

LECTURE

The New Evangelization and the Word of God

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Cardinal Bevilacqua Lecture

Seminary of the Immaculate Conception

October 30, 2011

It is a privilege for me to be invited to the annual Cardinal Bevilacqua Lecture here at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception. I am particularly grateful to Bishop William Murphy, whom I have known since our seminary days well over 40 years ago. Your bishop has a distinguished record of pastoral ministry and service to the Church not only here in the Diocese of Rockville Centre but to the Holy See and in his leadership at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In June 2010, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his homily at First Vespers for the Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul, announced the formation of a new Vatican office for the New Evangelization. This act gave a formal structure to what had been addressed by Pope Paul VI and, at great length, by Blessed John Paul II.

Less than two weeks ago I returned from Rome and a meeting at which our Holy Father presided to help the Church better carry out the mission of the New Evangelization. The focus of this meeting was new evangelizers for the New Evangelization.

The New Evangelization is the recognition that in countries where the Gospel has already been preached there is an “eclipse of the sense of God.” What brings a new urgency to our mission is the recognition of just how widespread and profound is the new secularism.

Pope Benedict XVI calls all of us to “re-propose the Gospel.” Somehow in what we do and how we express our faith, we have to be able to re-propose our belief in Christ and his Gospel for a hearing among those who are convinced they already know the faith and it holds no interest for them.

To underline how important is the pastoral initiative of the New Evangelization, our Holy Father has made it the topic of the next synod. The 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be held in 2012 has

as its topic “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.”

In the presentation of the *lineamenta* for this gathering we read that, “a distinction is drawn between evangelization as a regular activity of the Church; the first approach ‘*ad gentes*’ to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ, and the new evangelization which is directed towards those who have moved away from the Church, those who have been baptized but not sufficiently evangelized.”

How does the call for the New Evangelization relate to the recent Synod of Bishops on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church and the recently published post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (*The Word of the Lord*)? I propose that both the synod and the exhortation are clear manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s call to recognize that evangelization or, in other words, helping this generation hear the “God who speaks,” is the immediate and essential mission of the Church.

The New Evangelization is not a program. It is a mode of thinking, seeing and acting. It is a lens through which we see the opportunities to proclaim the Gospel anew. It is also a recognition that the Holy Spirit is actively working in the Church. The New Evangelization recognizes, as *Verbum Domini* also explains, that God speaks to his people. The Church is the voice which transmits the Word to the world. Like John the Baptist, the Church cries in the wilderness that the Messiah has come. The New Evangelization calls us to adapt how that voice speaks to this age. The Word never changes but the voice must modulate. Our voice must be clear and relevant. Our voice must be alive and enthusiastic. Our voice must transmit in the modes and places where our people are.

Some time ago I was speaking to a large group of teens in the Archdiocese of Washington. After I had spoken for a bit, I asked if there were any questions. A young woman stood up and asked: “What does the Church offer me?” The question can seem somewhat self-centered. But you would have had to hear her speak it to recognize from her tone that she was genuinely asking because she hoped to get an answer. Somewhere, surely, she had heard or read the promise, “Ask and you shall receive...”

The Church never tires of announcing the gift she has received from the Lord. The Second Vatican Council has reminded us that evangelization is at the very heart of the Church. In *Lumen Gentium*, the fundamental text and nucleus of the Council’s expression on the life of the Church, the Council Fathers emphasized, “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.” The Council spoke eloquently of the truth that the divine mission that Jesus entrusted to the Church continues through the Apostles and their successors and will last until the end of time.

On September 16, 2010 as our Holy Father arrived in Glasgow, Scotland as part of his trip to Great Britain, he set the tone, for his visit by calling upon “Catholic professionals, politicians and teachers of Scotland never to lose sight of their calling to use their talents and experience in the service of the faith, engaging contemporary Scottish culture at every level.”

He highlighted what exactly the New Evangelization entails. “The evangelization of culture is all the more important in our times, when a ‘dictatorship of relativism’ threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man’s nature, his destiny and his ultimate good. There are some who now seek to exclude religious belief from public discourse, to privatize it or even to paint it as a threat to equality and liberty... Society today needs clear voices which propose our right to live, not in a jungle of self-destructive and arbitrary freedoms, but in a society which works for the true welfare of its citizens and offers them guidance and protection in the face of their weakness and fragility.”

As we undertake the New Evangelization and the presentation of the richness of the experience of Jesus and his Gospel, we must be aware of the context in which this arduous task unfolds. Entire generations have become disassociated from the support systems that facilitated the transmission of faith. Decades of poor catechesis and theological presentation rooted in “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,” as Pope Benedict XVI describes it, have produced rocky ground and overgrown fields where we now try to sow the seeds of new life in Christ. Tragically, the sins of a few have encouraged a distrust in some of the structure of the Church itself.

The context of the New Evangelization and the very reason why we need to re-propose our Catholic faith to the world around us and of which we are a part is the secularism that is now rapidly enveloping our society and our Western culture.

During Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the United States, April 15-18, 2008, he spoke to a number of themes as he did more recently during his September 2010 visit to England and Scotland. The Pope recognized that bishops are called to sow the seeds of the Gospel today. But he went on to say, “this leads me to ask how in the twenty-first century a bishop can best fulfill the call to ‘make all things new in Christ our hope’? How can he lead his people to ‘an encounter with the living Christ’ the source of that life-transforming hope of which the Gospel speaks (cf. *Spe Salvi* 4)?”

He then went on to say that we need to begin by clearing away some of the barriers to such an encounter and he noted three in particular: “the subtle influence of materialism, which can all too easily focus attention on the hundredfold which God promises now in his age, at the expense of the eternal life which he promises in the age to come” (cf. Mark 10:30).

The Pope also reminded us that “while it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior.”

Finally he noted that “in a society which values personal freedom and autonomy, it is easy to lose sight of our dependence on others as well as the responsibilities that we bear towards them. This emphasis on individualism has even affected the Church” (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 13-15).

There is the sense among many that we are simply being overwhelmed. We may have lost confidence in our message or feel that somehow we must apologize for bringing the Gospel and its values into today’s marketplace. It is like a tsunami of secular materialism and skepticism washing over us, the Gospel, the Church and our efforts to renew the faith in the generation with which we deal. And yet, at the same time, we recognize, as Pope Benedict has noted on more than one occasion, the Church is always young, the Church is always being renewed, the Church is always facing the challenges that come with our age, our moment, our time, as we look to the future.

We bring a fuller vision — offering another dimension to life. In the Sermon on the Mount presented in Matthew’s Gospel, we hear of a new way of life and how it involves the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who mourn, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit. Here we learn of the call to be salt of the earth and a light set on a lamp stand. Later in that same Gospel, we hear the extraordinary dictum that we should see in one another the very presence of Christ. Jesus’ disciples are challenged to envision a world where not only the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given drink, the stranger is welcomed and the naked are clothed, but also most amazingly sins are forgiven and eternal life is pledged.

That same vision is held out for us today when we open the pages of the Gospel and read about the invitation to you and to me to be branches connected to the vine of the Lord, to eat of the bread of everlasting life and to hear the words of truth, words that endure forever.

God is calling his Church to renew her efforts for the salvation of all. The current emphasis on the significance of the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church is, I believe, a manifestation of the call. The Church cannot simply maintain the *status quo*; rather we must never tire of finding creative ways of sharing the “words of eternal life” (Jn 6:69).

To fully understand the Synod on the Word of God and its fruit, the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, it is best to go back to the beginning. What is a synod and why have one? A synod is a gathering of bishops who are representative of the Church throughout the entire world.

The idea of having a synod grew out of the experience of the Pope and the bishops at the time of the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965. Then over 2,500 bishops from all over the world came to Rome to reflect on how well the Church was carrying out her mission to be the continuing presence of Christ and his Gospel in the world. As the Council drew to a conclusion in 1965, there was the hope that some mechanism might be found to keep alive the collaborative experience of the Council. Thus was born, at the directive of Pope Paul VI, what we now recognize as the Synod of Bishops. It provides the pastors of the Church an opportunity to reflect on important issues in the life of the Church today. In short, the synod is a worldwide consultative body that provides a forum for discussion and reflection on issues of importance in the life of the Church today.

A seminary community would be very familiar with the fruit of the 1990 Synod on Priestly Formation because it produced the material out of which Blessed John Paul II created the masterful document, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

More recently, the 11th Synod of Bishops which met in October 2005 devoted its attention to the Eucharist. Out of those deliberations came Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (The Sacrament of Charity). Of course, the fruit of the 2008 Synod on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church resulted in our Holy Father's exhortation, *Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord).

One of the things we take for granted when we gather for the synod is an element in the life of the Church that should still cause us to rejoice. Even though we are bishops from all over the world, when we begin discussions, as we did at this Synod on the Word of God, it is clear almost immediately that on all of the elements of the faith we are of one mind. For example, in the preliminary discussions on the Word of God, when we deal with doctrine such as revelation, the Incarnation, the meaning of faith, the Church, its teaching office and sacred Scriptures, we are all united.

You might ask, "What is so surprising about that?" As bishops of the Church who have the responsibility of protecting and passing on the faith, we should all be one in that faith. Nonetheless, our very unity reminds us of the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.

No purely human institution could sustain this communion of faith, life and witness. The fact that all of the bishops who were gathered in the synod hall are one in the faith of the Church is a testimony to the enduring gift of the Holy Spirit at work in his Church.

How does the teaching of Christ get from him to us? How can we claim truly to know Jesus? These are important questions that we must answer when we recognize that God spoke in and through Jesus Christ 20 centuries ago. Yet he intended the message for each of us today. The reality through which we

ensure our continuity with the Lord is called Apostolic Tradition. It is best described as the passing on under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit what Jesus said and did. What makes it unique is that the very passing on in this way guarantees that the saving story of Jesus is not forgotten, misunderstood or lost from age to age, from generation to generation, from person to person.

Sacred Scripture and Tradition are closely related since both flow from the same divine wellspring and each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ who promised to remain with his own always until the end of all time (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 9).

While there can also be in the Church human traditions, which may be of temporary value, it is only by Christ's gift of the Spirit guarding the living teachers he set over the Church that it is possible to distinguish that which is the enduring word of God from that which is of passing worth.

One of the delegates, the president of the United Bible Societies of England, reminded the members of our language group that the Catholic Church tends to be too modest in pointing out its role in preserving the Word of God in its living tradition.

When we turn our attention now to the apostolic exhortation, we are reminded that our reflection on the Word of God is not an academic examination of the texts of sacred Scripture in order to consider them alone from the perspective of historical-critical study and the application of every scientific and literary method available, but rather to look at the Word of God as a means of our spiritual development and pastoral guidance. As the exhortation teaches us, "The intrinsic link between the word and faith makes clear that authentic biblical hermeneutics can only be had within the faith of the Church, which has its paradigm in Mary's fiat..." The Pope goes on to note that "we can point to a fundamental criterion of biblical hermeneutics: *the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the Church*" (29).

During the synod, the Holy Father gave a substantial intervention precisely on the idea of canonical hermeneutic – the understanding of each part of sacred Scripture in the total context and light of the whole canon of Scripture.

In this same section of *Verbum Domini* we read that "this is not to uphold the ecclesial context as an extrinsic rule to which exegetes must submit, but rather is something demanded by the very nature of the Scriptures and the way they gradually came into being."

In his first Christmas address to the Roman Curia in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI reflected upon two divergent approaches to the Second Vatican Council, labeled by him as a "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" and a "hermeneutic of reform." In the two approaches to the Council, the Pope remarked, one interpretation "caused confusion while the other, silently but more

and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit.” In the course of his reflections, the Pope observed that the “hermeneutic of discontinuity” has “frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media and also one trend of modern theology.”

The teaching office of the Church is intrinsic to the Church’s understanding of her Lord, his words and his Gospel. We find a parallel example in the understanding of the application of law. Judgments of the Supreme Court become determinative for jurisprudence. Law schools would not be faithful instructors in jurisprudence if they chose to exclude binding legal precedent from their understanding of the law. So, too, in the Church the judgment of the Magisterium is always integral to correct exegesis of Scripture.

As *Verbum Domini* points out, our constant reference point is the prologue of Saint John’s gospel and the understanding of how the term Word of God is used analogously (5).

The revelation of Christ, proclaimed in his teaching, received by his Apostles and announced by them, came to be written down. As the Christian community spread and new generations were added to the Body of Christ, the message – the Gospel of Christ – came to be written down. Thus we find the gradual composition of a canon of Scriptures recognized as inspired and containing the Word of God.

In describing the dynamic of revelation and faith, *Verbum Domini* highlights the Church as the home of the Word of God. It is the community that receives the spoken Word that passes on in its living tradition the revelation and has taken on the responsibility of writing down that Word in the form of scriptures that were eventually collected as the canon of what we now call the sacred Scriptures.

While the actual confirmation by the Church of what definitively composes the canon took some time, the extant texts of the New Testament include some surprisingly ancient ones.

In the context of the synod, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, provided each synodal father a facsimile of the Bodmer Papyrus 14-15 (P75), which include second century fragments containing the prologue of John’s Gospel and the Lucan account of the Lord’s Prayer – identical to what we have in our Bibles used at home and in the liturgy today.

In the course of the synod meeting, the ecumenical patriarch, His Holiness Bartholomew, together with Pope Benedict XVI, celebrated first vespers of the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time. In that context, the patriarch gave a long and thoughtful reflection on the Word of God. Here he touched on how, in the patristic tradition, there was an understanding of the spiritual senses. For listening to God’s word, beholding God’s word, and touching God’s word are all spiritual ways of perceiving the unique divine mystery.

The patriarch talked about hearing and speaking the Word through Scripture, seeing and experiencing the Word of God in the beauty of creation and human-made icons, and finally touching and sharing the Word of God through the sacraments, most particularly the Eucharist and the communion of saints.

Often, in preparation for and during the synod, the question was raised about Catholics reading the Bible. I think it is important to distinguish between reading the Bible and being familiar with the content of the Bible. Catholics are very familiar with the content of sacred Scripture. They hear it over and over again at Sunday Mass. When you begin a parable, the Catholics in the pew know how it ends. When you begin referencing specific Scriptures, many of them can complete the sentence. Most of our familiarity with the Scriptures comes directly from hearing rather than reading the texts.

Both the synod and the apostolic exhortation highlight the blessings that come from opening the Bible in situations other than the Liturgy so that the Word of God can nurture us in our homes, workplaces, or wherever else we gather and have access to the sacred Scriptures.

The Church urges us to read the Bible and to do so in the full context of centuries of reflecting on its meaning under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The study of the Bible by groups or individuals remains an occasion of God's continuous grace and enlightenment. This is why the Church so strongly urges that studying and praying from the Bible should be the lifelong project of every Christian.

It is precisely at the Liturgy, which is both an act of worship and a pedagogue, that the vast majority of practicing Catholics come into contact with the life-giving encounter with Christ. For that reason, it seems all the more appropriate to use the Scriptures in the context of the Liturgy to help better proclaim the Word of God as it has been applied over twenty centuries under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the teaching of the Church.

The celebration of the liturgical year offers us a frame of reference for ongoing evangelization and deepening catechesis. *Verbum Domini* calls us to utilize both the Lectionary and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in the preparation of homilies throughout the year.

In an earlier post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted the reflections of the Synod on the Eucharist. Here we read, "Given the importance of the Word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved. The homily is 'part of the liturgical action' and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the Word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful" (46).

I cite this because, over and over in the course of the Synod, there were interventions calling for the improved quality of homilies and a variety of practical

measures to assist priests in their homiletic responsibilities. There were numerous calls for materials to assist priests in preparing, on the basis of the three-year lectionary, “thematic” homilies treating the great themes of the Christian faith on the basis of what has been authoritatively proposed by the Magisterium in the “four pillars” of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, namely the profession of faith, the celebration of the Christian mysteries, life in Christ and Christian prayer.

The echoes of the Synod on the Eucharist reverberated through many of the discussions in the Synod on the Word of God and find voice in the document *Verbum Domini* relative precisely to homiletic content that was both inspiring and informative.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has already entrusted to a number of its committees to work together to prepare a new homiletic guide for priests and deacons. In this project it is clearly understood that there has to be catechetical content to our ministry of proclamation expressed in the homily.

What is apparent from all of the deliberations at the synod is the recognition of the obligation of every believer not only to hear the Word of God, but share it. Christ is our teacher. He offers his people the words of truth and everlasting life. “For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (Jn 18:37). Today his teaching mission endures in those whom he sends.

When our Holy Father speaks of re-proposing the encounter with the living Christ as part of the New Evangelization, he is asking us to recapture the excitement of those who found an empty tomb or probed the nail marks with their fingers. Jesus is indeed risen from the dead and he is offering us new life. Christ is also asking us to help him complete his work, build his kingdom, in anticipation of his return.

At the heart of the New Evangelization is both our own personal need to renew and deepen our faith and then the courageous action of spreading, sharing that faith.

In the context of a discussion of the New Evangelization on the campus of a school of theology, we need also to reflect on how witness to the Gospel is carried out in the highly complex world in which we live. Catholic institutions – educational, health care, social service and pastoral – are intended to be reflections of the life and ministry of the Church. As such, they should provide a structured institutional witness to the Gospel values that are at the core of the Church’s mission.

It is not enough that individuals on a campus, for example, attempt to live out their faith and commitment to the Gospel. The institution itself needs to provide a structured witness. A Catholic university or college should be prepared to offer institutional testimony. For example, this very symposium on *Verbum Domini* is a means of institutional witness. While a state or secular university or

college might not be persuaded to examine academically the importance and impact of a synodal document, a Catholic institution of higher learning should be the logical forum for such discussion. It seems most appropriate for a Catholic institution of higher learning to examine precisely from the point of view of the Catholic Church what a synodal document is, its content and its implications for life today.

Precisely because they are Catholic institutions, colleges and universities would be the logical and fitting fora for discussions on what the Catholic Church brings to the wider community by its understanding, for example, of the Word of God, or the Eucharist, or the understanding of objective right and wrong. All of this comes under the heading of institutional witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All of this is a participation in the New Evangelization. This can perhaps be described as one of the intellectual tasks of the New Evangelization.

When our Holy Father initiated the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization he reminded us that, "Human beings of the third millennium want an authentic, full life; they need truth, profound freedom, love freely given. Even in the deserts of the secularized world, man's soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Vespers Saints Peter and Paul, June 28, 2010). Our Lord has commanded us to give a cup of water to those who thirst and food to those who hunger. Our task is also to share the waters of baptism and the food of the Eucharist.

The words, "You are my witnesses" echo in the pages of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:8) where we find an account of the early Church. In living continuity since those days, the Church has passed on the words – the revelation – that introduces us to Jesus of Nazareth, who is Mary's son and God's son, to Jesus who is the Logos – the Word – come among us. Our faith and call to be witnesses are intrinsic elements of our self-definition as disciples of Jesus.

It is in that context that we take a critical look at ourselves to see how well we are engaged in the Church's mission to bring Christ to the world and to tell others of Jesus and his answers to the great questions of life.

To evangelize individuals is not sufficient. The Gospel is intended for every people and nation; it finds a home in every culture. Those who proclaim the Christian message must know and love the culture and the people to whom they bring the message in order for it to be able to transform the culture and the people and make them new in Christ. The New Evangelization calls for a clearly conceived serious and well-organized effort to evangelize culture. The dynamism inherent in the New Evangelization demands both the inculturation of the Gospel and the transformation of the culture by the Gospel.

As I prepared to leave Rome at the conclusion of the synod, I took some time simply to go back to Saint Peter's Basilica and quietly thank God for the gift of this

Synod and to recognize how great is the blessing of God's Word that continues to be with us, to enlighten us, to give us direction in life, to encourage us, to open up our minds and heart to God, and to bring us to God.

The ultimate lesson of the synod and very clearly articulated in *Verbum Domini* is something that we cherish as a mystery of our faith. God speaks to us. God speaks to us today. He invites us to friendship with himself. He invites us to invite others to this friendship. In his Word do we find the meaning and purpose of life.

I want to conclude these reflections with a reference to something our Holy Father underlined at the very beginning of the Synod on the Word of God. This seems so appropriate as we face so much change in our day, so many challenges, so much relativism and lack of a sense of stability.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (cf. Matthew 24:35).

The one sustaining, remaining, affirming reality in our lives as individuals and collectively as the Church is in fact God's Word come among us so that we might become one with God.