to challenge, as well as comfort the consciences of those who seek the truth? Reflecting on our vocation as evangelizers might lead us to honestly admit that we need better training and guidance as Catholics to become more effective at sharing our faith.

We cannot be afraid to listen to the stumbling blocks that prevent our neighbors from hearing the Gospel. We need to be genuinely compassionate and free of judgment as we try to understand where people are coming from when they express their belief and disbelief. This takes time and patience. It also serves to remind us, as Pope Paul VI did, that, "The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #15). We are always being called to a deeper conversion.

## Time for "re-proposing the Gospel"

Pope Benedict XVI made an urgent plea for a New Evangelization and said it was time to "re-propose" the

Gospel. He expressed an urgency about reaching out in a special way to those areas of the world that have been known to be Christian and yet in recent decades have lost interest or enthusiasm for the message of Christ, if in fact they ever truly heard the message of the Gospel.

The influence of secular culture, rapid changes in society, relativism, reliance on scientific proof, and disillusionment with authority have all played a role in the way in which individuals relate to religion. We all know neighbors or relatives who no longer go to Mass or participate in the life of the Church. Many still claim to believe in God but are not influenced by religious teaching when making decisions in life. God may no longer be at the center of their lives. Still others search earnestly for God.

Our task is to think creatively about how we can show the relevancy of the Gospel to contemporary society by using language, new methods and communication systems that speak to today's modern culture. The creative use of technology is truly invaluable for our ministry and can no longer be dismissed as optional. Employing our imagination to show a new face for our parish may be the open door that leads others to rediscover Christ alive in his Church.

### **There is much hope for the future**

There is a positive side to today's urgent need for evangelization. While many have disengaged from actively practicing their faith, many still thirst for meaning, hope, and truth. Contemporary society leaves many feeling empty and isolated from others. Many young people have a generous heart and want to make a difference in the world but are often unsure about where or how to invest their lives. As views about family and marriage change and traditional values are disregarded, good people are left confused and unsure about what direction to take. The search for truth continues.

In this brief snapshot of life, we can see how the Church could have a real impact on individuals and ultimately on society. But it all begins with listening with an open heart and a joyful, loving spirit. As we learn what lies in the hearts of those who search for meaning and hope, we will be in a better position to be the evangelizers that Christ calls us to be. The quality of our communal worship, our confidence in confronting evil and injustice, our ability to forgive when no one else will, to be a welcoming and inviting community, to lay aside our prejudices, to take a stand with the poor, to be hopeful even in difficult times – all of this is the fertile field of evangelization. The saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi is good to remember: "Preach the Gospel and if necessary use words."

## **FOR OUR MEDITATION**

"Having been born consequently out of being sent, the Church in her turn is sent by Jesus...thus it is the whole Church that receives the mission to evangelize, and the work of each individual member is important for the whole." (Evangelii Nuntiandi, #14-15)

"The concern to evangelize must never be left on the margin of ecclesial activity and of the personal life of the Christian, but it must be strongly characterized by the awareness of being recipients and, at the same time, missionaries of the Gospel." (Pope Benedict XVI, January 25, 2012)

"To be sure, the testimony of faith comes in many forms. Just as in a great fresco, there is a variety of colors and shades, yet they are all important, even those which do not stand out. In God's great plan, every detail is important, even yours, even my humble little witness, even the hidden witness of those who live their faith with simplicity in everyday family relationships, friendships. ...Let us all remember this: one cannot proclaim the Gospel of Jesus without the tangible witness of one's life. Those who listen to us and observe us must be able to see in our actions what they hear from our lips, and so give glory to God!" (Pope Francis, April 14, 2013)

"At times we lose people because they don't understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people. Without the grammar of simplicity, the Church loses the very conditions which make it possible "to fish" for God in the deep waters of his Mystery. (Pope Francis, Address to Bishops of Brazil, World Youth Day 2013)

"In our day Jesus' command to 'go and make disciples' echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church's mission of evangelization, and all of us are called to take part in this new missionary 'going forth.' (The Joy of the Gospel, #20)