

**“PILLARS OF THE ‘NEW’ EVANGELIZATION”**  
**EVANGELIZATION LEADERSHIP SUMMIT**  
**OHIO DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY, COLUMBUS, OHIO**  
**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2023**

Good morning. I am very happy to be with you for this Evangelization Leadership Summit. Let me express my gratitude to Fr. Adam Streitenberger, Liz Christy, the Office of Evangelization, and to all who have made this event possible, especially Ohio Dominican University and the Dominican Sisters of Peace for hosting the event.

In 1975, Pope Saint Paul VI wrote: “...evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. This task and mission are particularly urgent because of the expansive, penetrating changes in present-day society. In fact, evangelizing is the Church’s utmost identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14).

This Church is made up of families, that is, domestic churches, and the mission is more urgent today than fifty years ago. Today, we speak of the New Evangelization, a term coined by Pope John Paul II, addressing CELAM in 1983, where he urged bishops, priests and people to not merely a re-evangelization but to a “new evangelization – new in its ardor, its methods, in its expression.”

Benedict XVI wrote:

“A new evangelization is synonymous with mission, requiring the capacity to set out anew, go beyond the boundaries, and broaden horizons. The new evangelization is the opposite of self-sufficiency, a withdrawal into oneself, a status quo mentality and an idea that pastoral programmes are simply to proceed as they did in the past. Today, a “business as usual” attitude can no longer be the case.” (Benedict XVI, “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, 10).

Yet, here we are forty years after John Paul II’s initial call still speaking about a “new evangelization.”

Ten years ago, at the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis wrote of his dream for Christ’s Church – that it would be a missionary Church:

“I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.” (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 27)

The Popes keep calling for the new evangelization, but are we actually carrying it out? Are we being the Church that Christ has called us to be – a missionary Church? Is this our priority? What might be the pillars – not programs – offered for supporting the new evangelization?

First, there has to be leadership by the diocesan bishop who is the chief evangelizer. He will set the tone for his diocese. The shepherd must lead the flock. Someone once asked Cardinal John Henry Newman, “What do you think about the laity?” and he is reported to have responded, “Well, I think we would look rather foolish without them.”

The mission of evangelization, while led by bishops and priests, is the mission of the holy people of God, including deacons, religious, and the lay faithful. Last year, I spoke about “co-responsibility” for the mission of evangelization. Recently, the Synod on Synodality was held and concluded. Pope Francis continues to speak of a synodal Church – a Church that walks together, a Church that listens. In a way, synodality is not about changing doctrine, as much as it is, about a change in mentality. How can diverse voices contribute to a new approach to evangelization? But is that all – that we listen and walk together?

He actually also speaks about discernment: apprehending the human reality; interpreting that reality in light of faith; and, after deliberating, choosing. The new evangelization demands making actual decisions about missionary endeavors, about the direction and tone of our parishes and about the realities of family life, but these decisions only happen after prayerful listening and discernment. This listening demands listening to diverse voices and trying to understand the lived reality of our people.

Second, the new evangelization is driven by a vision of a converted society. What if we preached the Gospel and everyone responded? Simon Peter preached after Pentecost and thousands were immediately converted. What would happen if people came to Mass like we want or if all our children enrolled in Catholic schools

came to Mass every Sunday? What would family life look like if we were converted and our neighbors were converted?

I think we sometimes neglect reflecting on where we want to be twenty to thirty years from now. If you own a business or are looking to hand it on, in twenty-five years, where would you like it to be? What will Columbus and its environs be like? Will the city and its neighborhoods be inhabited by people who love Jesus? Sometimes we hear that we have moved from Christendom to an Apostolic Age. It is true, but we might ask: How was Christendom established? I might answer simply, "Because Christians loved." But why did Christians love? Because Jesus loved. The Book of Proverbs says that "without vision, the people perish." What is the "vision" – not the program – for the new evangelization? Is it one of a converted society?

Why did Christians love? Because Jesus loved. This brings us to a third pillar of the new evangelization: our efforts at evangelization in and through the family and the Church must be dependent on grace and borne out of love. But are they? It is easy to think that better planning and organization, along with better programs and catechetical materials, will help stem the bleeding of parishioners and of the faith in general. When we have had success in the business world, we can be tempted to think that translating the skill set into the Church will benefit the Church. It most certainly will.

However, real growth comes from the love of Jesus Christ. We must insist on the primacy of God in "making" the Church. To paraphrase, Pope Benedict XVI: We cannot make the Church; we can only know what God has done. The Church does not begin with our 'doing,' but with the 'doing' and the 'speaking' of God. So the Apostles did not say, after a few meetings: now we want to create a Church, and as such they drafted a constitution. No, they prayed and waited in prayer, knowing that only God himself can create his Church. [...] as in that time only with God's initiative the Church could be born, [...] so also today only God can begin, we can only cooperate, but the beginning must come from God."

He also added: "the new evangelization draws its lifeblood from the sanctity of the sons and daughters of the Church, from the daily journey of personal and communal conversion to an ever more profound conformity to Christ. And there is a close connection between sanctity and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, testified to by all of the saints of history. The true conversion of hearts, which is an opening up to the transformative and renewing action of God, it is the "engine" of every reform and it translates itself into a true evangelizing force."

Within my life, my family life, my career – do I cooperate with God’s grace on His terms and according to His time or do I rely on my own abilities, succumbing to the temptation to pride? Am I personally committed to a life of holiness?

Fourth, the new evangelization must be recognized as constitutive of the institutional Church. This is where bishops need your help. Certainly, we bishops must be at the forefront of the new evangelization, but people equate the Church with the bureaucracy and the heartless, slow-moving institution, instead of recognizing the Church as Mother or even associating the Church with all of you. For the new evangelization to be successful we need to bridge the gap between the so-called “charismatic Church” and the “institutional Church” and, I might add, between life and doctrine.

That is, people will only follow if they see *credible* witnesses. Young people are turned off from religion, because they see religious people as hypocrites. In some ways, we must all realize that we are fragile and weak; we are far from perfect, even as we strive for perfection. We cannot claim to be Catholic but not believe what the Church teaches anymore than we can claim to be Catholic but in practice reject Catholic morality. We need consistency. Young people are looking for authentic guides to accompany them on their journey of faith.

Fifth, the new evangelization needs to be recognized as normal for the typical Catholic. It is a mindset, a way of life - not a program. If we are not convicted by our encounter with Jesus and by our Faith, if we do not really believe it, then no one else will. Are we convicted of it? Enough to go out and tell others about it? The New Evangelization catches fire when we really begin to understand how much our God cares about us. The parable of the Prodigal Son, I believe, captures this image of the God who cares. But do His disciples care? Do we share our experience and the Word of God with those around us?

A couple of weeks ago, we had a special dinner for the lay missionaries in the Diocese of Columbus. I hear about FOCUS and SPO missionaries engaging their peers in Bible Studies. Hard as Nails Missionaries are embedded in our high schools, attempting to evangelize student athletes and eventually will expand their mission to go to places to lead people toward baptism. I was very impressed by the witness of the Missionary Servants of the Word, a group of Hispanic missionaries, who go door to door and preach God’s word and who hold regular sessions, forming people in the Word of God. This type of evangelization is the normal, Catholic way.

Sixth, the New Evangelization is ordered toward a conscious, personal decision for Christ. Young people do not inherit a Christian identity from their parents anymore. They pick and choose what they want to believe. We are beyond mere “cafeteria Catholics” as they used to say. Many fall into religious disbelief, agnosticism, or religious disaffiliation. This will have serious implications for our collective efforts in sacramental preparation. We will be moving more and more toward models of preparation that reflect the OCIA/RCIA process – for catechumens who have no real knowledge of Jesus, the Church, or of the Faith. Fundamentally, although Jesus has revealed who He is to us, we must ask: “Who is Jesus in my life?” We must pose the question: “Who is Jesus to you?” to our young people, so that they have the opportunity to individually say, “I believe,” and “I’m in!”

Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy. Faith and belief are not simply propositional statements such as, “Catholics believe *that...*” Rather it is through repentance and the experience of love that we come to believe in Him, whom we encounter in the Word and sacraments and in the actions of believers, that we experience love in authentic way, and so come to faith, and in believing we come to understand.

The New Evangelization is Christ-centered – is focused on the encounter personal and profound encounter with Christ the Savior, just as Saul encountered him on the road to Damascus; or the Samaritan woman met him at the well. It involves proposing and re-proposing the person of Christ whom we have come to know through the encounter.

Seventh, the New Evangelization is directed toward the Church *and* wider society. Forty years ago, we spoke of re-evangelizing previously Christian countries and fallen away Catholics. We spoke of “mission” as directed toward those who were baptized but not properly catechized or evangelized. These days, we have fewer who are baptized and those who are merely baptized do not bother to come; hence, the rise of the “nones” or religious unaffiliated. If 50% of those baptized Catholics are “nones” by age thirty, 50% of those have lost the faith by age 13. Hence, the family plays a critical role during the formative years.

We see this also in the distinction between the behavior and beliefs of former Catholics and others; these days, the distinction is blurred: they are all secular, claiming to be “spiritual, not religious” and dabbling in Eastern mysticism or neo-paganism before looking at the Tradition. In other words, we must be willing to

understand the new evangelization as being *ad gentes*, moving outside of the Church, acknowledging that we live in missionary territory.

Eighth, if the New Evangelization is to be successful then we need to work together – between dioceses, regions, and nationally. We need to have a collective effort rather than having a parochial mindset or staying in our silos. The New Evangelization is ecclesial. Faith is personal *and* communal. In encountering the person of Jesus Christ, we also encounter the Church, His Bride, born from His side. She receives her mandate and mission from Him. The new evangelization involves the “renewal of this mission *of the Church*”, not merely personal encounter and individual renewal.

“Of the Church” refers to the hierarchy *and* the lay faithful. This ecclesial renewal occurs in parishes but especially in the family, the domestic church. The work of the Church is the sanctification of the world through communion with the person of Jesus Christ. The New Evangelization then means proclaiming the person of Jesus Christ in the faith of the Church which we have accepted through our experience of love and mercy, which we in turn, wish to share with others, calling them to “follow” – to be free.

If we think about the success of the Apostles in the Book of Acts, we read over and over again that the missionary work of the Church is a Spirit-driven event, yet it is the Spirit who brings us together in unity. Working together, we can better use the new technology to evangelize. The pulpit and church bulletin will simply not do. New technologies, including marketing and data technologies and digital targeting of youth will be necessary.

Ninth, the New Evangelization will be fruitfully proclaimed via modern visual and digital media. It is beauty that attracts (and saves). The success of Bishop Barron and Word on Fire is in part due to the beauty of the products they produce, let alone content. If St. Paul proclaimed Christ at the Areopagus, we might liken the internet to the new areopagus. How will we proclaim Christ? Who will our new digital missionaries be?

Tenth, and finally, the new evangelization needs to be “long-range” in its vision and demands a permanent commitment. It is not enough to develop a strategic plan. We need to develop an army of committed missionary disciples. Beginning with prayer and discernment, we need to recruit and train the new missionaries. We need to repair leaks in the dam and mend nets where we have failed in the past. We need to put out into the deep waters for a great catch, but putting out into the deep

waters is not enough. We actually need to haul in the catch. Anyone who has been fishing knows that this requires effort and patience; nevertheless, the number of available “fish” is large. Once we have made new disciples, then we repeat the cycle; that is, the work is ongoing and never-ending. It requires permanent commitment.

With these words, I simply want to highlight elements of our collective task, but it is in the family and in our parishes that many of these efforts at the new evangelization begin, but that is where they *begin*, not end. Changes happening in our world have impacted families, but now more than ever the Church needs credible witnesses to Jesus Christ, who is the only Savior of the world.