



## Missions, the New Evangelization, and Jubilee 2021

As the celebration in 2021 of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming of Christianity is just behind the corner figuratively speaking, the preparations are well underway. Different sectors and themes have been designated for each year since 2013, but the underlying theme is gratitude and how to express it in a massive renewal of our faith and its manifestations in our life. With God's grace, President Rodrigo R. Duterte will still be in good health, as he takes part in the big event that will come towards the end of his term, which ends in 2022. It will be most certainly the "Mother of all Jubilees," as far as our country is concerned, if the nine-year preparation is an indication. There is no doubt that by then, many things shall have changed, with the President—and the rest of us—having grown a bit mellow with age, as well as grown in wisdom. We are in God's gracious hands.

Writing on missions today, one has to be aware of the present realities that involve the changes in the political, economic, and technological areas, with which we have grown familiar. Mission is proclaiming the Good News in a concrete historical context. In our national political life, the change has been defined to a large degree by the Marcos regime of 20+ years ending in 1986, when new political chapters were written in our history. With the



fall of the dictatorship, changes were expected, even perhaps an overhaul of attitudes and values, but the reality of the succeeding years fell short of our general expectations.

As early as nearly a century ago, the Popes spoke of new methods of bringing the Good News to be launched, because of the rapid changes in society. The efforts were sidetracked by World War II, which brought new levels of awareness, challenges, and sensitivities. Many countries practically had to start from scratch, as new national boundaries were made, particularly in Europe, and adjustments had to be made with regard to how whole countries coped with the effects of the war. It is an understatement to have to mention that these changes affected the Church, which had to make adjustments as well.

There were efforts to respond to the changes, the most far-reaching and impacting among such efforts being Vatican II (1962 - 1964), which for many of us today is history. The changes it brought, however, were welcome in most sectors, but there was still work to be done. Discussing problems and writing documents are one thing, seeing them through in practical life is quite another. The new evangelization was launched yet again by St. John Paul II in the ten decades (1990 - 2000) before the Third Millennium (cf the 1999 Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, 29-31, as an example).

## A NEW APPROACH TO MISSIONS

A somewhat redefined program would view missions, not simply *ad extra*, as in foreign missions, but *ad intra*, missions within. This did not refer only to parish missions that were popular after World War II, but especially the transformation of the individual, families, and small communities, that would impact on the rest of society. This is an ongoing process. Practically all main papal documents and pronouncements of the last decades had to do with missions, directly or indirectly, touching on different aspects and approaches related to it.

The groundbreaking document, however, was still Pope (now Blessed) Paul VI's encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) of 1975, which remains the Magna Carta of evangelization. While written to enhance the ideas proposed by the Vatican II documents, the encyclical went further and presented the challenge of a new evangelization, which the succeeding Popes brought to the countries they visited, particularly Pope (now Saint) John Paul II in his almost 30-year papacy.

Blessed Pope Paul VI stressed that “for the Church, evangelization means bringing the Good News to all the strata of humanity from within and making it new.” But there is no new humanity if, first of all, no new persons are renewed by Baptism and by lives lived according to the Gospel. The purpose of evangelization is therefore precisely this interior change. If it had to be expressed in one sentence, the best way of stating it would be to say that: “The Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciousness of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu, which are theirs” (EN, 18). This statement would form the basis, directly or indirectly, of succeeding papal pronouncements on evangelization.

The challenge of the statement lies in the affirmation that “the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, the personal and collective consciousness of people,” their activities and the lives and their concrete environment. “Solely through the divine power of the Message” has to be correctly and deeply understood, developed through the grace of the Spirit, and lived faithfully. Perhaps it is here where the principle that “nobody gives what one does not have” applies most appropriately.

The responsibility of bringing about the conversion and transformation, both of the individual and of society, is no longer in the exclusive hands of the “official” missionaries, the priests, brothers, nuns and laypeople who are missionaries in the strict and traditional meaning of the term. The task belongs to all Christians

by reason of their baptism. The ordinary lay Christians tend to shirk from this task because they do not know about this aspect or the mechanics and methods involved. The authority in our Church just continues to speak about this as if it is already a reality going on or a done deal. We speak of the new evangelization, without getting other sectors involved in the concrete—particularly the laity, thus giving the impression they are not involved. It is not easy to explain this reality in our Church without having to “antagonize” some in the hierarchy. This reality simply shows that either they do not know about their role in this enterprise, or they do not understand the importance and urgency of the situation, or they do not care—which would be the most disturbing of all.

#### WHAT THE NEW EVANGELIZATION ENTAILS

The celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the coming of Christianity mentioned in the opening sentence of this article, was introduced with a Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) on the Era of New Evangelization. It was written on July 12, 2012, by Archbishop Jose S. Palma of Cebu, the CBCP President at the time, “Live Christ, Share Christ.”<sup>1</sup> It is repeated that this “New Evangelization” is primarily addressed to persons who have drifted away from the Faith and from the Church in traditionally Catholic countries, especially in the West.

With regard to our situation in Asia, however, the letter stated that

What we are being called upon to do by this task of “New Evangelization” in Asia is to consider anew “the new methods and means for transmitting the Good News” more effectively to our people. *We are challenged anew to foster in the Church in our country a renewed commitment and enthusiasm in living out*

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<sup>1</sup>CBCP (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines). 2012. CBCP Pastoral Letter on the New Evangelization. Live Christ, Share Christ: Looking forward to Our Five Hundredth. July 9, 2012. <http://www.cbcnews.com/cbcnews/?p=326>

*the Gospel in all the diverse areas of our lives, in “real-life practice,” challenged anew to become more and more authentic witnesses of our faith, especially to our Asian neighbors as a fruit of our intensified intimacy with the Lord.<sup>2</sup>*

For the local church, this is a tall order. We can single out the following tasks: First, to consider anew the new methods and means for transmitting the Good News more effectively to our people. The use of “anew” implies that we have already used these new methods and means. The persons to whom this is addressed are our own people. However, there are no specific references regarding “the new methods and means” nor any results from having employed them in the past, which seems by the tone of the document that we have not been very successful. The second task challenges us anew to foster in the Church here a “renewed commitment and enthusiasm in living out the Gospel in all the diverse areas of our lives.” While the words “anew” and “renewed” are used again, these refer to our commitment and enthusiasm in living out the Gospel to be accomplished in all the diverse areas of our lives. What strikes us is the reference to living out the Gospel in all the areas of our lives.

There is an obvious indirect admission here that the Gospel is not lived out in all the different areas of our lives. We have known far too long that a deep dichotomy exists between our beliefs and our practical lives, including our double-standard morality, and the rest. This frank admission of a painful reality is admirable, but the reasons why this has been so are not mentioned obviously to keep the letter short, leaving it up to the readers to reflect on this situation, and see where and how this “renewed commitment and enthusiasm in living out the Gospel” can be done.

Finally, the third task is for us “to become more authentic witnesses of our faith, especially to our Asian neighbors as a fruit of our intensified intimacy with the Lord.” The reality of

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

the consequences of the dichotomy between our faith and lives, including our double-standard morality are negative testimonies of our faith vis-à-vis our Asian neighbors. In the last five years since the CBCP letter, we have been reminded that this predominantly Catholic country in Asia, is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, one of the main hubs of pornography, especially child pornography, and people trafficking, the popular web-cam sex tourism, the proliferation of forbidden drugs, the continued anti-government insurgency, particularly in the south of the country, one of the longest-running in Asia, that has gone even worse to induce the President to declare Martial Law in Mindanao, and so on.

#### THE EFFECTS OF THESE ON THE LIFE OF OUR PEOPLE

Poverty has increased as we can easily verify in our cities. Growing slums and people living in miserable conditions result from not only the existing graft and corruption in government but also calamities, both natural—such as the earthquake of 2013 and super typhoons (Yolanda)—and human-made—such as the militarization in the south, mining, and the degradation of the environment on land and in the sea, drugs, and so on. Many of these causes have brought about more migration and displacement of persons and even of whole communities. While most of these have been with us for decades, others have been made more acute in recent years. It is quite a daunting task that our bishops are challenging us to accomplish, even with the affirmation that the renewal would come “as a fruit of our intensified intimacy with the Lord,” a phrase that is more “devotional” and wishful.

Perhaps the heaviest blow to our identity, role, and influence in the country as church came in the 2016 National Elections, which elected to the presidency one most unlikely to have won in other times: the mayor of Davao City, Rodrigo Duterte. This was a proof—though many might not have seen it that way—that the local church had lost its influence over its faithful, who voted for him, in spite of the indirect non-endorsement of him

in statements and prayers. We have not yet really come to terms with this reality, considering the clashes between the church and the state on issues, from the supposed extra-judicial killings, the reintroduction of the death penalty, martial law in Mindanao, and so on. This reality, however, should have given the local Church the courage to challenge itself about its real nature as powerless servant washing the feet of others, betrayed, and persecuted, and not working to regain its former status of power and influence, which was a counterwitness to our neighbors.

### THE PILLARS ON WHICH THESE TASKS STAND

The CBCP Pastoral Letter underlines that the tasks mentioned stand on four pillars.

*First, fostering and fulfilling the missio ad gentes, as a special vocation of the Church in our country, effectively involving our lay people, our “Christifideles” brothers and sisters; our priests and seminarians; men and women in consecrated life.”*<sup>3</sup>

While it is presumed that the hierarchy is at the forefront of the movement, it is nonetheless an undesirable oversight that it has been left out in the enumeration of those who are responsible for the task, considering especially that the letter came from the CBCP.

*Secondly, “bringing Good News to the poor.” Again and again, Filipino Catholics coming together to discern priorities, have seen that the Church here must become genuinely “a Church for and with the poor.”*

*Thirdly, reaching out to those among us whose faith-life has been largely eroded and even lost due to the surrounding confusion, moral relativism, doubt, agnosticism; reaching out to those who have drifted from the Faith and the Church, and have joined other religious sects.*

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

*Lastly, awakening or reawakening in faith, forming and animating in Christian life our young people and youth sector groups, in both urban and rural settings;*<sup>4</sup>

## A NINE-YEAR JOURNEY TO THE GREAT JUBILEE 2021

The Pastoral Letter continues:

*A nine-year journey for the New Evangelization has already been charted climaxing with the Jubilee Year 2021: Integral Faith Formation (2013); the Laity (2014); the Poor (2015); the Eucharist and of the Family (2016);<sup>5</sup> the Parish as a Communion of Communities (2017); the Clergy and Religious (2018); the Youth (2019); Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue (2020); Missio ad gentes (2021). These are the nine pastoral priorities of the Church in the Philippines.*

*In the time before us, we will focus on these dimensions of faith, evangelization and discipleship, one by one. And it is most propitious that as we received the faith 500 years ago, so with the year 2021 we envision to become a truly sending Church.<sup>6</sup>*

These themes have been well thought out, and we are grateful to our bishops for them, as we are asked to “focus on these dimensions of faith, evangelization and discipleship, one and by one.” No general plan or program, however, has been given on how to do the focusing. The questions beg asking: Is the “focusing” and the accompanying reflections and practical considerations to be left up to the initiative, imagination, and expertise of the local churches, if not of the individual parishes? The themes have been in the Intercessory Prayers, in individual and local Recollection Days, generally in the peak penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, and that is practically it.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>This theme coincided with the 51<sup>st</sup> International Eucharistic Congress in Cebu in January of that year.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.



## THE NEED FOR EVALUATION

A more important question is: How do we evaluate each how or if a particular theme has impacted the practical life of each Christian in the country? How shall we know if the themes we had so far (2013 to 2017): faith, the laity, the poor, the Eucharist and family, the parish as communion of communities, have had any influence on the ongoing formation of our people? Or were they something more like “fashion” that changes every year and season, and then forgotten, as we pick up the new theme and work on it, without any structure through which we can look back on how the past year’s theme had done to our lives? I have the feeling that the evaluation and follow-up structures on these themes have not been spelled out, if they have even been in our minds at all. I have the feeling that when 2021 comes, we will just have a big celebration, and that would be the end of that.

How about the pastoral letter’s desire that by 2021 we will be a “sending Church” to the rest of Asia, and how the nine years have transformed our Christian life so our testimony of life would have been the powerful means by which we can show to our neighbors the richness and power of the Good News? We look around ourselves, pick up the daily news, watch the TV programs and we can see for ourselves the answer to these questions.

The pastoral letter ends thus:

*In the face of a secularism which in some parts of our present world has itself become a kind of a “dominant religion,” in the face of the reality of billions who live in our time and who have not truly encountered Jesus Christ nor heard of his Gospel, how challenged we are, how challenged we must be, to enter into the endeavor of the “New Evangelization!” We for whom Jesus has been and is truly the Way, the Truth and the Life,— how can we not want and long and share him with brothers and sisters around us who are yet to know and love Him, who are yet to receive the fullness of Life for which we have all been created, and without which their*

*hearts will be ever restless—until they find Jesus and His heart which awaits them?*<sup>7</sup>

Yes, how indeed? The words of St. Teresa of Calcutta would have strong repercussions on our work of evangelization in Asia, particularly with regard to the effectivity of our testimony of life:

*Just allow people to see Jesus in you, to see how you pray, to see how you lead a pure life, to see how you deal with your family, to see how much peace there is in your family. Then you can look straight into their eyes and say, “This is the way.” You speak from life, you speak from experience.*<sup>8</sup>

You may be the only gospel your neighbor will ever read.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Mother Teresa. *Words to Love By*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1983.

<sup>9</sup>Attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi.