



The Essential Elements of Evangelization Today

The Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

■ *Introduction*

1. If one word could sum up our modern society, it would be *pluralism*. This society embraces an ever-growing diversity manifested in various ways: we see it in the diverse ideas transmitted by the media with increasing intensity; in the various behaviours founded on differing belief systems, and in the religions that coexist within the same neighbourhoods of our large cities. Even within religions themselves we find diversity in the way people understand their religious obligations. Yet this diversity is more than a fact to be recognized; it is even prized and treasured as a necessity for respect between the different elements of society. This is the very definition of the word *pluralism*.

■ *The Challenge of Pluralism*

2. This pluralism, however, poses vast new challenges for the call we have received to proclaim the Gospel in our world today. In the wake of the recent Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, we, the members of the Episcopal Commission for Doctrine, would like to reflect on the challenges this pluralism brings, as well as how it affects the proclamation of the Gospel. These reflections are intended for priests, consecrated men and women, and those actively involved in pastoral work, as well as all Catholics who desire to understand better and respond more zealously to their call to evangelize the modern world.

3. The principal impact of pluralism is that the proclamation of the Gospel can no longer presuppose – as in other times – a Christian cultural foundation common to the whole of Canadian society. Rather, this proclamation has to compete with other religious and philosophical discourse that also claims to have the absolute truth. Pope Benedict XVI recognized this in an address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization:

In the past decades, it was still possible to find a general Christian sensibility which unified the common experience of entire generations raised in the shadow of the faith which had shaped culture. Today, unfortunately, we are witnessing a drama of fragmentation which no longer acknowledges a unifying reference point; moreover, it often occurs that people wish to belong to the Church, but they are strongly shaped by a vision of life which is in contrast with the faith.¹

4. This evolution has been rapid, particularly in Quebec, where Catholics are a large majority and have not been accustomed to living the pluralism that results from the juxtaposition of various Christian confessions, as is the case in the other Canadian provinces and in the United States.² Across Canada, however, pluralism is no longer only an intra-Christian phenomenon. Canadian pluralism encompasses the great non-Christian religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) whose numerical importance continues to grow with the arrival of new immigrants. It also includes the philosophical positions of non-believers, agnostics, or even

1 Benedict XVI, Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization (30 May 2011).

2 Cf. É. Martin Meunier, "Permanence et recomposition de la 'religion culturelle'. Aperçu socio-historique du catholicisme québécois (1970-2006)," in *Modernité et religion au Québec*, ed. Roger Mager and Serge Cantin (Quebec, QC: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2010) 79-128. The Catholic homogeneity of Quebec is moving more toward the situation of societies like Spain or Ireland than more pluralist societies such as the rest of Canada, the United States, the UK, etc.

atheists who, with the rise of secularization, have become increasingly vocal in debates on civil society and on the accommodations necessary for living together. Recent studies on religious belief in Canada and the United States show that the fastest growing group is those who claim to belong to no religion at all.³

5. We live, then, in a pluralist society where Christian faith is no longer a given. How is it, we might ask, that we have passed “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others?”⁴ Without providing an exhaustive response to this question, we can state that in today’s pluralist society the Christian faith is one option among others claiming the same character of truth and demanding the same adherence. This observation is the fundamental starting point from which we must think about the way we proclaim the Gospel today.

Our next door neighbour may be a Muslim, a Hindu, or member of another religion. Our cousins or our nieces and nephews may have become completely indifferent to the Catholic faith of their childhood. A colleague at work may be agnostic, or even atheist, convinced that every religion is an instrument of patriarchal domination. Yet we may detect in these same people qualities of sincerity and honesty that demand our respect. We cannot presume – as was perhaps done too often in the past – that their misunderstanding of the Catholic faith, or their dislike for its presence in society, are due to ill will. But neither can we assume that a simple, objective presentation of the Gospel message will convince them of its credibility and prompt them to accept it.

3 According to an October 9, 2011 study by The Pew Forum, one out of five adults in the US declares no religious affiliation at all. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones on the Rise,” accessed October 14, 2012 at www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx

4 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007) 3.

6. In many respects, our situation is like that of the first Christians, who had the task of bringing the Good News into a world of contrasting religious and philosophical currents. We need to rediscover the vigour of the early Church and be inspired by its action, so that our proclamation of the Gospel will be credible and compelling to a world enamored with authenticity, broken by divisions, and marked by inequalities. We shall take our inspiration from the Church's tradition, illustrated by three Greek words, in order to propose three elements that should embody our proclamation of the Gospel. These are: *martyria*, that is, witness; *koinonia*, that is, communion or fraternity; and *diakonia*, that is, service. We shall then identify the attitude that embraces all these elements: that of a humble and joyful confidence.

■ ***Martyria – The Witness of an Encounter***

7. "Speaking about what we have seen and heard." What do we see in the Apostles' proclamation of the Gospel? It is the joy of an encounter with the risen Jesus who by the Spirit leads them to the Father. The proclamation of the Resurrection is at the heart of their preaching. Saint Peter's whole speech on the morning of Pentecost comes down to this affirmation: "This Jesus God raised up, and of this we are witnesses" (Acts 2.32). In response to the Sanhedrin, who prohibited them from speaking in the name of Jesus, Peter and John firmly reply: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4.19-20). These courageous words hint at the three years lived with Jesus along the roads of Palestine, followed by the traumatic days of his Passion and Death on the Cross. But above all they point to the Easter encounters with the risen Christ in Jerusalem, along the Sea of Galilee, and finally the dazzling experience of Pentecost where the power of the Spirit filled the hearts of the disciples. Saint John recalls

this at the beginning of his first Letter: “we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us . . . We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (1 Jn 1.3-4).

8. The first challenge presented by pluralism today is that of getting back to the initial experience of Christianity, which is a meeting of two freedoms: the freedom of Jesus who reveals the love of the Father to us, and our own freedom that is captivated by this encounter. It is no accident that, in promoting the new evangelization, Blessed John Paul II was careful to highlight clearly the essential role of the encounter with the living Christ, “the way to conversion, communion, and solidarity.”⁵ Pope Paul VI sometimes described the Church’s mission as a kind of dialogue: “God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. ‘He has first loved us’ (1 Jn 4.10). We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others.”⁶ And, in this dialogue, we must not be afraid to tell of the wondrous initiative God has taken in drawing near to us.

9. No disciple can communicate the Gospel in a credible way if he or she has not had a real interior encounter with Jesus. This “being with Jesus” transforms all existence and gives it meaning; it is “living with Jesus” that introduces the believer into the inner life of the Father, borne on by the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is this experience of encounter that will impel us to announce, proclaim, and share what we have lived, because we have experienced it as good, positive, and beautiful. All of this is a question of *authenticity*: proclaiming what we have first experienced for ourselves, speaking from our very being and telling others what it is that dwells within us. Blessed François de Laval, Canada’s first Bishop, emphasized the necessity of this authenticity in the work

5 This was the theme of the special Synod of Bishops for America in 1997.

6 Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* 72.

of evangelization: "Let there be nothing in our lives or behaviour that would seem to contradict what we say, or that would trouble the minds and hearts of those we want to win for God."⁷

10. If there is one thing that our world today is looking for, it is authenticity. It is no longer satisfied with words learned by heart and repeated without conviction. The world does not need teachers who have nothing to present but teachings that will subsequently be contradicted by other teachers.⁸ First and foremost, the world needs witnesses: persons who are animated by an encounter with Jesus, who has opened new horizons to them and who has given meaning to their lives. This is exemplified by Saint Paul, who wrote to the Galatians that "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2.20). We can also call to mind here the saying of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta: "All our words would be in vain if they did not come from the heart; words that do not give the light of Christ only add to the darkness." The issue is clear, as Pope Benedict XVI stated in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*: "it is indispensable, through witness, to make this word credible, lest it appear merely as a beautiful philosophy or utopia, rather than a reality that can be lived and itself give life. . . . The word of God reaches men and women 'through an encounter with witnesses who make it present and alive.'⁹ Amid the clamour of the discordant voices of society, this "word" will only be attractive and compelling if it is brought by credible witnesses who have themselves been transformed by it.

7 Bishop François de Laval, Letter to Fr. Claude Trouvé and Fr. François Salagnac on the occasion of their departure to the Iroquois missions on the north shore of Lake Ontario, 1668. In *Bulletin du Centre d'animation François de Laval* 23 (Fall 2011 – Winter 2012) 4-5.

8 As Paul VI made clear, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (Address to the Members of the *Consilium de Laicis* [October 2, 1974]).

9 *Verbum Domini* 97. Here, Benedict XVI cites proposition 38 of the Synod.

11. In this way, the pluralism of our society brings us back to our own responsibility as Christians. It demands of the Church a spiritual renewal; it requires of each of its members a true interior conversion. Without outlining all of its features, we can say that this renewal is first of all characterized by a devout and thoughtful reflection on the word of God, particularly the Gospel, as well as by regular reception of the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist.¹⁰ These are two privileged places for this encounter with Jesus, whose witnesses we want to be in our world. Yet this encounter also occurs within the community of brothers and sisters that is the Church.

■ ***Koinonia: The Witness of Fraternal Life***

12. *“That they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me”* (Jn 17.20-21). In addition to witnessing to a loving and liberating God, the path of *koinonia* opens up to us the way of communion or fraternal life. In Jesus’ prayer at the Last Supper we find an absolutely fundamental text: *“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”* (Jn 17.20-21).

13. The disciples’ union with a God who is love is revealed by their union with each other. Furthermore, this union manifests the mission that the Father entrusted to Jesus, who came into the world *“to gather into one the dispersed children of God”* (Jn 11.52). In a world wounded by division and isolation, the love lived in Christian communities witnesses to the authenticity of Jesus’ mission and becomes a sign of the credibility of his message. The first Christian communities

¹⁰ Cf. *Verbum Domini* 54-55 (on the Eucharist) and 86-87 (on *Lectio Divina*).

spontaneously understood this. They were committed to a fraternal life that was manifested particularly in the sharing of goods: "All who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2.44). And later we read: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions" (Acts 4.32).

14. The example of the first Christian communities has something to teach us today. We, too, must work to build communities where love reigns. We must be, like them, faithful "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2.42). As Church, we must be able "to witness to the possibility of all of us together taking responsibility for the Church, desiring communion, making the community welcoming, attractive, and a place where one is loved, respected, and reconciled in charity."¹¹ This applies to all ecclesial groups, whether old or new communities of consecrated life, secular institutes, or associations of the faithful. It also applies to entities like parishes. All of these must become, more and more, real *communities*.

15. For the Gospel to be proclaimed effectively, these communities must be capable of living – and manifesting – the life of faith. This life must also be lived in families, who are called to be, through their openness to life, signs of hope and witnesses to love. Only with such families and communities living a fraternal love anchored in a profound communion with the Triune God will the Church be able to bear visible and credible witness to a God of love who offers himself for the salvation of humanity. The proclamation of the Gospel will draw on the support

11 Bruno Forte, "Quel avenir pour le christianisme?," *Documentation catholique* 2398 (March 2008), 291-295.

of praying and fraternal communities, of communities determined to devote themselves to “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2.42), that is, to celebrating the Eucharist. It is the Eucharist which, uniting them to the loving action of Christ’s self-offering to his Father, will allow them to live a Trinitarian love that will strengthen their bonds of unity. After all, what is the Church or the ecclesial community but “a people united in one in the unity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”?¹²

And it is the Eucharist, too, that will open them to all the world’s suffering. A third touchstone of evangelization now comes into view: the witness of selfless service.

■ ***Diakonia: The Witness of Selfless Service***

16. United by the Eucharist as a community of love, the Church community cannot withdraw inward, only thinking of itself. It needs to radiate outward, impelled by the Spirit towards the whole of humanity awaiting salvation. In the words of Pope Francis, “the Holy Spirit draws us into the mystery of the living God and saves us from the threat of a Church which is gnostic and self-referential, closed in on herself; he impels us to open the doors and go forth to proclaim and bear witness to the good news of the Gospel, to communicate the joy of faith, the encounter with Christ.”¹³ Thus the path of *diakonia* opens up before it, that path of selfless service to a suffering humanity in search of unity and meaning. Here we have in mind a love lived in working for justice, peace, and the safeguarding of creation, a love that makes us attentive to the poor and the weak, a love unafraid to be the voice of the voiceless. As Pope Benedict XVI told us, “Love — *caritas* — is an extraordinary force

12 Saint Cyprian of Carthage, *De Dominica Oratione* 23.

13 Francis, Homily for the Solemnity of Pentecost (May 19, 2013).

which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace."¹⁴ Here, the parable of the final judgment should give us pause: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt 25.35-36). The people hearing these words come from different nations and do not know the one speaking to them. Yet, to their denials, the King responds, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25.40).

17. At the heart of the life of the believer and of the Church is the fact that the poor, the needy, the downtrodden, are a presence of Christ himself. The great adorer of the Eucharist, Blessed Charles de Foucauld, was deeply convinced of this. As he wrote to one of his friends: "There is not, I think, any saying from the Gospel that has made a deeper impression on me and transformed my life more than this one: 'Everything you did to one of these little ones, you did to me.' If we consider that these words came from the same mouth that said 'this is my body, this is my blood,' then with what energy must we seek out and love Jesus in these 'little ones,' in these sinners, in the poor?"¹⁵ Going out to them when they are far off and welcoming them when they come near to us is encountering Jesus himself. Just as we must recognize him in the bread of the word and the bread of the Eucharist, so must we see him in the face of the poor, whom the Church is called to love as "part of her constant tradition."¹⁶

14 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* 1.

15 Charles de Foucauld, Letter to Louis Massignon (August 1, 1916).

16 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2444.

18. This concern for the poor is one of the most meaningful signs of credibility for evangelization today. We see this illustrated in the following reflection from the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a proponent of a profoundly secular, non-religious ethic:

The 'professional knowledge of experts alone' runs a great risk of lacking all sensitivity toward those left behind by society, of not seeing the failings and the wounds of numerous individuals or of minimizing their impact, whereas religious wisdom is attentive to the poor and the weak, proposing the possibility of salvation from a hopeless life.¹⁷

19. But if we recognize Jesus in the poor, then they deserve our unconditional welcome. Every undertaking on their behalf must always keep them squarely at the centre. Our attention and our concern for them must be given absolutely freely, and must not be motivated by hidden objectives no matter how noble they may be. Several times, along the roads of Palestine, Jesus was overcome with compassion (cf. Lk 7.13) for those who were experiencing a profound sadness. He raised the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, and his friend Lazarus; he made the deaf hear and the mute speak, he healed the blind and cast out demons. These actions reveal the kingdom that he came to announce, a kingdom where "mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev 21.4).

Following after Jesus, Christians must be moved in the deepest part of themselves by the sufferings and anxieties of our world. Vatican II made this the point of departure for its reflection on *The Church in the Modern World*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this

¹⁷ This citation is from Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) 43.

age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts."¹⁸

20. Moved by this conviction rooted in Christ's love, the Church has an obligation to work for the building of a more human world, to contribute to the "development of peoples," to use the words of Pope Paul VI.¹⁹ It also must ease the wounds and sufferings of those who cross its path. This will happen through the various undertakings of its members, particularly the laity. Inspired by an unconditional love whose touchstone is the care of the weakest, they will involve themselves in various ways in the struggle against injustice. Here, they will be joined by many non-believers and followers of other religions who are also engaged in such a project and whose dedication will inspire their own undertakings. In this way they will help the Church to reveal in a concrete and credible way the face of a God who is love and whose compassion extends to all of humanity. The Church, then, will be a source of hope for the world. And it will be capable of proclaiming the Gospel with a humble and joyful confidence to all of humanity. As Pope Francis states: "There are no borders, no limits: he sends us to everyone. The Gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who seem closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming. It is for everyone. Do not be afraid to go and to bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away, most indifferent. The Lord seeks all, he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love."²⁰

18 *Gaudium et Spes* 1.

19 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* 1.

20 Francis, Homily for the Closing Mass of the XXVIII World Youth Day (July 28, 2013).

■ *The Style of Ecclesial Witness: A Humble and Joyful Confidence*

21. It is indeed with a humble and joyful confidence that we must proclaim the Gospel in a pluralistic world of competing philosophical and religious systems, all of which claim to possess absolute truth (or affirm in an absolute way that absolute truth does not exist). This humble audacity describes how the Gospel must be proclaimed today, that is, the style of witness that this proclamation must adopt. As Christians, we must respond “with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt 3.16), always keeping in mind that the ultimate goal for ourselves and those we meet is an encounter with God the Father in his kingdom, by means of our union with Christ in the Spirit.

22. We must have humility, because nothing is so repulsive to our contemporaries as a truth imposed by authority without the interior consent of one’s conscience.²¹ We need humility because before we even speak we must accept the other person, with his or her sufferings, criticisms, and even aggression. We must listen to them with all the more attention, since the Holy Spirit is already present in them and has something to say to us. Michael Power, the first Bishop of Toronto, instructed his flock thus: “We therefore stand indebted to those who have not yet received the precious gift of faith, and who would, perhaps, have made a better use of this inestimable blessing than we have done.”²²

We need humility above all because it is God himself “who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant” (2 Co 3.6), and because “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Co 4.7). Pope Benedict XVI noted that “Saint Paul is well aware that he is an

21 *Dignitatis Humanae* 3.

22 Bishop Michael Power, “Pastoral Address for the Time of Lent, and for the Establishing of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, in the Diocese of Toronto” (1844).

'unworthy servant' (Lk 17.10) . . . an 'earthen vessel' (2 Co 4.7), into which God places the riches and power of his Grace." He then clarified one consequence that every evangelizer must take to heart:

Therefore, to the extent that our union with the Lord increases and that our prayers become intense, we also go to the essential and understand that it is not the power of our own means, our virtues, our skills that brings about the kingdom of God but that it is God who works miracles precisely through our weakness, our inadequacy for the task. We must therefore have the humility not to trust merely in ourselves, but to work, with the Lord's help, in the Lord's vineyard, entrusting ourselves to him as fragile 'earthen vessels'.²³

When we are freed from every tendency to see ourselves as important, and from all concern for visible results, we can be authentic witnesses of this Jesus whom we have encountered, and who fills us with joy. "Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness [*parrhesia*]" (2 Co 3.12).

23. It is joy that lies at the beginning and at the end of evangelization. "Joy is at the heart of the Christian experience," declared Pope Benedict XVI to the youth of the whole world as he asked them to be "missionaries of joy": "Go and tell other young people about your joy at finding the precious treasure which is Jesus himself. We cannot keep the joy of faith to ourselves. If we are to keep it, we must give it away."²⁴ It is to this joy that we are called; this is what Pope Paul VI called "the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing . . . May it mean the great joy of our offered lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive

23 Benedict XVI, General Audience (June 13, 2012).

24 Benedict XVI, Message for XXVII World Youth Day (2012) 7.

the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient, or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world."²⁵

24. In closing, we turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Star of the New Evangelization, and implore her maternal intercession as Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of America. In her we see exemplified all the elements needed for a new proclamation of the Gospel in our world today. With her *fiat*, she entered into an intimate personal encounter with the Lord Jesus that would continue throughout her life. She lived a life of faith-filled fellowship, first within the Holy Family, and then with her Son's disciples. She recognized her own "lowliness" (cf Lk 1.48) before God, yet did not hesitate to offer her life in humble service of others. Her humble and joyful confidence is evident in the bold words she still speaks to us today: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2.5). May the example and prayers of the Mother of God continue to inspire us to joyfully proclaim the Gospel in today's world.

²⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 80.

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