

DOCUMENTS

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Proclamation of the Word Inspiration from The Evangelizing Decade of Pope Francis

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“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” (Mark 16:15)

INTRODUCTION

“Go and Proclaim to the Ends of the World”

What a refreshing message and mandate from Jesus Christ!

This great evangelical Commission of Jesus proved to be the lifeline of the Church’s mission. I am glad that we are gathering today to reflect on this great commission of the Lord: “Proclamation of the Word”.

In this great venture, we are inspired especially by the prophet of Evangelization, Pope Francis. He gloriously completes his ten years as the prime evangelizer in the Catholic church.

Pope Francis, the 266th Pope of the Catholic Church, has been in office since March 13, 2013. He succeeded Pope Benedict XVI and has since then made significant contributions to the Catholic Church, particularly in the area of evangelization.

Under his prophetic papacy, the Word of God has regained its pivotal place and has become the ‘joy of the Gospel’. We are energized by the fact in the reorganization of the dicastery, the Dicastery of Evangelization has become the main portal.

My deep appreciation to the Catholic Bible Federation (CBF) and its energetic director, for bringing us to savour the call of history when the Catholic Church commits itself with great intensity to the mission of Evangelization. At the outset, I wish you to take note, that I am not a Biblical scholar but a missionary priest, bishop and now Cardinal, living amidst my dear people who live amidst some of the grievous challenges to their dignity.

May this moment become the new epiphany of Catholics, the evangelized becoming zealous evangelizers, journeying with the Pope in his quest for church nurtured in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Let me give a “road map” of my presentation. I am aware of the expertise of great professors will follow my simple talk.

1. *My talk would affirm that Pope Francis' stress on Evangelization follows the inspiration of two other charismatic shepherds, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict. They were the proponents of the New Evangelization Movement.*
2. *I will stress that under Pope Francis Evangelization has become a clarion call and a challenge to every Christian church to be a missionary church.*
3. *I will talk about the six major themes of Evangelization which have become the Pope's road map for the church's mission*
4. *I also will indicate how the Pope not only preaches these six themes but has become an active witness to the message of the Gospel through his inspiring life.*
5. *I shall end by indicating some areas of discussion that could follow this talk.*

PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD: APOSTOLIC CONTINUITY AND CONTINUITY OF THREE POPES

Proclamation of the Word marks the continuity of the Apostolic activity of the first Disciples. The integral mission of Breaking the world and breaking the bread became their core identity. That message united them in Christ, his message was the centrality of the early Christian existence. With the great animation of the Spirit, the apostles united the message, the messenger and the method in total harmony winning over thousands to Jesus Christ.

We are living in the energized epoch of Evangelization. Three recent papacies of John Paul II, Benedict and now Pope Francis have intensified the creative impulse of Evangelization.

1. The vision of Pope John Paul, true to his name, followed the Johannine quest of the ‘word becoming flesh’ and like the restless great apostle Paul travelled around 104 apostolic voyages, travelling 1,247,613 km (approximately 750,000 miles) to proclaim the Good News. He re-energized the church towards “New Evangelization” carrying the fire into even relapsed Catholic countries.
2. Pope Benedict followed in his footsteps and declared a year of New Evangelization insisting on faith and reason synergizing in the process.
3. Pope Francis has proved to be a global evangelizer with his common touch and memorable articulation of the Word. Word to him is that becomes flesh in actions. Following the great theologian Karl Barth, who said, a true Christian has the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in another, Pope Francis brings the concerns of the “existential peripheries” into his exegesis.

I shall take Pope Francis and his methods for consideration: **proclaiming the Word** by his actions and words. He completes ten years in a very significant Papacy in the history of the church made richer by his down-to-earth interpretation of the Word of God.

POPE'S MODEL OF THE CHURCH: CALL TO THE CHURCH TO BE MISSIONARY OF THE WORD

The church exists to evangelize, said Pope Paul VI. The only mission of the church is to go forth, proclaim, convert, and make disciples. Coded in the DNA of the Church is the mandate to be missionaries.

In his path-breaking Exhortation of the Joy of the Gospel, the Pope urges every Christian to be fired by the “**missionary mentality of proclamation**”:

“I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures

can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. (EG27)

The Pope is candid. A church that is **not evangelizing is a sick Church**

When the Church becomes self-referential, it gets sick. There are two images of the Church: the Church that goes out and goes forward toward the proclamation of the Gospel, and the self-referential Church, that is closed in on herself. When the Church is self-referential, she gets sick.” (Homily, April 23, 2013)

To a world strangled by the Covid of belief: the Pope says: **Proclaiming the Word is like oxygen** (Homily on October 18, 2020).

THE SIX MAJOR THEMES OF EVANGELIZATION OF THIS PAPACY

- 1) Evangelization is not expounding a theory, but sharing an intense experience of personal encounters.
- 2) The Good News: God is Mercy – he is not tired of welcoming us back into his embrace.
- 3) Evangelization is an accompaniment, a synodal journey of humanity to the promised land
- 4) Evangelization targets our brothers and sisters in Existential Peripheries.
- 5) Evangelization is a faith that proclaims God as Justice:
- 6) Evangelization calls the church to be the ‘tent’ and ‘the field hospital’.

PROCLAMATION IS ABOUT THE PERSON OF CHRIST: AN INTENSE EXPERIENCE OF A RELATIONSHIP

The New Evangelization strongly proposed by Pope John Paul and Benedict laid great stress on the ‘Intense and Personal’ encounter with the person of Jesus.

Proclamation in the Bible does not start with theology but with experience. We can have a glimpse of great encounters in the Bible:

1. *Moses felt this power in the burning bush, of a liberating God, on Sinai Mountain (Exod 3:2-3)*
2. *The Epiphany of the Magi (Matt 2:9-10)*
3. *The Theophany on the Mount Tabor (Matt 17:2)*
4. *The historical cross-cultural encounter of the Samaritan woman (John 4:13-14)*
5. *The de-stigmatizing all-inclusive encounter of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5-7)*
6. *The earth-shattering experience of Saul to Paul (Acts 9:3)*
7. *The encounter of disciples of the Jesus of resurrection (John 20:20)*

In various sermons, Pope Francis asserted that Evangelization is not espousing a dogma but. Jesus is an intense encounter, a nurturing relationship.

“Being a Christian is not about adhering to a doctrine, or a temple or an ethnic group. Being Christian is about an encounter with Jesus Christ” (Homily, April 14, 2013).

“The Gospel is not a theory, it is an encounter. Jesus is not an idea, he is a person” (Homily, January 7, 2014).

“Jesus is not an abstract idea or a distant figure for me. He is a living presence in my life, guiding me, challenging me, and comforting me. My relationship with Jesus is the source of my joy, my strength, and my hope” (Homily, April 3, 2013)

We have a great example of Francis of Assisi, who said, always preach the good news; use words if needed. Yes. Those who experienced Jesus, need a few words. And we have Mother Teresa, whose encounter with Jesus with the poor brought thousands to Christ.

PROCLAIM: GOD IS A GOD OF MERCY

This Pope looks at the world, theology, diversity, and migration through the lens of Mercy. He shook the world with the Year of Mercy. Many called him the Pope of Mercy.

I come from a Buddhist country with two major virtues Compassion and Mercy. The religious quest is to reach the blessings of having a compassionate and merciful heart.

Pope Francis has realized there were times, evangelization was used to show power, or even threat, often projecting a message that had nothing to do with the revelation of God in the Bible.

Even in the Old Testament where there are difficult passages to understand God, it was clearly stated by Yahweh that: The LORD passed in front of Moses, calling out, “Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness (Exod 34: 6).

Jesus himself proclaimed himself as a Messiah of Mercy: “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt 9:13).

To Pope Francis, Mercy is the great attribute of God:

- “Mercy is the keyword of the Gospel. It is the opulent manifestation of God's love.” (Pope Francis, General Audience, April 9, 2014.)
- “The name of God is mercy...the most important message of all time is that God is mercy.” (from *The Name of God is Mercy*)
- “We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy...It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace.” (from *Misericordiae Vultus*)

We often wonder, why just two per cent of Asia seemed to have taken Jesus as the saviour. A clear focus on Jesus as the Messiah of Mercy, the sacrificial lamb that saves with a total embodiment of God's mercy may be the core message of Christianity in Asia and other parts of the world. God as love is a message that somehow eluded millions of Asians. The next phase of Evangelization needs to be based on the simple truth:

“Love one another as I love you – If you love one another, they know you are my disciples” (John 13:35).

EVANGELIZATION IS THE JOINING OF GOD'S MARCH WITH HUMANITY: THE SACRED SYNODALITY

Accompaniment

The great mystery of the Christian faith is God's faithful accompaniment of humanity, through its suffering, its unfaithfulness, and its vulnerability. The great event of Exodus is the story of God's accompaniment of a people in search of freedom.

For the last ten years, Pope by his words and deeds, accompaniment by an Evangelical virtue. The Pope says: “The model of Christian accompaniment is Jesus himself, who came to accompany humanity with his unconditional love, compassion, and solidarity.” (Pope Francis, *Message for World*

Mission Day, October 22, 2017). He has shown this unwaveringly in his accompaniment of migrants and refugees.

The Bible celebrates God's unfailing accompaniment. The psalmist glorifies: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4).

After giving the great commission of Evangelization, Jesus promises accompaniment: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:20)

The message of Jesus, unfortunately, came with the colonial quest in many areas. The new challenge is to accompany others in humility in the total sense of listening. "We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur." (from *Evangelii Gaudium*)

Accompaniment is the *modus operandi* of evangelization. For the Pope that is a very important proclamation method. "The Church is a mother, not a customs office, but a mother who accompanies, who defends, who helps to grow and to develop." (from General Audience, 2016)

In this, he echoes St Paul, who said: For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ, we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:4-5)

EVANGELIZATION IS THE "GOOD NEWS" TO OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN EXISTENTIAL PERIPHERIES

Reaching out to the peripheries

This Pope reads the Bible with the eyes of the suffering people, people who were denied basic needs, and people who were pushed to existential peripheries, owing to an economy that enriches a minuscule minority of the world. His strong advocacy for the deprived people has forced some to name him in anger as the Red Pope.

But the Pope follows a great good news tradition of the Bible that is a God who has a great heart for the poor. When Yahweh refused to reveal his name on Mount Sinai, he was willing to reveal his heart: "I am the Lord who hears the suffering of my people" (Exodus ch. 3). A God of the peripheries.

Jesus followed suit in this Good News Mission. Proclaiming the Galilean manifesto, he said: "Good News to the Poor, liberty to the captives. (Luke 4:16-19). Christ was to proclaim God's presence in the people in the peripheries: "When you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it unto me" (Matt 25:40).

This has become a pivotal evangelizing mission of Pope Francis in the last ten years.

"The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only in the geographical sense but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery" (Address to the Bishops of Brazil, July 27, 2013). A Church that goes out and comes back with the smell of the sheep.

EVANGELIZATION IS PROCLAIMING THE UNCOMPROMISING JUSTICE OF YAHWEH

Justice

Three major elements of Justice have received strong attention in the papacy of Pope Francis. They are economic Justice (*Joy of the Gospel*) Environmental Justice (*Laudato Si*) and Digital Justice (His statements during Covid).

The Pope's justice journey is guided by biblical spirituality. The New Testament Jesus, was a God of mercy whereas the old testament God, we are told, is a God of justice. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24 ESV). Even the New Testament writers like John picked up this message: "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" (1 John 3:17)

His first exhortation of Evangelization, Joy of the Gospel, was a veritable prophetic cry for justice.

The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefiting the poor. But what happens instead, is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger, nothing ever comes out for the poor" (Interview with La Repubblica, September 19, 2013).

Confronting injustice is an evangelical call to every Christian as per the Pope.

"We Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it" (from *Evangelii Gaudium*)

The ultimate test of our love for others, according to the Pope, is to work towards a world based on Biblical Justice.

"A way has to be found to enable everyone to benefit from the fruits of the earth, and not simply to close the gap between the affluent and those who must be satisfied with the crumbs falling from the table" (from *Laudato Si*)

EVANGELIZATION IS TO ENERGIZE THE CHURCH AS A WELCOMING TENT FOR STRANGERS AND THE FIELD HOSPITAL FOR THE WOUNDED

This Evangelizing Pope is known for simple but colourful metaphors and similes. Two of his famous metaphors which have become mainstream are the metaphor of the tent and the Church as the field hospital.

THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF 'TENT' AND 'FIELD HOSPITAL' IN POPE FRANCIS: THE THEOLOGY OF "TENT" AND "FIELD HOSPITAL" IN POPE FRANCIS REFERS TO HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY THAT IS OPEN, FLEXIBLE, AND WELCOMING TO ALL, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE MARGINALIZED AND ON THE PERIPHERIES OF SOCIETY.

The image of the "tent" comes from the Old Testament, where the Israelites would set up tents as they journeyed through the desert. This image conveys a sense of movement, flexibility, and openness. Similarly, Pope Francis sees the Church as a "tent" that is always on the move, always open to new experiences and new ways of being Church.

The image of the "field hospital" comes from Pope Francis' experience as a Jesuit priest in Argentina, where he worked in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Buenos Aires. He saw firsthand the suffering of those who were on the margins of society, and he realized that the Church needed to be like a "field hospital" that reaches out to those who are wounded and in need of healing. But his healing of the wound comes often from his citation of the Good Samaritan, whose compassion exceeds kinship relationship. It is for all. A wounded man is my brother.

The theology of “tent” and “field hospital” is rooted in Pope Francis' understanding of the evangelizing mission of the Church, which is to be a sign and instrument of God's love and mercy in the world. It is a mission that requires the Church to be always on the move, always reaching out to those who are in need, and always adapting to new contexts and situations.

ATTITUDE OF EVANGELIZATION

The Pope's proactive choice of Evangelization as the primary mission of the Church also comes with a demand for an attitude change. A Church on an Evangelizing mission needs the following attitudes.

1. The Church needs to evangelize itself.

Pope Francis always believes the church is the primary target of evangelization. Without a conversion from a 'self-referential' church towards a church in the streets, there is no possibility of evangelizing others. In strong words, he addressed this issue of Evangelization:

To bear this witness, the Church as such must also begin by evangelizing herself”; she must do so to not become “a museum piece”; In brief, “This means that she has a constant need of being evangelized if she wishes to retain freshness, vigour, and strength to proclaim the Gospel”. (Pope Francis (Pope Francis, General Audience, 22 March 2023).

2. Towards a revolution of tenderness.

One of Pope Francis's most significant statements on evangelization was his call for a “revolution of tenderness” in a speech to young people in 2016. He said, “Do not be afraid to be tender and let us pray that the Lord will give us the grace of tenderness, to be able to cry. And when the world hears us crying, it will understand that something great is happening” (Address to Young People in Assisi, 4 August 2016).

This statement emphasizes the importance of empathy, compassion, and vulnerability in evangelization. It also reflects Pope Francis's belief that the Church should be a place of welcome and acceptance for all people. He is probably in mind the first evangelization in many countries that came under the shadow of a “Conquista” mentality. The revolution of tenderness, Pope hopes, will situate the Evangelization mission on the dignified ground.

3. A Church that goes out: breaks bread in the marketplace.

Another significant statement by Pope Francis on evangelization is his call for a “culture of encounter” in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelia Gaudium*. He writes, “We cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings; we need to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decided missionary pastoral ministry” (*EG*, 15). This statement emphasizes the importance of actively engaging with people in the world, rather than waiting for them to come to the Church. Covid proved that “Church” and “Evangelization,” do not need concrete buildings but constant social encounters with social media emerging as a new platform.

A POPE WHO EVANGELIZES MORE BY EXAMPLE THAN BY WORDS

Gospel is God in Action. Synoptic Gospels show Jesus constantly moving, touching, tasting, listening, and looking: Good News Embodied in love in action. Jesus was the Good News, his words, his touch, his examples, his stories. He touched the hearts of people. Evangelization is touching the hearts of people through warm acts.

Pope Francis is known for his personal touch and his ability to connect with people in a deep and meaningful way. His gestures of kindness and compassion have often moved people to tears, just as Jesus's healing touch did in the Gospels. His quest for world peace, a world without war and weapons are great papal themes in this millennium. At his advanced age, he is in Iraq, South Sudan, Myanmar, and DRC wherever the healing touch of peace is needed, he goes despite all challenges. That has been his main evangelization.

But he also follows St. Francis of Assisi's dictum: "Always preach the Good News, use words if needed." Yes. People believe not only in words but in life examples. Pope's life is full of very moving examples of Christian love.

A. Washing the Feet of Prisoners

In 2013, Pope Francis made headlines when he washed the feet of 12 prisoners, including two women and two Muslims, during a Holy Thursday Mass at a youth detention centre in Rome. This gesture of humility and service echoed Jesus's washing of his disciples' feet at the Last Supper. In John 13:14-15, Jesus says, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

B. Comforting a Young Boy

During a general audience in St. Peter's Square in 2013, Pope Francis comforted a young boy who had lost his father. The boy approached the Pope and asked him if his father, who was an atheist, was in heaven. Pope Francis responded by telling the boy that God's love is greater than any human limitations and that his father's heart was in the right place. The Pope then hugged the boy and comforted him as he cried. This moment reflects Jesus's teachings on comforting those who mourn. In Matthew 5:4, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

C. Blessing a Man with a Rare Disease

In 2018, Pope Francis met with Giovanni Palmiero, a man with neurofibromatosis, a rare genetic disease that causes tumors to grow on the nervous system. When Palmiero approached the Pope, the Pope blessed him and kissed his face. The moment was captured in a video that went viral on social media. This gesture of compassion and acceptance reflects Jesus's teachings on healing and caring for the sick.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

- We travelled with the Pope who was rooted in the tradition and following the empowering example of Pope John Paul II and Benedict ushered in a new impetus for Evangelization.
- He has made Evangelization the Pivotal mission and the top Dicastery.
- He has chosen six major Biblical themes for Evangelization.
- He also gave us guidelines on attitudinal changes needed for Evangelization.
- He has led by example.
- Based on these reflections we need to come out with simple methods of evangelization.

Areas for discussion

- How can we make this papacy of Evangelization reflect in our mission.
- How can we make the laity "the evangelized" become the "evangelizers."
- How can we make Gospel be presented with new impetus, new method in digital age.