What is evangelisation?

These passages come from the booklet [**The New Evangelisation: History, Theology and Practice**](http://www.ctsbooks.org/the-new-evangelisation/)by Fr Stephen Wang, published by the Catholic Truth Society. They are posted here to help people reflect on the importance of evangelisation and on how it can be approached in the setting of a parish or school or chaplaincy.



What is evangelisation?

In 1983 Saint Pope John Paul II [spoke to the Catholic Bishops of Latin America](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/new-evangelization/disciples-called-to-witness/disciples-called-to-witness-part-ii.cfm) in Haiti and called for a New Evangelisation: one that would be ‘new in its ardour, methods and expression’. More recently, in 2010, Pope Benedict [established a Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html), to help the Church share ‘the inestimable gift’ that God has given us, the gift of being ‘sharers in his own life’. And when Pope Francis [stepped onto the balcony](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/elezione/index_en.htm) of St Peter’s Basilica for the first time on the day of his election it was significant that he spoke about his hopes for ‘the evangelisation of this beautiful city’ – a city that many assumed had already been evangelised.

Evangelisation is not something new. Christians have been sharing their faith for two thousand years: giving witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ, and inviting others to share in that redeeming love through faith and the sacramental life of the Church.

Why, then, do we need a New Evangelisation? If the city of Rome has been a centre of Christian faith for many centuries, what does it mean for Pope Francis to say that it still needs evangelising?

First of all, we can make some straightforward distinctions. The word ‘evangelisation’ comes from a Greek verb that simply means ‘to bring good news to others’. Anything that involves sharing the Christian faith and bringing others to know Christ and his Church is part of the work of evangelisation.

Primary evangelisation is understood to be the task of reaching out to those people and cultures that have never known Christ and his Gospel. It is ‘missionary work’ in its traditional sense, sometimes called the mission ad gentes, meaning ‘to the (non-Christian) nations’. This is the first and in some senses the most important kind of evangelisation.

The New Evangelisation, according to Blessed John Paul II, concerns another situation. It involves the mission of the Church ‘particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel’ ([Redemptoris Missio](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html), Para 33). The New Evangelisation, on this first definition, involves the re-evangelisation of former Christian cultures and of Christians who have become disconnected from their faith. [Pope Benedict](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html) explains very simply that it is the need for a renewed missionary impulse in territories that have traditionally been Christian.

On the other hand, the distinctions between different kinds of evangelisation are not always so clean. The New Evangelisation is a cluster of ideas about mission and culture that are not easy to define. [Greg Willets has written](http://www.catholicdigest.com/articles/faith/trends/2013/04-03/what-is-the-new-evangelization) that defining the New Evangelization ‘is like herding squirrels: it can take you in a multitude of different directions, sometimes all at once’ (CatholicDigest.com). And even [Pope Benedict,](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html) when he established the new Pontifical Council, admitted that this involves a variety of situations that demands careful discernment: ‘to speak of a “new evangelization” does not in fact mean that a single formula should be developed that would hold the same for all circumstances’.

This booklet recognises this variety and in Part 1 sets out five distinct but connected reasons why the Church needs to engage in an evangelisation that is truly new. In Part 2 it then presents a number of New Evangelisation ‘projects’ that have developed in the UK over the last few years. In Part 3 it draws out from these projects some consistent features of the New Evangelisation as it has been practiced effectively in the UK. Finally, in Part 4, the booklet collects together some of the most significant writings about the New Evangelisation from recent papal teaching and Church documents, as a resource for further reflection.

This booklet is not intended to be an introduction to the very idea of evangelisation: it takes for granted a basic understanding of why Christians want to share their faith and what this involves – theologically and pastorally; and it does not enter into the practical aspects of what individuals or parishes can do to evangelise. The intention here is very limited: to write about the distinctive features of the New Evangelisation, and to stimulate people to consider what this could mean for them and their communities.

Why evangelise?

Everyone has a slightly different explanation of why we need a New Evangelisation and exactly what the term means. These are the five reasons that come up most consistently in Catholic thinking. Taken together they form a kind of definition of what the New Evangelisation is and what it’s primary goals are.

**(a) Living in a post-Christian society**

Many countries that have historically identified themselves as Christian are now losing touch with their Christian roots. When this happens, the general culture often becomes increasingly secularised and pluralistic; the moral and legal assumptions of society are less and less influenced by Christian values; and fewer people identify themselves as Christian. There is, [according to Pope Benedict](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html), a ‘loss of the sense of the sacred’ (Ubicumque et Semper).

This ‘de-Christianisation’ of society has been taking place for decades in most Western countries, especially within Europe, which has been at the heart of ‘Christendom’ for many centuries. It is also happening in places like Latin America, which has been a predominantly Christian continent for five hundred years.

This is not all negative. Some of the changes are to do with immigration and globalisation: societies are less homogenous and more pluralistic, which in many ways is a great gift. Some of the changes are to do with a greater social tolerance and a respect for difference and autonomy. But part of the situation is undoubtedly caused by an indifference to questions of faith, a lack of familiarity with the core Christian message, an increasingly materialistic outlook amongst many people, and sometimes an outright hostility to religion or to people of faith.

For some statistical evidence, here are some results from [a recent census](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html) for England and Wales: ‘Between 2001 and 2011 there has been a decrease in people who identify as Christian (from 71.7 per cent to 59.3 per cent) and an increase in those reporting no religion (from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent). There were increases in the other main religious group categories, with the number of Muslims increasing the most (from 3.0 per cent to 4.8 per cent)’ (Office for National Statistics).

This isn’t the first time that thriving Christian cultures have given way to a post-Christian landscape. By the fourth century, North Africa was predominantly Christian and home to some of the key figures of early Christian history, such as St Augustine of Hippo. Within a few centuries, these same territories were almost exclusively Muslim. And it took very little time for the communist regimes of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century to impose their atheistic ideologies on their citizens and drive religion, both Christian and non-Christian, almost completely underground.

What, therefore, are the new challenges that our own ‘post-Christian’ situation presents for the task of evangelisation? There are three in particular:

First, many people in a post-Christian society believe that they already understand Christianity and are in a position to move beyond it. They believe that to some degree they have ‘tried it’ and found it wanting. In reality, they are often ignorant of the real meaning of Christianity, or they have never had it presented in an authentic and life-giving way. But this sense of their own familiarity can create a prejudice against Christianity, an assumed superiority, a lack of openness, that is absent in cultures that have never been influenced by the Christian message.

As Blessed John Paul wrote in [Ecclesia in Europa](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa_en.html), ‘Many Europeans today think they know what Christianity is, yet they do not really know it at all. Often they are lacking in knowledge of the most basic elements and notions of the faith’ (Para 47).

Second, an aggressive secularism has developed in some of these Western countries that is much more than a benign post-Christian pluralism. Religion is dismissed out of hand by many people as something irrational and backward, or it is privatised and treated as an individual commitment that has nothing to do with public life or the common good. This attempt to create a neutral and even value-free public square ends up stifling debate and weakening society. It presumes that institutional religion has nothing to contribute to the common good, and forces individuals to separate themselves from their faith commitments if they have to deny their consciences when they participate in public roles (for example, as teachers, politicians, lawyers, doctors, etc.).

Third, despite the appearance of post-Christianity, many of these societies have deep Christian foundations that have not been completely undermined. The challenge is to rediscover the importance of these foundations, and to help people appreciate how much their culture has to gain from a greater understanding of its Christian roots. Christian history and Christian values, despite what many believe, are not a threat to a contemporary, pluralistic society, but a genuine help. As Pope Benedict said [when he visited Westminster Hall in 2010](http://www.thepapalvisit.org.uk/Replay-the-Visit/Speeches/Speeches-17-September/Pope-Benedict-s-address-to-Politicians-Diplomats-Academics-and-Business-Leaders), a society needs both faith and reason if it is going to root itself in objective moral principles.

When Pope Benedict [spoke to the Queen](http://www.thepapalvisit.org.uk/Replay-the-Visit/Speeches/Speeches-16-September/Pope-Benedict-XVI-s-Speech-to-The-Queen) in Edinburgh on the same UK visit, instead of criticising Britain for the process of de-Christianisation that seemed to be taking place, he sought to affirm the Christian values that were still very much a part of British culture. This recognition and reaffirmation are part of the New Evangelisation: ‘The monarchs of England and Scotland have been Christians from very early times and include outstanding saints like Edward the Confessor and Margaret of Scotland. As you know, many of them consciously exercised their sovereign duty in the light of the Gospel, and in this way shaped the nation for good at the deepest level. As a result, the Christian message has been an integral part of the language, thought and culture of the peoples of these islands for more than a thousand years. Your forefathers’ respect for truth and justice, for mercy and charity come to you from a faith that remains a mighty force for good in your kingdom, to the great benefit of Christians and non-Christians alike’.

The New Evangelisation is trying to understand and speak to this broadly post-Christian society, with all its questions, dangers, possibilities and ambiguities.

**(b) Christians disconnected from their faith**

Another aspect of the contemporary situation, as mentioned in the Introduction, is that many people who call themselves Christian do not have a strong and life-giving faith.

Blessed John Paul II wrote about this in [Ecclesia in Europa](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa_en.html): ‘Many of the baptized live as if Christ did not exist: the gestures and signs of faith are repeated, especially in devotional practices, but they fail to correspond to a real acceptance of the content of the faith and fidelity to the person of Jesus. The great certainties of the faith are being undermined in many people by a vague religiosity lacking real commitment; various forms of agnosticism and practical atheism are spreading and serve to widen the division between faith and life; some people have been affected by the spirit of an immanentist humanism [i.e. a view of the human person that has no room for the transcendent], which has weakened the faith and often, tragically, led to its complete abandonment; one encounters a sort of secularist interpretation of Christian faith which is corrosive and accompanied by a deep crisis of conscience and of Christian moral practice’ (Para 47).

There are many issues here, but the central point is that many baptised Christians do not have a living faith and a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ their Saviour. This is not to judge or condemn anyone, or to expect that everyone’s faith should be expressed in the same way; it’s just to recognise – with sadness – that the Christian faith is skin deep for many people.

This is not a new situation historically. Many of the great missionary movements in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe were founded to evangelise and catechise nominal Christians in Catholic countries who had had almost no Christian education or formation. This was especially true amongst both the rural and urban poor. But the fact that the situation has been a problem throughout Christian history does not make it any less worrying.

The normal pattern of Christian initiation is meant to run as follows (using the traditional theological language, and realising that this is a simplification): Initial proclamation; personal conversion; introductory catechesis; sacramental initiation; ongoing Christian formation; witness.

Putting this into ordinary language: The basic message of Christianity is shared with someone (‘proclamation’); this touches their heart and mind and leads them to take a step in faith and commit their lives to Jesus Christ (‘conversion’); they then choose to learn more about this new faith, to grow into the Christian life, and to share more fully in the life of the Church (‘catechesis’); this leads to the celebration of the sacraments and their wholehearted commitment to Christ and his Church (‘sacramental initiation’: baptism, confirmation and the holy eucharist); after this they continue to deepen their faith through their own efforts and with the support of the Church (‘ongoing formation’); and they in their turn share the Christian faith with others through the example of their life and through their words (‘witness’).

In this pattern, evangelisation (the first two steps of proclamation and conversion) happens before sacramental catechesis. In other words, as a Christian is catechised and celebrates the sacraments, it is taken for granted that this person knows the basic message of Christianity and has taken this to heart, that they have a living faith, and that they have made a personal commitment to what they are learning and celebrating. The problem is that many Catholics, to use this technical language, are catechised but not evangelised; they are baptised and ‘sacramentalised’ but without having any real knowledge about what this means; they are nominally Catholic, culturally Catholic, but they lack a genuine conversion of heart and mind that would allow them to bring their Christian faith alive.

In [Catechesi Tradendae](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae_en.html) Blessed John Paul analyses the different reasons why this initial evangelisation has sometimes not taken place: ‘A certain number of children baptized in infancy come for catechesis in the parish without receiving any other initiation into the faith and still without any explicit personal attachment to Jesus Christ… In addition, there are other children who have not been baptized and whose parents agree only at a later date to religious education… Again, many pre-adolescents and adolescents who have been baptized and been given a systematic catechesis and the sacraments still remain hesitant for a long time about committing their whole lives to Jesus Christ… Finally, even adults are not safe from temptations to doubt or to abandon their faith, especially as a result of their unbelieving surroundings. This means that “catechesis” must often concern itself not only with nourishing and teaching the faith, but also with arousing it unceasingly with the help of grace, with opening the heart, with converting, and with preparing total adherence to Jesus Christ on the part of those who are still on the threshold of faith’ (Para 19).

This, therefore, is one of the key challenges of the New Evangelisation: to help those Christians who are still ‘on the threshold of faith’ to make a deeper commitment and discover the true riches of Jesus Christ; to call people to a genuine conversion even though they may already identify in some way as being Christian.

**(c) New Culture, New Media**

Another reason why we need a New Evangelisation is that the cultural situation has radically changed over the last two generations or so, particularly through globalisation and the development of new media. It was [Blessed John Paul II’s wish](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/new-evangelization/disciples-called-to-witness/disciples-called-to-witness-part-ii.cfm) in 1983 that the Church would develop an evangelisation that was ‘new in its ardour, methods and expression’.

One of the key reasons why we need new methods and modes of expression is because advances in information technology and digital media have utterly transformed the ways that human beings think and communicate. We could almost say that they have transformed the nature of what it is to be human, at least in terms of our understanding of ourselves and our relationships.

There have been similar social transformations in earlier Christian history: for example, the invention of the movable type printing press, the industrial revolution and the consequent urbanisation of society, the development of radio and television, etc. At each moment the Church has had to respond creatively and develop a new means of evangelisation appropriate to the situation. But perhaps no previous transformation has taken place so quickly and with such wide ranging effects as the digital communications revolution.

Pope Benedict, apart from his decision to open a papal Twitter account, was not a pioneer in the area of new media and evangelisation. But his letters on the occasion of World Communications Day each year offer some of the most profound reflections on the New Evangelisation and the new media.

[In 2009](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day_en.html) he wrote about ‘the fundamental shifts in patterns of communication and human relationships’ brought by the new digital technologies. He encouraged young people of the digital generation to use these technologies for good, in order to foster dialogue, connectedness and authentic friendship. Above all, he challenged them to be evangelists.

‘The proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately. It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this “digital continent”. Be sure to announce the Gospel to your contemporaries with enthusiasm. You know their fears and their hopes, their aspirations and their disappointments: the greatest gift you can give to them is to share with them the “Good News” of a God who became man, who suffered, died and rose again to save all people.’

[In 2010](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day_en.html) Pope Benedict called on priests in particular to enter into the digital arena. ‘The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul’s exclamation: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16)… Priests stand at the threshold of a new era: as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word… Priests can rightly be expected to be present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders of communities which increasingly express themselves with the different “voices” provided by the digital marketplace.’

And [in 2011](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day_en.html) he went even further in highlighting the extraordinary newness of this new situation: ‘I would like then to invite Christians, confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity, to join the network of relationships which the digital era has made possible. This is not simply to satisfy the desire to be present, but because this network is an integral part of human life. The web is contributing to the development of new and more complex intellectual and spiritual horizons, new forms of shared awareness. In this field too we are called to proclaim our faith that Christ is God, the Saviour of humanity and of history, the one in whom all things find their fulfilment (cf. Eph 1:10).’

A central part of the New Evangelisation is responding to this invitation to find ways of proclaiming Jesus Christ to others within this new digital world, and to discover what forms Christian faith may take in this radically new situation.

**(d) Confusion about the need for evangelisation**

One of the reasons why the New Evangelisation feels new, even though in this respect it isn’t really, is because it represents a recommitment to the task of evangelisation after a period of theological confusion and crisis. In the period immediately after the Second Vatican Council, from the mid-1960s onwards, many Catholics came to believe that it was no longer necessary to proclaim the Gospel to non-Christians. There were a variety of reasons for this, and it is worth exploring some of them.

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council (also known as ‘Vatican II’; 1962-65) certain theological themes came to the fore that seemed to represent a break with previous thinking, when in fact they were a continuation or a development of ideas that were part of the Church’s received faith. These included the idea that salvation is possible for those outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church; that seeds of truth and goodness can be found in non-Christian religious traditions; that God’s grace can work invisibly in the hearts of those who do not explicitly know Christ; and that Christians should respect the freedom of conscience of all people, especially in the area of religion (cf. [Unitatis Redintegratio](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) 3; [Ad Gentes](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html) 11; [Gaudium et Spes](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) 22; [Lumen Gentium](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) 16-17; [Dignitatis Humanae](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html) 3).

These are wonderful truths, which make up one important part of the Christian vision. Taken in isolation, however, they could lead to any number of false conclusions: for example, that people can be saved without Jesus Christ; that the Catholic Church does not play an essential part in God’s plan of salvation; that there is no need to share the Christian message with those who belong to another religious tradition; that everyone with a kind heart will automatically go to heaven when they die; that the grace given through the sacraments is unimportant and unnecessary; or that there is no need to appeal to someone’s conscience if they are already convinced about the path they are on. Not one of these conclusions is found in the teaching of Vatican II or warranted by the theology of Vatican II.

Many of these false conclusions entered the mainstream of Catholic consciousness, and affected especially the field of ‘missiology’ – the theology of mission and evangelisation. This created a crisis within missiology in the 1970s and 1980s such that many theologians and missionary congregations became unsure about whether evangelisation was still a necessary part of the Church’s mission. There was a fundamental doubt in some people’s minds about the importance of faith in Jesus Christ and baptism into the Catholic Church.

In a 2012 conference at Leeds Trinity University entitled Vatican II, 50 Years on: The New Evangelization, Gavin D’Costa [spoke](http://lanyrd.com/2012/vaticaniiconference/swkrq/) about the dangers of taking statements from Vatican II in isolation. He showed how for every text that points to the work of the Holy Spirit outside the Church or the sacraments, there is another text – usually following on its heels – about the continuing importance of explicit faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, the Church, the sacraments, mission, evangelisation, etc.

It’s not about playing one text off against another; it’s about seeing that the Council is often holding together two truths, that are not contradictory, and that are both vitally important. First, our need as Catholics to be open to God’s work in people’s lives outside the Church; and second, the continuing need to evangelise.

Again and again, within the teaching of Vatican II, we are reminded about the importance of evangelisation. In [Lumen Gentium](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) it says, ‘The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth. Wherefore she makes the words of the Apostle her own: “Woe to me, if I do not preach the Gospel” (I Cor 9:16)’ (Para 17). And in [Ad Gentes](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html) we hear: ‘The Church has an obligation to proclaim the faith and salvation which comes from Christ’ (Para 5).

One passage in particular from Ad Gentes holds together the two inseparable theological truths: ‘So, although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, though no fault of their own are ignorant of the gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him (Heb 11:6), the Church, nevertheless, still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelise. And so, today as always, missionary activity retains its full force and necessity’ (Para 7).

Part of the New Evangelisation, therefore, has been the Church’s recommitment to primaryevangelisation, after a time of theological confusion and crisis. This recommitment is nowhere clearer than in Blessed John Paul II’s Encyclical Letter [Redemptoris Missio](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html). In fact the very reason for writing the letter was to respond to the crisis in missiology, as Blessed John Paul acknowledged: ‘As a result of the changes which have taken place in modern times and the spread of new theological ideas, some people wonder: Is missionary work among non-Christians still relevant? Has it not been replaced by inter-religious dialogue? …Does not respect for conscience and for freedom exclude all efforts at conversion? Is it not possible to attain salvation in any religion? Why then should there be missionary activity?’ (Para 4).

Blessed John Paul’s answer is emphatic: ‘But what moves me even more strongly to proclaim the urgency of missionary evangelization is the fact that it is the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world, a world which has experienced marvellous achievements but which seems to have lost its sense of ultimate realities and of existence itself. “Christ the Redeemer,” I wrote in [my first encyclical](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html), “fully reveals man to himself… The person who wishes to understand himself thoroughly must draw near to Christ…. The Redemption that took place through the cross has definitively restored to man his dignity and given back meaning to his life in the world”’ (Para 2).

**(e) Questions about the nature of Christian witness**

A final reason why the Church needs a new commitment to evangelisation is because there has been some ambiguity about the meaning of Christian witness over the last half century or so. Even for those who are very committed to the idea of sharing the faith, there has sometimes been a hesitation about the need to explicitly proclaim the Gospel. This is the question of the relationship between the witness of life and the witness of words; between example and proclamation.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways that we witness to our faith and allow it to touch the lives of others. First, there is the witness of our Christian life: how we live at each moment; the example we give in every aspect of our lives; the ways we love, forgive, pray, speak, work, serve, laugh, cry; especially the ways that we relate to others and to God.

The witness of our life ‘speaks’ to others; it tells them, in a way that words never could, what is most important to us, what our convictions and priorities and values are. It is often silent and unselfconscious. Many people have been converted by the quiet example of Christians they have come to know. As St James says, ‘By my works I will show you my faith’ (James 2:18).

Second, there is the explicit witness of words: when we speak to others about our Christian faith, telling them about the love of Christ and the salvation he offers, and inviting them to know him through faith, repentance, prayer and the sacraments of the Church.

Now this explicit witness doesn’t necessarily come straight away. There is a time and a place, and it takes great sensitivity and the help of the Holy Spirit to judge when to speak. But one aspect of Christian witness is helping others to know what we believe and why we believe it, and giving them the possibility of learning more and making this faith their own. A coherent witness always involves personal testimony and the proclamation of the Gospel, as well as example and the quiet witness of our lives.

This should all be uncontroversial. The difficulty is that in the period following the Second Vatican Council there was very often an emphasis on the witness of life, dialogue with non-Christians, collaboration in works for justice, etc – these are hugely important things – but this sometimes came with a neglect of the element of proclamation. Sometimes it was assumed that proclamation was not necessary – because the witness of life would be sufficient, or because an explicit proclamation might seem patronising, offensive or triumphalistic. Or there was the feeling that proclamation could be left to a group of ‘specialists’ (priests, religious, lay missionaries, etc), and that ordinary lay people should concentrate solely on their own quiet example.

The Catholic Church’s response to this question has been to re-state very clearly that every Christian is called to witness to their faith both through their example and through their words. Of course there may be an emphasis, at any given moment, on one aspect rather than the other. But the idea that you can completely separate the witness of life and the witness of words is quite alien to the Christian vision.

This was clarified by Pope Paul VI in 1975 his Apostolic Exhortation [Evangelii Nuntiandi](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html). He did not in any way diminish the importance of Christian example: ‘For the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life’. And he made famous an often-quoted phrase about the need for witnesses: ‘Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses’ (Para 41). A wordless Christian witness ‘is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization’ (Para 21).

But Paul VI meets head on this question about whether the witness of life alone is enough. He writes: ‘Nevertheless this always remains insufficient, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified – what Peter called always having “your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have” (1 Pet 3:15) – and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus. The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed’ (Para 22).

Nor is this duty to proclaim the Gospel reserved for specialists. Every Christian, in virtue of their baptism, has a prophetic vocation. Lay people, as the Second Vatican Council explained, have a particular call to become powerful ‘heralds of the faith’ in the secular world, ‘if they unhesitatingly join the profession of faith to the life of faith’. This task of evangelisation, ‘that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the witness of their lives, acquires a special character and a particular effectiveness because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world’ ([Lumen Gentium](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), Para 35).

Taken together, these five reasons behind the New Evangelisation create a situation that is unique in the history of the Church. There is a new cultural situation, a new set of internal and external challenges for the Church, and a new clarity about the meaning and purpose of evangelisation.

How can we evangelise?

When you look at the slightly random examples of the New Evangelisation presented in Part 2, and when you take into account many other similar projects throughout the world, there are certain common threads in their approach to the New Evangelisation, certain themes that emerge. We can call these the ‘essential ingredients’ of the New Evangelisation. Here are five of them.

These are not in any way the essential ingredients of evangelisation in general, which is a much bigger topic. There are no specific headings here, for example, about the Holy Spirit, Faith, Prayer, the Catholic Church, the Sacraments, Witness, Conversion, Repentance, etc. It’s necessary to take these for granted, and there is no space here to give an overview of the theology of evangelisation in general. These are just distinctive aspects that come to the fore when we think about the New Evangelisation.

Nor is this is to suggest that in order to evangelise everyone needs to be involved in a specific ‘project’. There are many, many different ways of sharing the faith with others, and many if not most of them take place in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life and relationships. But these ‘ingredients’ will very often be part of the experience of the New Evangelisation, whether it is through an individual Catholic quietly witnessing to their faith, or a specific organisation that is established to promote the New Evangelisation.

**(a) Personal conviction**

Each of the five projects in Part 2 has been driven forward by people who have a profound love for the Lord and his Church, and a desire to share their faith with others. There is no evangelisation without a desire to evangelise.

Many Catholics, of course, love their faith, but not everyone has a deep conviction that this faith is meant to be shared, that it is something too precious to keep hidden. As Blessed John Paul II noted, ‘In the Church’s history, missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith’ ([Redemptoris Missio](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html), Para 2).

When you look in the Gospels, there are three main reasons that lead people to speak to others about Christ and what he has done for them.

One is joy: many of those who are healed by Jesus or who witness a healing rush around telling everyone what has happened; they simply can’t contain themselves – they are so excited and overjoyed (e.g. the deaf man in Mk 7:31-37, ‘They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak”’; and the blind men in Mt 9:27-31, ‘But they went away and spread the news about him throughout the district’).

Another is love: when someone’s life is touched by the Lord, they want to share this experience with those they love, so that they too may come to know the love of Christ (e.g. when Andrew goes in search of his brother Simon Peter in Jn 1:40-42, and says to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’, and brings him to Jesus; and Levi the tax collector in Mk 2:13-17, who hosts a dinner so that his friends can meet Jesus).

A third reason why people speak about Christ to others is obedience. Even if it is not always at first a heartfelt personal desire for everyone, Jesus sometimes just commands people to speak about him (e.g. the Demoniac in Mk 5:1-20, who wants to remain with Jesus after his liberation, but is told: ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you’; and the eleven disciples after the Resurrection in Mt 28:16-20, who are told, even as some of them doubt: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you’).

Joy, love and obedience. These are the factors that motivate people to commit themselves to the New Evangelisation.

But this can be in sharp contrast to the reticence still felt by many Catholics about the very idea of evangelisation. There can be different reasons for this, not all of them negative: a desire to witness unobtrusively through one’s personal example; a respect for the presence of God in people of other faiths or of no faith; a fear of appearing triumphalistic, arrogant or judgemental.

But the reticence can also reflect a subtle relativism that sometimes casts its spell, persuading Catholics that all beliefs are equally true, or that all truths are equally important. Many people aren’t convinced that evangelisation is ‘the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity’ ([Redemptoris Missio](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html), Para 2).

Personal conviction is an essential motivating factor in the work of the New Evangelisation. It is also part of the content of what is communicated to others: we speak not just about the truths of our faith but also about what they personally mean to us and how they have changed our lives. This has often been an informal part of conversations between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours and friends. Catholics have become more aware in recent years of the power of personal testimony in witnessing to the faith.

Few people today doubt the effectiveness of personal witness in touching people’s hearts and minds, whether it’s a testimony given during a parish mission, a heartfelt conversation with a friend, a two-minute interview posted on YouTube, or a team of young people speaking about their faith at a school retreat. This was one of Blessed John Henry Newman’s themes: ‘Heart speaks unto heart’, and it was evident during much of Pope Benedict’s visit to the UK. When Barry and Margaret Mizen, parents of the murdered schoolboy Jimmy, gave a testimony at the Hyde Park vigil, they moved many people to tears. Their personal faith said more than a thousand sermons about the virtues of hope and forgiveness, and the power of Christ’s love.

Without a strong personal conviction about the importance of evangelisation, and a willingness to share our faith in a personal way, the New Evangelisation will never really move forward.

**(b) Community**

An emphasis on community runs through the New Evangelisation. The aim is not just to proclaim the message but to invite people into a way of life, a new set of relationships, and to show the beauty of a community founded on the love of Christ. This is, ultimately, an experience of the Church.

This comes in different ways. For many young Catholics, travelling to World Youth Day, for example, is the first time that they have had an experience of the Church beyond their own small parish communities and their schools. It’s a time when their faith has come alive as if they have been evangelised for the first time. This was true for many people when they joined the crowds to visit the relics of St Thérèse on a tour of Britain in 2009, or lined the streets to greet Pope Benedict during his UK visit in 2010. Mission builds community, and depends on it.

This is seen in each of the five examples of the New Evangelisation above. There are different kinds of community represented here: a residential evangelisation school; a cluster of city centre parishes; a group of young people brought together by their faith and their desire to evangelise their peers; a team of skilled communicators united by a shared vision and a common training programme; a small theatre company with a network of loyal supporters and friends.

In each case, the effectiveness of the mission arises from the sense of community and common purpose that is formed when people have a shared commitment to evangelisation. This is thoroughly biblical. Jesus formed a group of seventy two disciples to go ahead of him to prepare the local towns and villages for his own arrival; and even then he sent them out in pairs and not alone (Lk 10:1-12). The powerful witness and preaching at Pentecost came from a community of disciples and not from an individual (Acts 2).

The Church needs communities dedicated to the New Evangelisation. These communities support and strengthen people so that they can ‘go out on mission’, whatever form that takes. And this creates a virtuous circle where the communities themselves are supported and strengthened through the shared experiences of the members. The New Evangelisation is not for isolated individuals; it depends on the Church and builds up the Church.

For most people, of course, the first community of the New Evangelisation should be their local parish, centred on the celebration of the Holy Eucharist each Sunday. This is the community that is meant to nurture faith and send us out into the world to witness to Christ in daily life. But even in the most faithful and life-giving parish, there will still be the need for specialised communities-within-the-community that can focus on particular aspects of the New Evangelisation, whether it is reaching out to young people, to parents and families, to the poor, to people in particular professions, to the media, etc. Each of these ‘ministries’ requires particular skills and evangelistic tools. Just as there have traditionally been guilds for doctors, lawyers and tradespeople; and support groups for mothers, fathers, young people and the elderly; so it should not surprise us that many new initiatives are springing up to facilitate the New Evangelisation in particular areas.

**(c) The Word of God and the teaching of the Church**

The New Evangelisation has been associated with a reverence for the Word of God in Sacred Scripture and a faithfulness to the teaching of the Catholic Church in its integrity. A new generation of evangelically minded Catholics has turned to the Bible and Catholic teaching for wisdom, nourishment, inspiration and renewal.

Catholics have always known this intellectually: that God’s life-giving revelation, his Holy Word, is passed on to us through Scripture and Tradition, and interpreted through the teaching of the Catholic Church. But in recent years, in very concrete ways, different communities have seen how Scripture and Catholic teaching can transform people’s lives and be a catalyst for conversion and renewal.

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [Verbum Domini,](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html) Pope Benedict emphasised the link between the New Evangelisation and meditation on Sacred Scripture: ‘Our own time, then, must be increasingly marked by a new hearing of God’s word and a new evangelization. Recovering the centrality of the divine word in the Christian life leads us to appreciate anew the deepest meaning of the forceful appeal of Pope John Paul II: to pursue the missio ad gentes and vigorously to embark upon the new evangelization, especially in those nations where the Gospel has been forgotten or meets with indifference as a result of widespread secularism. May the Holy Spirit awaken a hunger and thirst for the word of God, and raise up zealous heralds and witnesses of the Gospel’ (Para 122).

The emphasis on clear Catholic teaching seems to be an essential aspect of the New Evangelisation in its practice. Those involved want to proclaim the basic message of Christianity, to explain the core teachings of the Scriptures and of the Church, and to apply these teachings to everyday life. They are not arrogant, or unaware of the nuances and disputed questions within Catholic thought; but they are more interested in helping people to understand the settled faith of the Church than in exploring the boundaries. Their experience is that people are actually longing to learn more.

There is a hunger for truth in contemporary society, and a desire in many Catholic circles to share it. The intention is not to proselytise, in the sense of targeting people from other religions, but it is certainly to share this Christian vision with anyone who is attracted by it.

There has been a reticence in some Catholic circles over the last half-century about presenting the Catholic faith in its integrity and in an unapologetic way. There have been internal battles about Catholic teaching and identity. Sometimes there has been a lack of confidence that the Catholic vision is actually good news to be shared, or a fear that it will be ignored, rejected or even ridiculed. More recently, however, different groups such as Catholic Voices have been developing a New Apologetics. They are not strident, but they have a new confidence that Catholic teaching really matters, that it has something to say to the culture, and that it can make a difference.

One example of how confident catechesis and the New Evangelisation are intrinsically linked can be seen in the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation. One it’s formal tasks, according to [Ubicumque et Semper](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html), is ‘to promote the use of the Catechism of the Catholic Church as an essential and complete formulation of the content of the faith for the people of our time’. It recognises that you can’t share a faith that you don’t know; that effective evangelisation depends on good catechesis. Blessed John Paul had [predicted](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19921011_fidei-depositum_en.html) that the Catechism would ‘make a very important contribution to that work of renewing the whole life of the Church’ (Fidei Depositum).

In [Porta Fidei](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html), Pope Benedict’s Apostolic Letter of 2012 for the Year of Faith, we read about the importance of the Catechism: ‘In order to arrive at a systematic knowledge of the content of the faith, all can find in the Catechism of the Catholic Church a precious and indispensable tool… Here, in fact, we see the wealth of teaching that the Church has received, safeguarded and proposed in her two thousand years of history. From Sacred Scripture to the Fathers of the Church, from theological masters to the saints across the centuries, the Catechism provides a permanent record of the many ways in which the Church has meditated on the faith and made progress in doctrine so as to offer certitude to believers in their lives of faith’. This is not just an intellectual journey, but an opportunity to meet the living Christ: ‘On page after page, we find that what is presented here is no theory, but an encounter with a Person who lives within the Church’ (Para 11).

**(d) Liturgy and the sacraments**

The sacramental emphasis of the New Evangelisation is counter-intuitive. If you are reaching out to people with little or no faith, it’s not clear why you would want to introduce them into a liturgical experience they probably wouldn’t understand.

There are three reasons why the sacraments often form an effective part of the work of the New Evangelisation. First, in the post-Christian context, many enquirers often have some kind of Catholic or other Christian background, and some have even had some catechetical formation. So there is often a latent understanding of the meaning of the sacraments, an unacknowledged appreciation of their place in the Christian life. To celebrate the sacraments, and to speak about them, can help to awaken a half-formed memory of their significance. If there is a flicker of faith, it is often associated with a liturgical experience from the past, and so a new encounter with the sacraments can sometimes fan that tiny flame into something more powerful.

Second, very often the New Evangelisation involves not just talking to people but inviting them into the lived experience of a community of faith. An enquirer is often taken to a prayer group, or a mission in a parish church, or a celebration of the Holy Eucharist with a particular evangelistic focus. The celebration of the liturgy, whether the Church’s Public Liturgy or something more para-liturgical, is both the context in which the faith is being proclaimed and the lived expression of what this faith is ultimately about. People are brought into a community of faith, into a celebration of faith, and this helps them to see what it means in the round, in the flesh, and not just as an idea. The liturgy is the source and summit of the Christian life, and for that reason it can provide a rich context for conversion – if someone is led into it with sensitivity and helped to understand it in appropriate ways.

Third, the fact that Jesus Christ is present in the liturgy and the sacraments, supremely in the Holy Eucharist, means that an encounter with the liturgy is an encounter with Christ himself. This is true even if someone has no faith and no consciousness of Christ’s presence, because there is an objectivity about his presence, even if it is hidden in the sacramental forms. This doesn’t mean that someone should be dragged unwillingly before the sacraments as if there was some kind of guarantee that they would have a personal encounter with Christ. But if someone is open to the Christian faith, and freely chooses to come to the liturgy with an open heart and mind, this can create an opportunity for them to meet Christ in the sacraments and reach out to him in faith (but without encouraging them to participate sacramentally in a way that is inappropriate, because they are spiritually or catechetically unprepared).

It is an undeniable fact of Christian history that many people have been converted through an encounter with Christ in the liturgy, even though you might assume that their lack of faith would make their presence at the liturgy nonsensical. He speaks to them through the beauty of the liturgical celebration, or through the witness of the Christian faithful, or through the proclamation of the Word of God, or through the sacramental presence of Christ himself, or through the holiness of the building – and in many other ways.

This is a common experience on youth retreats, even when they are aimed at non-Christians or nominal Catholics who have ceased practicing their faith. An example is the Youth 2000 prayer festival that takes place each year over the August bank holiday. Over a thousand young people flock to a field outside Walsingham, many of them with little or no commitment to the Christian faith. The Blessed Sacrament is exposed in the centre of the main tent for the whole duration of the festival, and at any moment a dozen priests are sitting round the edges of the tent to hear confessions. People are encouraged to pray, and to offer their lives to Christ in faith.

This living encounter with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, even for those whose faith is just beginning, is very often the occasion of genuine Christian conversion and a source of life-changing graces. Many of the confessions have an almost baptismal quality about them, because it is often the first time that someone has really had the encouragement and the desire to bring their whole life to the Lord, without reservation. The sacraments, in much of the New Evangelisation, are the source and not just the summit of faith.

**(e) Courage and creativity**

Now and then, we are longing to share our faith, and a happy opportunity presents itself when we can speak with confidence and enthusiasm to someone who wants to listen to us. But more often than not, it’s not clear what we should do or say, our faith is weak, our motivations are very mixed, and we are simply too nervous or afraid or unsure to take the next step.

It’s difficult to evangelise. It’s also one of the most important responsibilities that we have, and one of the most powerful ways in which God wishes to bless us. Faith is strengthened when we share it. Yet we often fail to share it because we think our own faith is not strong enough, when in fact our faith would become stronger if only we would share it more willingly.

Each one of the New Evangelisation initiatives described in Part 2 of this booklet took great courage and commitment to begin. Someone had an idea, or a quiet inspiration from the Holy Spirit, and they almost certainly thought to themselves, ‘I can’t do this. It’s too risky. I’m not ready. I don’t have the support I need. It probably won’t work.’ Yet they took the risk. They dared to do something different – with the help of God – and to do it with all the energy and creativity that they could muster.

Every Christian is called to take the risk of evangelising. We don’t all have to go out into the streets and witness to strangers. But we do all have a responsibility to witness to our faith in everyday life, and to share our faith with others when the opportunity occurs.

Pope Francis has spoken about the need for Catholics to take risks as they reach out to others. In an [address to the ecclesial movements](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste_en.html) on the Vigil of Pentecost he said: ‘At this time of crisis we cannot be concerned solely with ourselves, withdrawing into loneliness, discouragement and a sense of powerlessness in the face of problems. Please do not withdraw into yourselves! This is a danger: we lock ourselves up in our parish, among our friends, in our movement, with people who think as we do… but do you know what happens? When the Church is closed, she becomes an ailing Church, she falls sick. Think of a room that has been closed for a year. When you go into it there is a smell of damp, many things are wrong with it. A Church closed in on herself is the same, a sick Church.

‘The Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence, whatever they may be, but she must step out. Jesus tells us: “Go into all the world! Go! Preach! Bear witness to the Gospel!” (cf. Mk 16:15). But what happens if we step outside ourselves? The same as can happen to anyone who comes out of the house and onto the street: an accident. But I tell you, I far prefer a Church that has had a few accidents to a Church that has fallen sick from being closed.’

And in his [Pentecost homily](http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-homily-at-pentecost-mass) on the following day Pope Francis spoke about ‘newness’ in a way that can very easily be applied to the New Evangelisation: ‘Newness always makes us a bit fearful, because we feel more secure if we have everything under control, if we are the ones who build, programme and plan our lives in accordance with our own ideas, our own comfort, our own preferences. This is also the case when it comes to God. Often we follow him, we accept him, but only up to a certain point. It is hard to abandon ourselves to him with complete trust, allowing the Holy Spirit to be the soul and guide of our lives in our every decision. We fear that God may force us to strike out on new paths and leave behind our all too narrow, closed and selfish horizons in order to become open to his own.

‘Yet throughout the history of salvation, whenever God reveals himself, he brings newness and change, and demands our complete trust: Noah, mocked by all, builds an ark and is saved; Abram leaves his land with only a promise in hand; Moses stands up to the might of Pharaoh and leads his people to freedom; the apostles, huddled fearfully in the Upper Room, go forth with courage to proclaim the Gospel.

‘This is not a question of novelty for novelty’s sake, the search for something new to relieve our boredom, as is so often the case in our own day. The newness which God brings into our life is something that actually brings fulfilment, that gives true joy, true serenity, because God loves us and desires only our good. Let us ask ourselves: Are we open to God’s surprises? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God’s newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?’

This is God’s call to every Christian: to step out, to take the risk of doing something new and creative in order to spread the Gospel. Whether it is in a large and well-known project, or in the quiet circumstances of everyday life and work, each one of us is called to share our faith and take part in the New Evangelisation.