

What is Evangelization?

What is evangelization? What is the new evangelization? And do Catholics evangelize differently than other Christians?

The answers to these questions could vary depending on the definition of evangelization, so let's find the most enduring and widely accepted definition of evangelization. At the heart of all Christian definitions of evangelization is "spreading the good news of the Gospel". Some alternate definitions cite the preaching of the Gospel; some the conversion to Christianity; and still others making more disciples for Jesus. In secular media, evangelization is often associated with public exhortations of the street preacher, sometimes associated with missionary programs or occasionally door-to-door ministry. While each of these definitions varies greatly in method, the message of spreading the good news of the Gospel remains at center. So let's stick with evangelization meaning, "spreading the good news of the Gospel".

As for the definition of "new evangelization", the Catholic Church's use of the phrase goes back more than 40 years with Pope John Paul II providing the first extensive writings on the subject and its definition. Pope John Paul II defined the new evangelization as a re-evangelization with a commitment to three essentials: 1) the Church's commitment to spread the Gospel to those who have not heard it; 2) the Church's commitment to stoking the fires of the Gospel message in those who have Christian fervor; and most importantly 3) the Church's commitment to re-evangelizing to those who have lost their faith.

Pope Benedict XVI reemphasized John Paul II's new evangelization message in his writings beginning in 2000. He was concerned that the secularization of daily life was fostering a progressive process of de-Christianization and a loss of essential human values. He noted that a large part of today's humanity does not recognize the Gospel in the permanent evangelization of the Church. Humanity needs a convincing response to the question "How should I live?" The new evangelization should provide the answer to that question.

Pope Benedict XVI's assessment requires an analysis of how the Catholic Church evangelizes and whether that evangelization can be more effective

in providing a clear answer to the question “How should I live?” So how does the Catholic Church evangelize? The Church’s history of evangelization is rich in spiritual inspiration, missionary zeal and profound practicality. Let’s take a look at the Church’s evangelization efforts.

Many of the earliest evangelists were Saints that were martyred for their efforts. Despite opposition from the strongest government on earth at the time, despite religious persecution, despite bigotry and misunderstandings about beliefs and practices, the early disciples and saints spread the Gospel across the Roman Empire and beyond. Inspired by the Holy Spirit beginning at Pentecost, they could not be stopped!

Over the next fifteen hundred years the Gospel was spread around the world by Catholic explorers, missionaries and pioneers. Entire continents like South America were converted to Christianity. Many of the major discovery expeditions of Spain and Portugal during the 15th through 17th centuries were co-sponsored by Church and investors. Many of the original European explorers of the Americas were also priests and missionaries – Jolliet, Marquette, Kino and Hennepin to name a few. Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries often were the first to contact new American civilizations. They used the advice of St Francis of Assisi to “Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words.” This advice may be the fundamental difference associated with Catholic evangelization – a predisposition for action vice words.

That predisposition for action is responsible for these evangelization statistics in the United States: 630 Catholic hospitals; 244 Catholic colleges and universities - 1210 secondary Catholic schools -6288 primary Catholic schools and the largest private charity network in the U.S. Catholic Relief Services is a consistent first responder to disaster sites around the world; and the nearly 2 million men in the Knights of Columbus provide programs around the world for the poor, the aged, the infirmed, and the physically and intellectually challenged.

There is more, but an interesting note is that although Catholic hospitals account for less than fifteen percent of the total number of hospitals in the U.S., they are the predominant members of the top 100 rated hospitals in the U.S. Further, compared to their competition, Catholic hospitals take a leading role in providing less-profitable services to patients. They lead the

sector in breast cancer screenings, nutrition programs, trauma, geriatric services, and social work. In most of these areas, other non-profits come close, but hospitals run by state and local governments fall significantly off the pace. Where patients have trouble paying for care, Catholic hospitals cover more of the costs. For instance, Catholic Health Services in Florida provides free care to families below 200 percent of federal poverty line, accepting Medicaid reimbursements as payment in full, and caps costs at 20 percent of household income for families that fall between 200 percent and 400 percent of the federal poverty line.

So Catholics do evangelize differently! Without words!! But to address Pope Benedict XVI's concerns, does general public connect the Catholic Church's charitable works with spreading the Gospel and showing people a great way to live? Our job in the new evangelization should be to support and participate in the charitable works of the Church and make that connection between those works and the Gospel message!