

(English translation)

Castel Gandolfo, February 24, 2002

The New Evangelization

It's not the first time I am addressing this subject and I must say that it has always given me a special joy.

Why? Because the indications of the Holy Father John Paul II in this regard are stupendous, truly special and timely. But also because I've realized the truth of the Pope's words in *Redemptoris Missio*, that is, that the ecclesial Movements and new Communities "[are] a true gift of God both for the new evangelization and for the missionary activity, so properly called."¹ So he expects a new springtime for the Church especially from them.

It is for this reason then that whenever I have spoken of the "new evangelization" and listed its main aspects, I have always compared them with the characteristics of these new ecclesial realities, and in particular with the Focolare Movement.

The "new" evangelization

Why has the adjective "new" been added to the word "evangelization"?

John Paul II did this in 1983. Then in the following years, he formulated principles and characteristics of this "new evangelization." First of all, we must say that the Holy Spirit had in some way announced this word "new" already in the early decades of the 1900s when he began to send on earth – as he does from time to time – particular charisms for a re-evangelization of Christianity, which was needed, and for a more far-reaching evangelization of humanity, thus giving origin to lively and vibrant new associative forms, like Movements and ecclesial Communities.

The most important principles and characteristics of the "new evangelization" announced by John Paul II can be summed up in ten main points. Evangelization must be new in its ardour; new in its methods; new in its expressions.

The first announcement it must make is: "Humanity is loved by God." It is destined to form mature ecclesial communities. The "new evangelization" requires that we first evangelize ourselves.

The "new evangelization" will highlight the words of the Gospel which speak of love. It will have to lead to living out Jesus' New Commandment. It won't be possible to achieve it without aiming at sanctity.

Naturally, the "new evangelization" will also require the spoken word.

All called to evangelize

As we know, the words of Jesus: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15) marked the birth of evangelization.

They were directed to his apostles, to their successors, and to those who would collaborate with them. And so it has been for twenty centuries.

All Christians, and not only, know of missionary bishops, priests, men and women religious and some lay people who left their country, home, family, work and studies... in order to keep this commandment of Jesus down through the centuries. We are all aware of the lifestyle they chose in order to carry out this mission; a lifestyle which was often heroic, today too, in order to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. We believe that this type of evangelization will continue.

¹ *Redemptoris Missio* 72.

First principle: «new in its ardour»

Nevertheless, through the words of the Pope, the Church today affirms the need for a “new” evangelization. Indeed, in speaking to the bishops of CELAM in Haiti on March 9, 1983, the Holy Father specified that it had to be “new in its ardour.”² It will be so if union with God grows in those who promote it.

Is it true then that by evangelizing others – our neighbours, the world – we grow in union with God?

The connection between the two might appear to be new, but it is not. It emerges from Scripture and from the experience of our Movement. As Paul affirms in the Hymn to Charity (1 Cor 13:1-3), nothing has value if it is not animated by love for our neighbour, so not even evangelization. However, because there is a close connection between love of neighbour and love of God, the more one grows, the more the other increases, and vice versa.

We always give the example of the tiny plant: the more the root grows, the higher the stem shoots up. And the taller this latter becomes – also with the contribution of the oxygen it receives – the deeper its root goes into the ground.

This then is a possibility for the whole Church to bring about a “new evangelization” which increases union with God and “ardour” in people’s hearts.

Isn’t this exactly what happens in our Movement, for example, and not only, animated as it is by love in all aspects of its lifestyle?

The second principle: «new in its methods»

This evangelization must be “new in its methods.” The Holy Father said this in 1988, in a homily in Salto, Uruguay.³

New in its methods means that this time it will be carried out not only by special people, like priests or religious men and women, but by the entire people of God.

All the faithful should be mobilized then. Here again, isn’t this the case of our Movement, as it is, generally speaking, for all the other Movements?

In our case, from the very beginning the Holy Spirit chose lay people, or more specifically, lay women, to bring about this ecclesial reality which is an instrument of evangelization.

Even now, although our Movement includes all states of life, from children to bishops, it is made up predominately of lay people. Here too, then, the people are evangelizing and they have been doing so for almost 60 years. However, this method must now become the practice of all the Church.

The third principle: «new in its expressions»

The “new evangelization” will be new also “in its expressions.”⁴

The Holy Father affirms: “This is because even in countries evangelized many centuries ago (as in Europe), there is no longer the reality of a Christian society which... measured itself explicitly on Gospel values. Today we must face a situation ... in the context of globalization and of the new mingling of peoples and cultures.”⁵

This explains the need for new expressions of evangelization.

² John Paul II, To the Bishops of CELAM, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 9 March 1983, in “*La Traccia*” 3, (1983), p. 269.

³ John Paul II, Homily in Salto, Uruguay, 9 May 1988, in “*La Traccia*” 5 (1988), p. 523-525.

⁴ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*

And there is no doubt that dialogues, in which a number of Movements or Ecclesial Communities are also involved, are emerging as a modern form of evangelization. These are the four dialogues already announced by Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam*,⁶ intended today by John Paul II for the whole Church.

1) *Dialogue with the Catholics.*

As our Movement spread throughout the world, from the beginning, it opened a dialogue in our Church with individual Catholics and, more recently, among the ecclesial Movements and other Associations, as well as with religious Families born from the charisms of past centuries.

Among other things, this dialogue achieves a goal greatly desired today by the Church: to be “communion,” “Church-communion.”

2) *Ecumenical dialogue*

In 1961 our ecumenical dialogue began, in which we highlight the many things we have in common with Christians of various Churches: Baptism, Scripture, the Creed, the early Councils, and the spirituality of unity which we share and live together almost integrally. Actually, the spirituality is considered, in a number of places, to be an ecumenical spirituality.

In view of all these common elements then, we feel that we can already form together with the Christians of 350 Churches who adhere to our Movement, one Christian people awaiting full unity. And this greatly alleviates the suffering of division.

3) *Interreligious dialogue*

Our dialogue with the faithful of other religions began towards the end of the seventies. The first step in our dialogue with them is to live together the “Golden Rule” present in almost all the Sacred Books, a rule which is given in the Gospel with the words: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Lk 6:31). This rule was recently mentioned in Assisi by the Holy Father and others.

Through love of neighbour, which the rule calls for on both sides, it is already possible to base our relationship with others on mutual love. And this gives rise to fraternity.

Then, in this atmosphere, placing ourselves on the same level, we can establish a dialogue with our partner, a dialogue in which we seek to make ourselves ‘nothing’ so as to in a sense enter within them. We assume this attitude which is very important, indispensable, and which has a twofold effect: it helps us to inculturate ourselves in their world, to know their culture and terminology, and it predisposes them to listen to us.

And then we pass on to a “respectful announcement”⁷ – a beautiful, well-chosen expression of John Paul II – in which, faithful to God, to ourselves, and sincere with our neighbour, we share what our faith affirms on the subject we are discussing, without imposing anything, without wanting to conquer anyone, therefore without any desire to proselytize, but only out of love.

Our interreligious dialogue embraces the faithful of the major religions: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Shintoists, Hindus, etc., by whom we are often esteemed and loved. In fact, they call us to bring our Christian experience into the Muslim mosques (so far, in 40 mosques throughout the United States), in Buddhist temples, in Jewish Synagogues, etc.

There are also those who freely embrace Christianity, as happened with thousands of members of an African people, for whom we had to build a church, which was then instituted as a parish.

4) *Dialogue with people of good will.*

Also people of good will who do not have any religious affiliation realize that loving others does not concern only Christians. It is a command inscribed in the DNA of every person because – as we believe – every person has been created in the image of God who is Love.

⁶ *Ecclesiam Suam*: EV/2, 163-210.

⁷ See *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 56.

So there can be mutual love, and a dialogue can begin with them too in which we make a “respectful announcement” of the Christian truths. And, because they believe in the human person, we work together, to the glory of Jesus who was Man as well as God, to safeguard the great human values to which they, too, give much importance, like freedom, solidarity, human rights, unity, peace, and so forth.

But the dialogues are not the monopoly of the Focolare. Other Movements practice them with very positive results. The Community of St. Egidio is a model in this.

Fourth principle: «humanity is loved by God»

The first announcement it will have to make is that “humanity is loved by God,”⁸ because – as the Pope said to the Bishops of the United States in 1998 – “evangelization is the effort on the part of the Church to proclaim to all people that God loves them, that he offered his life for them in Christ Jesus and that he invites them to an eternal life of happiness.”⁹ This is a wonderful, concise definition of the Good News.

Understandably, this detail of the first announcement that must be made to the world necessarily surprised us and others. We are not the only ones, in fact, who begin evangelization exactly in this way.

In our case, as many of you know, from the first days of our new way of life, the Holy Spirit deeply impressed on our heart a strong conviction: “God loves us.” We said to everyone, in every possible way: “God loves us immensely.”

We believed in God’s love, and we’ve continued to announce it throughout these 58 years of our Movement’s life. Everything began and developed from this faith, giving origin to our “spirituality of unity.” In obedience to the Holy Spirit, who speaks through the Holy Father, now this announcement can be universalized in all the Church.

The fifth principle: «formation of mature Christian communities»

“This new evangelization is directed not only to individual persons but also to entire portions of populations.... Its purpose is the formation of mature ecclesial communities.”¹⁰

“Mature communities.”

It seems to me that this is precisely the goal that is generally achieved by the Movements, including our own. This is because we do not focus so much on evangelizing people of only one age group, for example, little children, nor of evangelizing occasionally through a mission or some other means (even though this can be done). The evangelization carried out by the Movements is on-going and can truly offer promising results with regard to the formation of mature Christian communities.

In particular: “The lay faithful – the Pope points out in *Christifideles Laici* – have their part to fulfil in the formation of these ecclesial communities, not only through an active and responsible participation in the life of the community, through a testimony that only they can give, but also through missionary zeal and activity.”¹¹

Is this not perhaps the twofold action of the lay people of our Movement, for example? Some devote themselves to announcing the Gospel through the various branches of the Movement. Others, through the so-called “*inundations*” – an expression borrowed from St. John Chrysostom¹² who speaks of “rivers of living water” – inundate different human environments (the worlds of politics, economics, the arts, culture) with the wisdom of the Gospel.

In a similar way, other Movements do the same, and it is certainly in the pastoral plans of some dioceses.

⁸ *Christifideles Laici* 34.

⁹ John Paul II, To the Bishops of the United States, 17 March 1998, in “*La Traccia*” 3 (1998), p. 257.

¹⁰ *Christifideles Laici* 34, in EV 22, 1751-1752.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See John Chrysostom, In *Johannem Homilia* 51; PG 59, 284.

Sixth principle: «evangelize ourselves»

And now another principle for a “new evangelization” which the Holy Father announced, always in 1998, to pilgrims of the Diocese of Torún, a principle which made a deep impression on us because of the method he speaks of. Certain Movements live it and ours, I would say, lives it in an altogether special way, to the letter, fully.

“We cannot evangelize others” if we do not first evangelize ourselves, “if we personally are not the object of evangelization, because only a person who has been transformed by the law of Christ’s love (understood from the Gospel) can bring about a true *metánoia* [=conversion] in the hearts and minds of other people, environments, nations and the world.”¹³

You know that one of our main concerns has always been and still is to change our way of thinking, willing, and loving and to assume that of Jesus by living one sentence of the Gospel for a certain period of time. The reason for this is to first of all re-evangelize ourselves. Almost three million copies of the Word of Life are translated into 91 languages and dialects and are mailed out every month.

Now, who knows which ways the Church will find to live out this principle everywhere, if it is not already doing so.

The seventh principle: «highlight love»

“This transformation is summed up in love of neighbour and in works of mercy.” These are always the words that the Pope addressed to pilgrims of the Diocese of Torún.

Even though we gave the greatest attention to all the words of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit especially underlined, as he did with many other Movements, the word which sums up all the Law and Prophets: love.

“Love is the inspiring spark of all that is done with the name Focolare”¹⁴ – this is what John Paul II said in one of his talks to us in 1984.

Furthermore, owing to the fact that love is expressed in the works of mercy or the works of charity, as a testimony of true love, we know that all the Movements have these works, as does the Focolare Movement (1,000 + 400). And there are a countless number in the various Churches.

Eighth principle: «living the new commandment»

The witness of mutual love is fundamental for evangelization. Jesus said: “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). And the early Christians fully gave this witness if people said of them: “Look how they love one another and how they are ready to die for one another.”¹⁵

In the Focolare Movement, not only do we live the New Commandment, but we place it at the basis of everything, following what St. Peter said: “Above all, let your love for one another be intense” (1 Pt 4:8), which is for us the norm of all norms.

Furthermore, some months ago, mutual love was underlined in an altogether special way in the Church by the *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, which announced that “spirituality of communion” which the Holy Father wants to see lived on every level. The best way to accomplish it – he writes – is love for Jesus crucified and forsaken.

¹³ To the pilgrims of the Diocese of Torún, 19 February 1998, in “*La Traccia*” 2 (1998), p.174-175.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Discourse to the Focolare Movement*, Mariapolis Center, Rocca di Papa, 19 August 1984, in OR, 21 August 1984, p. 5.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *Apologetico*, Latin text, translation and notes by Anna Resta Barrile, Bologna 1980, cap. 39, 7, p.145.

The “spirituality of communion” is synonymous with our “spirituality of unity,” as the Pope himself affirmed in a letter to Cardinals and Bishops, friends of the Movement.¹⁶

The ninth principle: «pointing to holiness»

Holiness is required and deemed to be necessary for the “new evangelization.”

Here too, what shall we say of our experience?

Various bishops feel that a number of the Movement’s members can be proposed as models and have begun a process for their beatification. Is this not perhaps a confirmation that it is not only possible to become saints by following our charism, but that, thanks be to God, striving for holiness is a reality in all of the Movement’s members called to evangelize the world?

From now on it will be the duty of all Christians to strive for holiness if they want to effectively contribute towards the “new evangelization.”

The tenth principle: «the spoken Word»

“The new evangelization will be effective if it proclaims from the rooftops what it has first lived in intimacy with the Lord.”¹⁷

Do we do this? Certainly. All the Movements do it. The Church itself aims at this in many ways.

In our Movement, the Word of God resounds in every corner of the world: in our personal relationships, in our meetings and congresses, in the temporary Mariapolises and in the permanent little towns, etc.

We speak directly and through the most modern means of communication: the press, radio, television, theatre, telephone conference calls, music groups, and so forth.

This is something of the ten main points launched by John Paul II. This is how the Holy Spirit has been underlining them in the Church through the most varied charisms.

Therefore, the “new evangelization” proposed from Above gave us wings, as I think it did for the other Movements.

Now, the fact that the Pope has proposed it for the whole Church, and in these terms, is an immense grace.

All that is left to do now is for us to get down to work in order to promote it, and for all Christians to bring it about.

May the Holy Spirit keep us faithful to it.

¹⁶ See *Letter to the participants of the annual meeting of bishops friends of the Focolare Movement*, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XXIV (2001) 1, LEV, Città del Vaticano, p. 370.

¹⁷ *Vita consecrata* 81, in EV 15, 684.