

# Catholics and Evangelization

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## Introduction

It is my great joy and delight to welcome you to the second anniversary of the *Desert Day of Prayer*. This programme, which began two years ago, has run uninterruptedly on every third Saturday of every month. People have attended this programme from within and outside Abuja. I give thanks to Almighty God for the inspiration that has guided this programme. I hope and pray that this programme will continue to nourish the spiritual lives of those who attend it. On this second anniversary of the programme, I would like to reiterate my prayer for participants at the inaugural *Desert Day of Prayer*: **“May you leave here with a renewed spirit, a stronger faith, an enduring hope, a deeper love of God, and a total dedication to our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Our New Year’s *Desert Day of Prayer* will focus on Catholics and Evangelization. This is absolutely necessary because of the mandate of Jesus Christ to all the baptized to preach the good news of salvation. Also, it is relevant to examine our commitment as Catholics to evangelization in our country. One might ask: What is the attitude of Catholics towards Evangelization? Do Catholics show enough interest in Evangelization? This paper will first examine the meaning of evangelization. It will then focus on Pope Paul VI document on Evangelization. It will analyze Evangelization in the Nigerian Context. It will equally emphasize the role of Mary in evangelization. The paper concludes with a call for a renewed spirit of evangelization in the Nigerian Church.

## A. The Meaning of Evangelization

### i) The Origin of the word Evangelization

The origin of the word ‘evangelization’ is traced to the Hebrew word *basar* which means “to announce the good news or joyful tidings.” This is connected to the OT usage of “bringing the good news of salvation” (Isaiah 52:7; 61:1). In the NT, the Greek word *euangelion* is a translation of the Hebrew word *basar*. *Euangelion* is used in the NT with the same meaning as the OT, which is “bringing the good news of salvation.” It is in this context that our Lord used it in the Synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:18-21). Finally, it is used with regard to the good news of our salvation brought by the passion, death, and the resurrection of Christ. Paul used it with regard to the life and death of Christ. The Fathers of the Church down through the centuries continued to use it with similar understanding. When the use of Latin became more prominent, the Greek *euangelion* was eventually translated into the Latin *evangelizo*. It is this *evangelizo* that has been translated into two forms of the English *Evangelism* and *Evangelization*. The Protestants prefer to use *Evangelism* while Catholics use *Evangelization*.

### ii) What is Evangelization?

Evangelization is the initial proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians leading to conversion and response in faith. Evangelization is a primary function of the ministry of the Word of God usually directed at non-Christians. The secondary function of the ministry of the Word of God is *catechesis*, which is directed at those who have already made their first act of faith in response to evangelization. Catechesis, which is an instruction in the faith, helps to deepen the faith and to foster the growth of the faith of those already baptized. The fundamental mission of the Church is evangelization, i.e., to proclaim Christ to the whole world: “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Mt 28:19-20). This passage is known as “the Great Commission.” This “Great Commission” was first entrusted to the apostles, and then to all the members of the Church in virtue of their baptism and confirmation. Thus, evangelization is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ who is the good news that should be preached in season and out of season till the end of time.

Paul the great missionary to the gentiles understood very profoundly this ‘Great Commission’ when he said: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). Hear St. Paul: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel” (1 Cor 9:15-16). It is incumbent on all Christians to grasp the gravity of this mandate. One might ask: How come that Catholics are lukewarm in preaching the Gospel?

### iii) Evangelization since Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council revived the Church’s mandate to evangelize. Vatican II teaches that since the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, all the members of the Church are called to participate in the mission and ministry of the Church. According to Vatican II document, on the Missionary Activity of the Church, **Ad Gentes**, “the Church on earth is by its very nature missionary” (**Ad Gentes 2**). And it is the responsibility of every member of the Church to participate actively in the Church’s mission of evangelization. As **Lumen Gentium** has clearly stated, “each disciple of Christ has an obligation of spreading the faith to the best of his ability” (**Lumen Gentium 17**).

The question for each Christian is: To what extent do I spread the gospel of Christ? Each disciple of Christ is called to evangelize, to be a witness of Christ and to preach the gospel message. Undoubtedly, the mission of evangelization is not the exclusive domain of priests and religious but of the entire Christian community. Unfortunately, this call to evangelize has not always been taken seriously by Catholics and oftentimes evangelization has not been given the significance it deserves in parish life. Some Catholics think that what matters is to go to Mass on Sunday and that is it. That is not enough. What of “the Great Commission” to all the baptized. This “Great Commission” is addressed to every Catholic. Hence Catholics must desire to preach the gospel and by so doing bring new members to the Church.

## **B. Evangelii Nuntiandi (On Evangelization in the Modern World)**

Pope Paul VI gave to Catholics a renewed focus and impetus to the missionary mandate. Pope Paul VI in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on “Evangelization in the Modern World,” *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, issued on December 8, 1975, describes catechesis as an element of evangelization in the mission of the Church (**Evangelii Nuntiandi 24**). The document **Evangelii Nuntiandi** was the fruit of the Synod of Bishops which met in Rome in 1974 to discuss

evangelization. That shows that in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI called the bishops of the world together to discuss evangelization. This helped to revive evangelization in the Church in our modern time. Paul VI in **Evangelii Nuntiandi** gives a pride of place to the first proclamation of the gospel to non-Christians since there are still many people who have not heard the good news preached to them. He then insisted that, first evangelization is not only to those who have not heard the good news, but also to children (some of whom were baptized as infants), and adults who have abandoned the faith they received as children; **they need to know the faith in a new light.**

The **1997 General Directory for Catechesis** describes catechesis as **a moment in the process of evangelization.** In other words, catechesis is an indispensable aspect of evangelization, what is called pastoral evangelization, because of the need for *metanoia* (this means conversion, a radical change of heart) of all Christians who have already embraced the faith. This will enable baptized Christians to preach the gospel to non-Christians and lukewarm Christians.

### i) Catholics and Evangelization

Oftentimes, many Catholics shy away from preaching the gospel to non-Christians. In fact, they do not see it as their responsibility to make Christ known to others. On the other hand, our protestant brothers and sisters, especially the Pentecostal Christians, are unabashed in preaching the Lord Jesus to anyone who comes their way. Sometimes, they do this quite aggressively. Perhaps, as Catholics we can learn from their enthusiasm and eagerness to win converts. While it is praise worthy that some parishes have evangelization team, there is a need for priests to support such team in their parishes, in order to foster effective and dynamic collaboration of the mission of evangelization in parishes. **Evangelii Nuntiandi** identifies the following as means of evangelization: witness of life, preaching, liturgy of the word, catechetical instruction, mass media, personal contact and commitment, entry into ecclesial community, participation in sacramental life and apostolic action (**Evangelii Nuntiandi 40-48**).

Of all the means of evangelization, Pope Paul VI gives a pride of place to witness of life. **Who then is a witness?** A witness is someone who testifies on behalf of another person; one who stands for another person. It also means to be present to an event and to be able to give an account of it. The Christian vocation requires a personal relationship with Christ and the willingness to witness to him daily to the point of shedding one's blood for him. Even if one does not shed one's blood in martyrdom, one must be ready to endure the bloodless or white martyrdom that comes our way every day. The apostles were the first witness to Christ and ultimately gave their lives for Christ.

### ii) *The Call to Witness (Mt 5:13-16)*

"You are the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13); "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14). As Christians, we are called to witness to Christ. We are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Our lives and actions should motivate other people to follow Christ and give praise to God, "who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9). The disciples and early Christians witnessed to the Lord. After the resurrection of Christ, the disciples began to witness to the resurrection (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32). As Catholics and modern-day disciples of Christ, we are called to witness to Christ both in the Church and in the world in virtue of our baptism and confirmation. Witness of life has always been one of the most effective ways of preaching the gospel. By one's way of life, one shows that one is truly a disciple of Christ. The

old saying that “actions speak louder than words,” remains ever true with regard to witnessing to Christ and the Gospel values. As Pope Paul VI has observed: “The men of our day are more impressed by witness than by teachers, and if they listen to these it is because they also bear witness” (**Evangelii Nuntiandi 41**).

Our first place of witness is the Christian family, which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls a “domestic Church.” Witness in our places of work is equally essential. According to **Ecclesia in Africa**, “The Church’s witness must be accompanied by a firm commitment to justice and solidarity by each member of God’s people. This is especially important for the lay faithful who hold public office, because such witness demands an abiding spiritual attitude and a way of life consistent with the Christian faith” (**Ecclesia in Africa 105**).

### C. The Role of Mary in Evangelization

Since the “Great Commission” is to all the disciples of Christ, Mary as a disciple of Christ, plays an indispensable role in the Church’s mission of evangelization because she gave life to the world. She gave Jesus, who is the light of the world (John 8:12), to the whole world. Because of her special role in salvation history and her special relationship to Jesus, Mary leads people to Jesus in an exemplary way. Because Mary is unique and favoured by God, she helps us to be united with her Son and to proclaim him to the whole world.

*Pope Paul VI* concludes **Evangelii Nuntiandi**, by stressing the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the work of evangelization. *Pope Paul VI* calls Mary the “star of evangelization” and bids all Christians to put this fundamental work under her special care and protection:

- **“On the morning of Pentecost she presided in prayer at the beginning of evangelization under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. May she shine forth as the star of that constantly renewed evangelization which the Church, in obedience to the command of the Lord, must promote and accomplish especially in these days, so difficult but so full of hope” (Evangelii Nuntiandi, #82).**

Mary is the “star of evangelization” because she attracts people to her Son. She also encourages those who wish to know Jesus and who seek to be close to him. She shows people the path of discipleship to her Son.

### D. Christian Statistics and Evangelization

While writing this paper, I decided to delve into the statistics on the number of Christians in the world. According to David Barrett’s *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 33 percent of the world’s population is Christian, Muslims 21 percent, Hindus 13 percent, Buddhists 6 percent, Ethno Religions (Chinese) 6.3 percent, Tribal Religions (mainly Africans) 4 percent. Christianity is one third of the world’s population. Only one of every three persons in the world believes in Christ. Of all Christians, Roman Catholics (including Orthodox Catholics) are about 65 percent of Christians, Protestants are between 17-19 percent of all Christians. The other 16 percent is divided among the various Christian Churches of the world. There are a little over one billion Catholics in the world. Catholics form the largest Christian group in the world. One out of every six persons in this world is a Roman Catholic.

From the above statistics, we can deduce the fact that majority of people in this world do not believe in Christ. This makes “the Great Commission” even more imperative in our world. There remains a tremendous need for evangelization. The good news of Jesus Christ cries out for

preaching in the world. As Catholics, the largest Christian block on earth, the *onus* rests on us to be at the fore-front in preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

## E. Evangelization and the Nigerian Church

I wish to pay tribute to the countless men and women, the unsung heroes, who worked side by side with the early missionaries to sow the seed of the faith in our country. Countless catechists, teachers, housewives, cooks, etc., assisted the early missionaries and thus fostered evangelization and established the Church in our land. In the early history of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, there was a great fervor for evangelization. Schools, hospitals, and other social programmes were tools for evangelization. At least, there was a sense of urgency to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to traditional worshippers in order for them to embrace the Catholic faith. It is worth asking today: Is there still a zeal for evangelization in the Nigerian Catholic Church? Are we more into maintenance Christianity? Are we as Catholics in Nigeria ready to make in-roads by promoting and practicing evangelization?

Statistics put the number of Catholics in Nigeria at about 20 million. Some statistics have Catholics a little less than that. That means that in our country with a population of at least 140 million, it is only one out of seven Nigerians that is a Catholic. Admittedly, the Church is growing in Nigeria. This is evidenced in the number of new dioceses that are being created. However, I strongly believe that the Catholic Church in Nigeria will grow rapidly if evangelization is deeply entrenched in every Catholic. Remember, the laity played an indispensable role in spreading the faith with the early missionaries. Are the laity of today involved in evangelization? Is evangelization seen as a priority in the Nigerian Church?

There is a School of Evangelization in Issele-Uku, Delta State. The Dominican Sisters also run a School of Evangelization in Gwagwalada. There is a religious congregation established few years ago by Bishop Anthony Gbuji known as New Evangelization Sisters. Their primary apostolate is evangelization. Every diocese has the Office of the Propagation of the Faith. It is worth asking: Have all these efforts fostered the spirit of Evangelization in the Nigerian Catholic? How come that Catholics are not at the fore-front in converting people to the Church? Do we make any attempt to invite and convert our non-Catholic friends to the Church?

Brothers and sisters, evangelization should be part and parcel of our Christianity as Catholics. We should think of evangelization in simple ways such as making the faith strong in our family, fidelity and witness to the Gospel at home and in the society, being charitable to the poor and needy, the willingness to share our faith with friends, inviting our friends to attend Mass, supporting the work of missionaries, praying for the success of the missionary work of the Church, etc. My religious congregation, The Missionary Society of St. Paul has a saying: "Some give to the mission by going while some go the mission by giving." The missionary endeavour of the Church is forever. **Ad Gentes** states very clearly that "the duration of missionary activity is given to the period between the Lord's first coming and his return, in which the Church works to gather together and convert non-Christian nations" (**Ad Gentes, #9**).

## Conclusion

My dear friends in Christ, you and I are called to be missionaries, to proclaim Jesus Christ and the good news of salvation. We have to practice our faith and cherish the Church in

order for us to eagerly preach the faith to others and bring people to the Church. It is like a sales person who convinces you to buy a product because of his or her sheer power of persuasion. Perhaps, I can ask myself: Am I happy to be a Catholic? If the answer is yes, then, I must be bold, eager, and excited to tell people about the Catholic Church. With joy and excitement, you can share with people that you belong to the Church founded by our Lord Jesus Himself two thousand years ago. Tell them that you belong to the Church that has an impressive list of witness, confessors and martyrs. It is the Church that has produced apostles, martyrs, confessors, prophets, evangelizers, teachers, missionaries, the Great Fathers of the Church, the Doctors of the Church, pastors, virgins, Abbots and Abbesses, and so on.

Just recently, precisely on December 14, 2007, the Office of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document entitled, *Evangelization Requires Freedom and Truth*. This shows that evangelization remains the focal point of the mission of the Church. I wish to end with the insightful remark of our own Francis Cardinal Arinze, at the official presentation of the above document:

- **“The sharing of our Catholic faith with others who do not yet know Christ should be regarded as a work of love.... provided that it is done with full respect for their dignity and freedom. Indeed if a Christian did not try to spread the Gospel by sharing the excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ with others, we could suspect that Christian either of lack of total conviction of faith, or of selfishness and laziness in not wanting to share the full and abundant means of salvation with his fellow human beings.”**

Thank you for listening and God bless you. *Praise the Lord!*