

What Is the New Evangelization?

Michelle K. Borras

CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE



GENERAL EDITOR

Michelle K. Borrás, Ph.D.

*Director of the Catholic
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Thomas Serafin

DESIGN

Adam Solove

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Susan M. Timoney, S.T.D.

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COVER IMAGE *The Archangel Gabriel*

The Archangel Gabriel holds a scroll representing the first proclamation
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The mosaic was completed by Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik, SJ and the artists of
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Detail of Christ pulling Adam up by the
hand during the descent into hell.

Wall of *The Incarnation of the Word*,
Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Vatican City.
Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

“We have come to believe in God’s love....”

(1 John 4:16)

A World Longing for Love and Joy

It is rare to see flashes of real, life-transforming hope in today’s world. Joy is even harder to find. More often than not, people get by from day to day, occasionally enjoying a fleeting moment of happiness, but mostly waking up and going to bed in the same relatively joyless existence. In Western Europe and North America, which pride themselves on their prosperity and on legal traditions that safeguard human rights, people usually have enough to eat. But food, clothing, shelter, and respect for basic rights aren’t all that human beings need to survive. How many people would not confess, if they were alone or in a place where they didn’t have to wear their upbeat “public face,” that it’s hard to live?

It is hard as a young person to return from school every day to a home that reminds you that your parents, whom you love, no longer love one another enough to live together; as an employee, to return every day to a workplace where human beings are viewed solely in terms of their productiv-

ity or their ambition; as someone in middle-age, to find that your relationships have broken apart, such that you expect to spend the rest of life eating “alone, or with the cat”;¹ or as an elderly person, to feel that you no longer have anything to contribute to society and are half-forgotten by relatives. It is hard not to be loved at all, or as much as we wish we could be loved. And even if we’re so used to this state of affairs that we hardly notice it any more, it is hard not to love.

Living in a world that often seems to be without any real, lasting beauty – beauty that is not an illusion, that can transfix us and take us out of our humdrum existence and out of ourselves – is not easy. And when we come face to face with a stark, undeniable rejection of beauty, of humanity, of love, it is almost unbearable. Something like this happened in the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001. At that time, the *New York Times* described “panic-stricken hours,” in which Americans “witnessed the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the unthinkable.”² But other moments of horror continue happening on a smaller, more personal scale – and at times even on a global scale – all the time. On the one hand, the times we live in seem full of promise. On the other hand, that promise often seems to implode, whether it is because our lives are drab and joyless, or because we suddenly come face to face with the evil, whether blatant or more insidious, that can be set loose in the world through human hearts.

Discovering God's Love Amid Suffering

Both Karol Wojtyła, who became Pope John Paul II, and Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI, grew up in a century and a world that seemed not just horribly conflicted, but in which a great “eruption of evil”³ seemed to drown out every possibility for hope and for joy. Wojtyła, born in 1920, was by a few years the older of the two. He came of age in a Poland that would be invaded first by the German Nazis in World War II and then by the Soviet Communists. Later he would say, “I have had personal experience of ideologies of evil. It remains indelibly fixed in my memory.”⁴

After Adolf Hitler’s armies invaded his country in 1939, the young Karol, a university student when the war broke out, became a laborer in a stone quarry. One of his countrymen described these years of war and occupation: “Police round-ups, deportation to camps and forced labor ... shooting in the street – all these things were part of daily life.... We were hungry for five years without a break, and each winter we were desperately cold.”⁵ When he decided to study for the Catholic priesthood, Karol was educated secretly, in a clandestine seminary. Once he became a priest and later a bishop, he witnessed his country emerge from the horrors of World War II only to enter into long years of repression by the Soviet Union, which established puppet Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe.

Karol the young man, the priest, and the bishop, saw the dignity of the human person gravely and continuously

threatened, as his countrymen were oppressed, murdered, unjustly imprisoned, and told that they did not need their culture or God. Nonetheless he knew that he had to live a life that was worthy of a human being. In the face of so much that denied the human person's basic need to love and to be loved, he had to love.

The second of these two young men, Joseph Ratzinger, was born in 1927 and grew up in Germany just as Hitler's Nazi Party was coming to power. His father, who had spoken out forcefully against the Nazi regime, had to move his family to ensure their safety. As a teenager during World War II, Joseph, like all able-bodied German boys, was conscripted to perform various services supporting the German military effort. He dug trenches by hand in a labor detail, overseen, as he recalls, by "fanatical ideologues who tyrannized us without respite."⁶

Drafted into the German infantry toward the end of the war, Joseph deserted – an action punishable by immediate execution – and found his way home. When he arrived, he found that American soldiers were occupying his family's house. He became a prisoner of war for two months, sleeping with thousands of other prisoners in an open field and subsisting on "one ladleful of soup and a little bread per day."⁷ After he was released, he reentered the seminary, motivated by "a great sense of gratitude for having been allowed to return ... from the abyss of those difficult years."⁸ Despite the ideologues who told the German people that their country needed power and national pride – not God – and despite all the others who lost hope, Joseph knew that that he had to

live differently. He had to live humanly, to give thanks and to hope. Like Karol, he had to love.

Both of these young men, who would become future popes, lived through very difficult circumstances. But they were also carried through those years by something that they would later offer to everyone hungry for lasting beauty and love: the discovery that hope is possible, that the human person's deepest aspirations have a real object, that beauty exists and even enters into the abysses of human suffering to transform them, and that we really are meant to – and can be helped to – love and be loved with a faithful, complete, and beautiful love.

A Message of Hope for the Modern World

As John Paul II wrote at the end of his life, all the terrible experiences of his youth taught him that there was a “limit imposed upon evil in ... history,” and this limit had to do with the mercy of God.⁹ Despite all the fears we might have of the human person's capacity for evil or of the weakness and confusion of our own hearts, we need not be afraid, for God loves. Indeed, God is Love: he is a Father who sent his only Son to die and conquer death for us, so that we might live in “the marvelous freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). For the young Karol Wojtyła and for the man he would later become, Christianity, the revelation of a God who loved humankind to this extent, was truly *Gospel* (*evangelion*, Greek for “good news”). In a largely joyless, suffering world full of oppression and death, he had found joy. This

joy was so great that he felt compelled to offer it every day of his life to people who, in different ways, were oppressed by joylessness and hopelessness.

In the modern, prosperous countries of the West, threats to human happiness may take subtler forms than the suffering the young Karol experienced. But even as Pope, John Paul II knew that these subtle dangers are nonetheless present and that they threaten human beings no less than the “explosion of evil”¹⁰ he witnessed as a youth.

Like Karol Wojtyła, the young Joseph Ratzinger might easily have despaired. His country had been morally and physically shattered, and someone growing up in that context would have every reason to fear what is in the human heart. And yet like John Paul II, Ratzinger would be able to say as Pope Benedict XVI, “Do not be afraid!” There is someone who knows the hearts of human beings, someone who takes away our fear, someone who loves and enables us to love, and so enables us to hope. That person is Jesus Christ.

It is not by accident that one of Benedict XVI’s first encyclical letters to the Church and the world was about *hope*, the great and definitive hope in God that gives all of human life its meaning.¹¹ He knew from his experience of the Nazi tyranny what happens – not just on the level of world events or of war, but inside the human heart – when human beings try to live without God. For a while, everything seems to go along just fine, until suddenly people realize that they cannot stop the threats and the violence that they themselves have set loose in the world. They lose hope and thirst terribly for something that they cannot give themselves. This is why

much later, Pope Benedict later insisted on visiting a town of the formerly Communist eastern part of Germany where most people no longer believe in God, to tell them that there is Good News. There is someone who fills the abysmal thirst in the human heart that arises when people try to live without the one thing that can give them enduring joy.

During his 2011 visit to Erfurt, Germany, the pope asked, “Does man need God, or can we live quite well without him?” He then said, “The more the world withdraws from God, the clearer it becomes that man in his hubris of power, in his emptiness of heart, and in his longing for satisfaction and happiness, increasingly loses his life. A thirst for the infinite is indelibly present in human beings. Man was created to have a relationship with God; we need him.”¹² We cannot stop thirsting for what surpasses us, for the infinite, and this infinite is a Person who gives himself to us. He loves us and desires our love so intensely that we could say that he, too, thirsts for *our* love.¹³

Sharing the Joy of the Gospel

For Ratzinger, just as for Wojtyła, Christianity was not just any piece of “good news,” but *the* Good News, the only complete, lasting, and superabundant answer to the insatiable longing of the human heart.

For both of them, the Gospel message really is news so necessary to the human person that one cannot keep it to oneself. It is a message of profound and radiant *joy*, which is so powerful that it can transform the abyss of human suffer-

ing into something not just bearable but beautiful. It can transform the lack of love into love, or a tedious, difficult life into a life that is definitively worth living. It is also, as we see in the early Christians and even in our own time, a joy so great that believers find it eminently worth dying for.

The joy that carried Wojtyła and Ratzinger through such difficult experiences and inspired the rest of their lives, is the same joy that St. John, the apostle and disciple of Jesus, wrote about in the Bible.

Traditionally held to be the youngest of the Twelve Apostles, John could not write about this “news” without expressing joyous wonder at what he had been privileged to hear, see, and touch in Jesus Christ, the Son of God – God himself – made man. At the beginning of his first letter, John simply describes his unheard-of experience of the invisible beauty of God made visible. Through the Incarnation, God has drawn so near to human beings that we can perceive his love with all our senses: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life...” (1 John 1:1).

In the Son of God who became man, died, and rose from the dead, John was struck by something utterly unexpected. He encountered so great a beauty that it took him out of himself, as if he was enraptured, and transformed every aspect of his existence. He had the “encounter” that Pope Benedict XVI, commenting on the same book of the Bible, says is at the heart of Christianity: “*We have come to believe in God’s love.... Being Christian is ... the encounter with an event,*

a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”¹⁴

Because John recognized that what drew him out of himself into a new existence in love, was Love itself, he knew that this encounter was a gift to be shared. If God opens his life to us, it is to draw us into communion, or shared life, with himself and with one another. Thus John continues in his letter, “What we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We write this so that our joy may be complete.” (1 John 1:3).

The fellowship God offers us in Christ is “complete joy,”¹⁵ a greater and more intense joy than any human being could ever have wished or imagined. John knows that this joy is meant for everyone and that it must be proclaimed. To use the term the authors of the New Testament and the early Church coined for this proclamation, John, like every disciple after him, must *evangelize* – not only or even primarily with words, but with his whole life.

John knows that he must communicate the Love in which he has come to believe, not because he thinks he is better than others who haven’t yet encountered it – he knows he isn’t – and certainly not because he wants to force anyone to believe. Rather, he prays, writes, preaches, and suffers because “God so loved the world” (John 3:16), and John, who loves God, has to love it, too. Love, like joy, naturally overflows – especially that love which is the definitive affirmation of the goodness of the world and of every human life.



Detail of Mary and Christ bearing his wounds, from *The Wedding at Cana*.

Holy Family Chapel, Knights of Columbus
Supreme Council, New Haven, Connecticut.

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel”

(Mark 16:15)

Why Do We Need a New Evangelization?

As both Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger knew very well, humankind is in dire need of a definitive affirmation that it is *good* that the human person – and the world as a whole – exists. We need to know that human dignity is rooted in something unshakeable, that each and every human being is loved eternally and is called to love. Both men experienced in their own lives what happens to the human person when the sense of God is obscured. This is why Ratzinger, when he became Pope Benedict XVI, would say, “If ever man’s sense of being accepted and loved by God is lost, then there is no longer any answer to the question whether to be a human being is good at all.... Where doubt over God becomes prevalent, then doubt over humanity follows inevitably.”¹⁶

What are the effects of this doubt? They can be horrific, such as the genocidal “explosion of evil” both Wojtyła and Ratzinger experienced in their youth. More often than not, however, the effects are more hidden, settling over our com-

fortable lives like a kind of dull, poisonous dust: “We see [this doubt] in the joylessness, in the inner sadness, that can be read on so many human faces today.”¹⁷

Speaking to religious instructors in 2000, Cardinal Ratzinger recalled that Jesus came to “bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). And then he says something that we might not expect: *We are the poor*. Even though the countries in Western Europe and North America are materially rich, their inhabitants are in another way unspeakably poor, for often they are missing the one thing that makes life beautiful. The deepest poverty is not the lack of food, shelter, or clothing, but rather “the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today, in very different forms in the materially rich as well as the poor countries. The inability of joy presupposes and produces the inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice – all defects that devastate the life of individuals and of the world.... This is why we are in need of a new evangelization.”¹⁸

We need a “new evangelization,” a renewed proclamation of the Good News that St. John, like Wojtyła and Ratzinger after him, knew he couldn’t keep to himself. In calling for this renewed proclamation, Ratzinger draws on a number of statements of Pope John Paul II, who saw the need for an evangelization “new in its ardor, methods, and expression,”¹⁹ capable of bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the men and women of today’s world.

We live in a world filled with the “inner sadness” Pope Benedict describes, where man seems more and more to be

tormented “in his hubris of power, in his emptiness of heart and in his longing for satisfaction and happiness.” Above all, we live in a world that seems to have forgotten that beyond the ephemeral moments of happiness that sometimes visit the lucky, there is such a thing as lasting, unshakeable joy. In this kind of a world, what we need more than anything else is to experience the joy of being definitively loved and definitively loving. And those who have encountered such love need to communicate it. That’s what evangelization is: the communication in words and in life, in prayer and in silence, in action and in suffering, of a love that both embraces man and infinitely surpasses him, and therefore of joy. This joy can sometimes be demanding and difficult. It is, after all, a joy “bigger” than man because it comes from God. But precisely for that reason, it is the only joy that can satisfy the insatiable hunger of the human heart.

Why “New”?

The communication of this joy, or the Good News of God’s definitive love for man made visible in Jesus Christ, has been the task of the Church from the very beginning. After Jesus’ crucifixion and death in abandonment, the Apostles barred themselves behind locked doors. But amid their stifling fear, they suddenly encountered joy: “He stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’” (Luke 24:36). They were confronted with a reality that bursts all boundaries, so definitive that it grants all of history “its meaning and its ultimate goal.”²⁰ Their Lord, who had died,

stood living before them, inviting them, “Touch me and see...”; and “they were ... incredulous for joy” (Luke 24:36-41). They touched and they saw, and they knew that this joy was not to be kept for themselves.

In case the Apostles had any doubts as to what they were to do in the face of this clear, objective, and joyous action of God on behalf of man, Jesus commanded them, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). This “sending forth,” or mission, shapes the community of disciples Jesus called together. In fact, this mission shapes the Church so completely that almost two thousand years later, a modern-day apostle, Pope Paul VI, wrote, “Evangelizing is ... the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.”²¹ From the beginning of Christianity, and for all time, the Church exists to proclaim with her words and her deeds – and above all with the lives and the deaths of all those who belong to her – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the supreme act of God’s love. She sings in the Easter liturgy of the joy that was given to us in him:

The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
By the Lord has this been done,
it is wonderful in our eyes.
This is the day the Lord has made,
let us rejoice and be glad in it! (Psalm 118: 22-24)²²

On the one hand, this Good News, and the mission to proclaim it, never changes; always and everywhere until

the end of time, Christians proclaim the perennial Gospel. In the Church's liturgy and sacraments; in her members' speech and their silent, hidden prayer; and perhaps most of all in that highest witness, martyrdom, those who love "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:3) communicate the Love and the Life that was given to them. Despite and oftentimes precisely through their weakness, Christians communicate God's Word, and in doing so help to give life to their brothers and sisters. Like their brethren, they know what it is like to have hearts that are not satisfied anywhere else, because they thirst incessantly – and sometimes unbearably – for God.

If, then, this proclamation never changes, why have Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessors called with ever greater urgency for a "new evangelization"? What can be "new" about a message that is two thousand years old? But then again, is the Gospel ever supposed to get old? We begin to understand something of what these 20th- and 21st-century apostles mean when we hear John Paul II talk about the "passion" that must be stirred up again in the hearts of Christians and in formerly Christian societies that have forgotten the joy that was entrusted to them.²³ The believer who fails to pay attention to the thirst in his heart and who stops wanting to see, hear and touch the risen Lord, allows the Word of Life to die in him. His heart becomes passionless, sad and old. And the Christian people or society that stops wanting to see, hear and touch finds itself seeking infinity in ever more contradictory ways, faced eventually with the terrifying prospect of the human person unpro-

tected by any ultimate affirmation of his dignity or worth.

Both the believer and the society whose faith has grown old and stale need passion, understood as far more than an emotion or a passing fit of enthusiasm. In John Paul II's words, they need the "ardor" or "burning conviction" of people who have been enraptured by a surpassing beauty, who have been loved beyond their imaginings or hopes, and who are thus people who love.²⁴ The call for a new evangelization is a call to realize now, in our time and with our lives, that Christianity is not just a piece of information or a historical fact. It is a Word addressed to us personally, and this Word is Life, it is a Love that abides. It is news so good and so necessary that no human being who has encountered it can keep it to himself.

At the end of the great Jubilee celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ in the year 2000, John Paul II wrote, "We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1 Corinthians 9:16)."²⁵ Like the great apostle, whose sudden encounter with the risen Jesus changed his whole life (cf. Acts 9:1-19), we must encounter this Word made flesh and let it so "burn" in us that it transforms us totally. Only then can its beauty radiate through everything we do and say, our silences and suffering, and our joy – the same joy that St. John writes about in his letter, and that carried Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger through the difficult years of their youth. As Pope Benedict says, this is the only way to reintroduce joy into our dull hearts, or beauty into our oftentimes unbeautiful and desperate world. The Gospel,

which never grows old, is the path toward the only humanism that is truly worthy of man:

Christ's disciples are called to reawaken in themselves and in others the longing for God and the joy of living him and bearing witness to him, on the basis of what is always a deeply personal question: why do I believe?... [W]e must see to it that the beauty and contemporary relevance of faith is rediscovered, not as an isolated event, affecting some particular moment in our lives, but as a constant orientation, affecting even the simplest choices, establishing a profound unity within the person.... What is needed is to give new life to a faith that can serve as a basis for a new humanism, one that is able to generate culture and social commitment.²⁶

The Source of Evangelization

In a series of Advent homilies in 2011, Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher of the papal household, warns of two dangers that beset Christians with regard to the new evangelization. The first is laziness, or leaving the task to others. We say to ourselves, "I think that evangelization, or the proclamation of the Gospel with our lives and in our time, is a good idea, but it is not a summons that concerns me personally." The second, subtler danger is "a feverish and empty human activism," which causes Christians little by little to lose "contact with the source," which is the Word of God.²⁷

With this twofold warning, Father Cantalamessa raises

the question of the source of the new evangelization: Where does the renewed passion to which John Paul II so urgently summoned us, or the “reawakening” that Pope Benedict calls for, come from? What is the abiding origin of the joy that is meant to transform us, and that we are to proclaim with our words and our lives? In a way, to identify this origin is also to identify the first and most important thing every member of the Church must do to communicate the divine Word. The origin of evangelization, and the Christian’s most basic response in the face of it, is simple enough. Once again, John, the Apostle and Evangelist, shows us the answer.

When John writes to proclaim his joy to the early Christians, he can only do so because he has first heard, seen, and touched: he has experienced the Word of God made flesh and been overwhelmed by its beauty. He has been drawn into fellowship with the living God, and discovered that “sharing in the life” of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “a Trinity of love, is complete joy (cf. 1 Jn 1:4).”²⁸ Like a lover, he has been taken out of himself. From this point forward, he knows that his whole life can only be a response to this gift. He realizes in his flesh-and-blood experience the truth that Pope Benedict would later describe: “At the root of all evangelization lies not a human plan of expansion, but rather the desire to share the inestimable gift that God has wished to give us, making us sharers in his own life.”²⁹

At the source of evangelization lies the experience of a gift: the gratuitous and surpassing love shown to us by God the Father in his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit, who

ever since Jesus' resurrection has been poured out upon "all flesh." Whether we realize it or not, this gift of God, who opens his life to us, is the source of all true joy in the world. When John Paul II asks "What is the Gospel?" he answers without hesitation, "It is a grand affirmation of the world and of man, because it is the revelation of the truth about God. God is the primary source of joy and hope for man. This is the God whom Christ revealed: God who is Creator and Father; God who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life' (cf. Jn 3:16)."³⁰

The Gospel is the source of joy because it is the gift of God, the Word of God, who comes to encounter us. It is the personal revelation of the God who is Love. This Word, spoken to every human being who ever has lived or will live, is full of the divine life God wishes to share with man. It is "a living and efficacious Word,"³¹ a Word of power, but whose power is God's own humility and love. As the preparatory commission for the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization reminded us, "We must not think of [the Gospel] as only a book or a set of teachings. The Gospel is much more; it is a ... Word, which accomplishes what it says.... It is ... a person: Jesus Christ, the definitive Word of God, who became man"³² to give us the joy of sharing in God's own communion of love.

If this is true – if evangelization has its origins in God's "proclamation" when he sent his Son to redeem the world – then before we do anything else in the face of this Gospel, we have to receive it. Like John, we have to see with our

eyes, hear with our ears, and touch with our hands, and respond to God's invitation of love. We have to listen, and only then – never for a moment ceasing to listen to him! – can we proclaim what we have received. In Pope Benedict's words, we have to “make ourselves docile to ... the Spirit of the Risen One who accompanies all who are heralds of the Gospel and opens the hearts of those who listen. To proclaim fruitfully the Word of the Gospel one is first asked to have a profound experience of God.”³³

In other words, we have to pray. And once we really have been docile and encountered such beauty in prayer, we cannot but speak – first to God, in the “praise” that is “the point of departure for every genuine response of faith to the revelation of God in Christ,”³⁴ and then to our brothers and sisters who, like us, are thirsting for Love.

Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI are all adamant in this regard: Christians cannot evangelize unless they are first and continually evangelized,³⁵ unless they behold the incarnate Word in all his humility and splendor, listen to him, and experience the life he brings. Christians have to do this before they engage in any sort of evangelizing activity, and also continuously, because the joy that they are asked to bring to others is offered to them continuously from its inexhaustible source: “The new evangelizers are called to walk first this Way that is Christ, to make others know the beauty of the Gospel that gives life.”³⁶ They can only bring life to others if they remain at the source of life, keeping their “gaze fixed upon Jesus Christ” because they know that “in him, all the anguish and all the longing of

the human heart finds fulfillment.”³⁷

In every proclamation of the Gospel, in whatever form this takes in our lives, there is the primacy of God’s Word made flesh in Jesus Christ and communicated to us in the Scriptures and in the sacraments. No word we might speak, no deed we might perform, no life we might live contains any power or fruitfulness outside of the power and fruitfulness of this Word. Christians are witnesses to their brothers and sisters, to be sure, but only because they have first witnessed. They are those who see, hear, and touch the Love of God, who died on the cross for us, was raised by the Father, and poured out his Spirit upon all of mankind.

The source of all evangelization is God himself, who opened his life to us in his Son. In the words of Pope Paul VI, the “foundation, center, and ... summit” of evangelization is always “Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead” to offer “salvation ... to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy.”³⁸ In writing this, Paul VI was simply echoing what St. Paul said 2,000 years earlier, when he identified the core of his preaching, his suffering, and indeed his whole life: “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you but Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). That same Jesus Christ, who opens to us the life of God, is the Way that we walk in order “to make others know the beauty of the Gospel that gives life.”³⁹



Detail of Mary as an image of the Church,
receiving the blood and water that are a
symbol of the sacraments at the Crucifixion.

Wall of *The Incarnation of the Word*,
Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Vatican City.
Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies...”

(John 12:24)

Who Evangelizes?

Our journey on this Way isn't solitary, for the beauty we encounter on it is a concrete sharing in the communion that is God's own life. Pope Benedict explains, "On this Way one never walks alone but in company, an experience of communion and brotherhood that is offered to all those we meet, to share with them our experience of Christ and of his Church."⁴⁰ Evangelizing is not a solitary activity because we never receive and we never offer the gift of the Gospel alone. As John reminds the early Christians in his first letter, the Gospel is "fellowship ... with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." This sharing in God's love and life immediately generates fellowship among believers, in a communion that presses outward from this small group of Christians who love one another to the ends of the earth: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us.... And we are writing this so that our joy may be complete" (1 John 1:3-4).

Communion means shared life. This profound sharing of life with God and with our brothers and sisters is precisely the joy that the disciples of Jesus Christ are called to give to the world. As John Paul II writes, we are not “saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!”⁴¹ It is as if Jesus is saying to us: I, with my Father and the Spirit who belongs to us both, am with you, and we help you to be with one another in a communion that overcomes all the lack of love in the world, that is stronger than death!

If we could receive or offer the gift of the Gospel as solitary individuals, it wouldn't be the Good News of God's love – a love powerful enough to regenerate the union of a mankind divided by sin. Even if we haven't had the searing experiences of the consequences of human hatred that both Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger had during World War II, we have all experienced the loneliness, brokenness, and lack of love that generates isolation. The “joylessness” and “inner sadness” that Pope Benedict mentions as so prevalent in our modern societies go hand in hand with the experience of not being loved in truth, or truly loved. To a greater or lesser extent, we all know what it means not to be part of a communion that gives life – that draws its life from the joyous communion of life that is God. When we experience this lack of communion, we all know what it means to wish for something different, even without being able to put our longing into words. We wish for the fullness of a communion that gives joy.

This communion for which we long is given in the gift of God's Word, who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) and so generated his Body, the Church. We do and we must receive this Word of God personally, in meditating on the Scriptures, in the sacraments and in prayer. But we can only do so fruitfully, or even do so at all, within a "fellowship" or communion that has its origins in him. The Gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a Word of love addressed to all of mankind, and we only receive it as members of the renewed humanity that is Christ's Body and Bride.

Tradition expresses this truth with rich and beautiful images, such as the Church emerging from the pierced side of the crucified Christ like the new Eve from Adam's side. The Church, in all of her members, never ceases emerging from the gift of God's Word. It is the Church as a whole who receives at Pentecost the gift of the Holy Spirit that alights on the apostles as "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:3). This same Church receives the command that will define her existence until the end of time: "Go out to all the world and preach the Good News..." (Mark 16:15). She continually receives the Word of God, ponders it in her heart (cf. Luke 2:19), and offers it to a world that is hungry and thirsty for God.

Alone, we couldn't do this. God's Word is too great, and the power it has to generate communion could not be contained in ourselves. But in the Church, we can receive the fullness of the Gospel, allow it to transform our lives and all our relationships, and offer it at every moment to our brothers and sisters who, like us, cannot live without love.

Every time we witness to the Gospel with our lives, our words, and our silent prayer, we are performing an act that involves the “entire Church in all she is and all she does.”⁴² We are offering the joyful, life-giving communion that is the Church, and that is our sharing here and now, with our concrete lives, in the life of God. At the same time, we are participating in a necessary “interior renewal”⁴³ of the Church who, in her liturgy and in the lives of each of her members, must constantly return to her origins in the gift of the Word.

As the preparatory documents for the Synod on the New Evangelization tell us, “The transmission of the faith is never an individual, isolated undertaking, but a communal, ecclesial event.”⁴⁴ Evangelization is always an action of the Church, who simultaneously praises God and offers to human beings the joy that comes from “an experience of communion and brotherhood”⁴⁵ – the only experience of communion and brotherhood that is stronger than all the forces of isolation in the world.

The Content of the New Evangelization

The Church, who is nourished continually by God’s Word in her liturgy, knows that evangelization is her “grace and mission..., her deepest identity.”⁴⁶ For her, who receives and contemplates the Word, the content of evangelization is clear. In prayer and proclamation, and in the lives of each of her members, she must communicate the beauty and the holiness – in other words, the love – of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. “For God so loved the world that he

gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). John Paul II once observed that the entire Gospel is summed up in this sentence, which contains the “grand affirmation of the world and of man.”⁴⁷

To understand what he means, we have only to think of the loneliness, restlessness, and unprotectedness of the human person without God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh, comes to bring us the Good News of God’s love. In doing so, he also shows us through his life what it means to be fully human. He shows us what we are meant to be: people who have been loved definitively and who therefore can love with God’s infinite love. Jesus reveals God, who is a communion of Love. In doing so, he reveals man, who is made for this Love.

The Gospel that Jesus Christ came to bring us isn’t some information about God, but rather God himself in our midst. God has made himself accessible to our eyes and ears and hands. He has even submitted to and overcome the terror of death. This incredible humility of a God who comes to be with us where we are most alone, is why the first act of both receiving and imparting the Gospel is always that of a faith that marvels, a faith that adores. According to Benedict XVI, adoration – which is what all prayer is at its core – is the first and abiding response of love that the Church can offer to this unheard-of revelation of Love. Our response to God, which consists in listening, contemplating, and adoring, is at the heart of all evangelization: “The risen Lord enters into our midst. And then we can do no other than say, with Saint

Thomas: my Lord and my God! Adoration is primarily an act of faith – the act of faith as such. God is not just some possible or impossible hypothesis concerning the origin of all things. He is present. And if he is present, then I bow down before him.... We enter this certainty of God’s tangible love for us with love in our own hearts. This is adoration, and this then determines my life.”⁴⁸

God’s love, and the response of love to which it invites us, determine our lives. After all, if Christianity is fundamentally about love, it can’t be communicated as a mere intellectual idea. It has to be lived, because love has to be lived. If it is going to be lived in us and for us, it has to take on flesh and blood. God knows this, and so he himself took on flesh and blood in the Son of God made man, Jesus Christ. Ever since then, there is no other way to communicate his Gospel than by allowing it to take on flesh and blood also in us. Pope Benedict XVI draws our attention to this central aspect of the new evangelization when he says, “Since the Christian faith is founded on the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the new evangelization is not an abstract concept but a renewal of authentic Christian living based on the teachings of the Church.”⁴⁹

God’s Word wants to enter us and transform us, fashioning us into the Church, that joyful communion that is his Body and Bride. He wants to help us love, because we were made to love. He knows that our lives are meaningless and our hearts are restless until we encounter love and allow it into every aspect of our lives. This is why, if we let him in and “bow down” in his presence, the Word made flesh

changes us little by little, so that our entire life begins to radiate the beauty of the God who is Love.

If we pray, if we experience the presence of the risen Christ in our midst and adore him with the Church, then we begin to understand: he is calling us to love definitively and forever within his own enduring love for the Church, his Bride. This call to love takes on its clearest contours in the complete gift of ourselves in marriage or in the evangelical counsels – following Jesus poor, chaste, and obedient in consecrated virginity. But it also determines every aspect of a believer’s behavior and life. Christians are called to love not only or primarily with their emotions or with words, but entirely and concretely, “in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Those who encounter Love are invited to allow it to transform every aspect of their lives. And because they encounter this Love in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who “loved them to the end” (John 13:1), believers come to understand that the beauty they have allowed into their lives also carries them through their life’s end.

For the Christian who has really experienced the Gospel, suffering and death are not the ultimate realities. The ultimate reality is the Love that God is – a love that is the meaning and the goal of every human life. This love contains in itself such power that it is stronger than sin, stronger than death. The divine life and love that the risen Christ communicates to all of mankind contains a mystery of both judgment and mercy, and the promise of eternal life.

Eternal life is nothing other than our sharing completely and forever in the Love that Jesus came to bring us, the Love

that Christianity is all about. It is our final transformation into beloved children of the Father, who have been invited to share in God's life. At the same time, it is an invitation to share in that "great mystery" (Ephesians 5:32) that we glimpse in the Scriptures: the Lamb's "wedding feast" with redeemed humanity, or with the Church who is his Body and Bride (cf. Revelation 19:9). This Lamb, Jesus Christ, is God's life opened to us. Taking on flesh, dying, and rising from the dead to bestow his Spirit on us and lead us to the Father, he is all the joy in the world – and he is the content of the Gospel.

The Method of Evangelization

A "new evangelization" is acutely needed in our time, in which so many people thirst terribly for the joy of being loved and of loving definitively. Yet the "method" of evangelization, like the content, has not fundamentally changed. Ever since the day on which the risen Christ stood in the midst of his frightened apostles and "they were incredulous for joy" (Luke 24:41); since his Spirit, bestowed upon them like "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:3), gave them new courage and new insight into the mystery of the Lord; or since John wrote his first letter to some of the earliest Christians, the only method evangelization can have is that of incarnate love. Love must be embodied and communicated, with words of course, but above all with one's whole life.

Evangelization is witness borne by the total existence of the one who proclaims. When John wrote about Christ, he

wrote as a witness. He simply proclaimed what he saw and heard and touched, the One who is his (and our) entryway into joy. The wonder and the love with which he contemplated the “Word of life...made manifest” (1 John 1:1-2) is palpable in John’s letter. It is as if he still has before his eyes the image of Jesus on the cross, loving us to the end, or the risen Jesus showing his glorious wounds, loving us beyond the end. Such love led John to love – to love God above all, the community of believers that is the Church, and every human being as his brother. He knew what every Christian after him must come to know: You cannot testify to the Word made flesh without letting that Word take on flesh in you.

The Word of God is a Word of total commitment to every human being who ever has lived or will live. It is the commitment of the Son of God who came to die so that we might live – no longer our small, limited lives that are subject to death, but the very life of God. God opened himself to us in love. His Word became flesh, “humbling himself” (Philippians 2:8) so completely to bring us God’s love that he died on a cross. In doing so, he laid down what Cardinal Ratzinger identified as the first condition of all evangelization: Offering one’s person “to Christ for the salvation of men, is the fundamental condition of...true commitment for the Gospel.... [E]vangelizing is not merely a way of speaking, but a form of living.”⁵⁰

God offered himself completely in love, and man cannot testify credibly to this love unless he, too, offers himself completely. In this way, evangelization is a form of witness

that is one's whole life, and a life that radiates love. A witness, like a true lover, does not look out for himself; he offers himself, pointing with his entire existence to what he has seen.

Moreover, because the Christian has been introduced into a "fellowship" or communion where the Word of God is received, pondered, and kept, he does not bear witness alone. In all his weakness and difficulties, he is carried in a communion that is greater than he. To bear witness to Another, to a beauty that takes you out of yourself, means, as Ratzinger also reminds us, "to speak in the mission of the Church."⁵¹ Because the Church has its origin in God and reflects his life, "the Christian community is never closed in upon itself."⁵² Everything in the Church and everything she does – even her most hidden life of prayer – "only acquires its full meaning when it becomes a witness," or a testimony of love: "[I]t is the whole Church that receives the mission to evangelize, and the work of each individual is important for the whole."⁵³

Conclusion: The Grain of Wheat

Although everything in the world and all of human creativity is meant to be drawn into the service of God's love, evangelization is not a program that can be managed or improved with the newest technologies. Rather, the method of evangelization is always and inescapably the method of a witness that is simultaneously ours and that of the whole Church. It is the commitment of one's whole

life in fidelity and in patience, waiting for the seed that is God's Word to bear fruit. Sometimes it is a long waiting and sometimes it is a hard waiting, but it is a waiting in hope. It is also a waiting in prayer, for it is only from seeing, hearing, and touching the Word that we begin to understand the magnitude of the gift we have received.

In the Church's liturgy and in our silent contemplation, we learn that we have been loved without measure and thus have encountered joy. But this love and joy are not for us alone; they are a force pressing outward to all our brothers and sisters. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "Out of ... contemplation springs forth, with all its inner power, the urgent sense of mission, the compelling obligation 'to communicate that which we have seen and heard' so that all may be in communion with God (1 John 1:3). Silent contemplation immerses us in the source of that Love who directs us towards our neighbors so that we may feel their suffering and offer them the light of Christ, his message of life and his saving gift of the fullness of love."⁵⁴

Perhaps it is a paradox, but it is precisely in moments of discouragement, when it seems that none of our actions or words have borne fruit, that we finally come face to face with the real "method" of evangelization: We are not the source of the Word's bearing fruit. All life and all the "success" of evangelization come from him. We are simply his servants, because he needs people who love. He needs people who give themselves away and who pray. Such people, like the young Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger, are attentive enough amid the world's darkness to catch a

glimpse of God's beauty. When they do, they come to realize that God's Word has its own method of fruitfulness.

Speaking about the new evangelization, Ratzinger said, "Jesus did not redeem the world with beautiful words but with his suffering and his death. His Passion is the inexhaustible source of life for the world; the Passion gives power to his words. The Lord himself... formulated this law of fruitfulness in the [parable] of the grain of seed that dies, fallen to earth."⁵⁵

This "law of fruitfulness" plays itself out in every proclamation of the Gospel: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it will yield a rich harvest" (John 12:24).

The witness who sees, hears, and touches the Word – like John, Karol, Joseph, and perhaps ourselves – needs to know this law of the seed that dies in order to bear an unexpected and superabundant fruit: "We cannot give life to others without giving up our own lives."⁵⁶ We could also describe this simply as the law of God's love. This may seem like a strange method and a difficult law for the new evangelization, but this bearing witness by giving our life is the only way we can really respond in love to Love. It is the only way really to become capable of joy. As John, Karol and Joseph each realized, it is the only way for the Christian message to become a living, joy-filled Word of Love for ourselves and for all the men and women of our time.

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About the Author

Michelle K. Borrás, Ph.D., is director of the Catholic Information Service. She received a B.A. in English Literature from Harvard University; an S.T.L. from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Rome; and a Ph.D. in theology from the Institute's Washington, D.C. session, with a dissertation on Origen's interpretation of the Paschal Mystery. Dr. Borrás taught at the John Paul II Institute in Washington an adjunct professor during the 2010-2011 academic year, and has given seminars in Catholic literature, the patristic interpretation of Scripture, and the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar at the internal school of the Missionary Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo in Rome. In addition to translating extensively, Dr. Borrás has published articles in the areas of Catholic literature and theology.

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