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Cultural Changes and New Language of Evangelization

Everybody evangelizes about something. Some people evangelize about their favorite restaurant or vacation destination, others about music or a movie, some about their new iPhone, and others still, about a politician or political agenda. Everybody evangelizes about something and everyone is a disciple of something or someone.

There are now 2.5 billion iPhones on the planet. That didn't happen without some serious evangelization. And there have been many times when I have heard people speak with great passion about their new iPhone and thought to myself, "Imagine if Catholics were this passionate about sharing the Gospel!"

It is in our nature to evangelize. It is in our nature to share good news with others. Those who have had a deeply personal encounter with Jesus do not need to be told to evangelize. It is an inevitable consequence of that encounter. If you place an empty bucket under a dripping tap it will eventually overflow. It has no choice.

Though we have travelled different paths, we are each here today because we have accepted God's invitation to serve his people.

I was raised in Sydney, Australia. Each Sunday I went to Mass, I attended Catholic schools, and I received the Sacraments. And yet, although I had been immersed in the activities of our faith, like millions of my generation, my heart had not been won for Jesus and his Church.

I knew about Jesus, but I did not know Jesus - and knowing about someone is not the same as knowing the person. This is the difference between catechesis and evangelization.

When I was fifteen I was evangelized. My path crossed with a man who challenged me to pray and read the Gospels, reflect on the larger questions of life, consider my responsibility to the poor and lonely, and patiently answered my questions about life and the faith. It was at this time that I encountered Jesus in a deeply personal way. The direction of my life was forever altered.

As I delved into the Catholic experience, one idea captured my imagination above all others. It was the idea that holiness was possible and that each moment was an invitation and an opportunity to grow in holiness. It was the first time holiness had been set before me as a possibility. Each moment was now filled with purpose and each moment grasped for God produced an explosion of joy in my soul.

When I began speaking and writing about the faith in my late teens I wanted to share this joy with others. By that time, I had immersed myself in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and was convinced that the *universal call to holiness* held the key to helping people find meaning and purpose in their lives, and the key to helping them understand the genius of Catholicism.

Over the next seven years, I visited the Church in more than fifty countries speaking to people of all ages. Standing before audiences I noticed that when I began speaking about the universal call to holiness their eyes would glaze over. There was a disconnect. This was magnified when I visited high schools. Standing in front of a thousand teens you can tell how each and every sentence is received, and the concept of holiness was simply unable to garner their attention.

I didn't know it at the time, but I know today that the reason they were unable to engage in a conversation about holiness was because they had already fallen victim to the biggest lie in the history of Christianity. It is not a lie that non-Christians tell about Christians, but rather a lie we tell ourselves. "Holiness is not possible for me." This is the lie that hundreds of millions of Catholics have accepted consciously or unconsciously. This is the lie that has paralyzed the inner and outer lives of Christians in the modern world.

When I first started speaking and writing I found this incredibly discouraging, because I wanted others to experience the joy that I was experiencing by immersing myself in relationship with God and this quest for holiness. So, I began to experiment with language.

How could I say it in a way so they could hear? How could I set them free from all the false stereotypes and caricatures about holiness? How could I explain it in a way that cuts through bias and prejudice? How could I help them to hear the message as a beautiful invitation to a new way of life?

It was out of this search that the phrase “the-best-version-of-yourself” emerged. I can still remember the first time I used it. It came to me while I was speaking to a group of people. “God has an incredible dream for you,” I said, “he wants you to become the-best-version-of-yourself!” Their reaction was instant. I could see in their eyes that they had heard the message in a new way, that it had captured their imaginations. I went on to explain that some things we do help us to become the-best-version-of-ourselves and others do not. They understood clearly. It was as if I could see their minds filling with examples they had identified for themselves. I explained that some things we do help *other people* become the-best-version-of-themselves and other things we do prevent people from becoming all God created them to be.

For the past 20 years I have lived in the United States and dedicated myself to serving the Church there. Since first arriving in the United States I have visited more than three thousand parish communities. These visits convinced me of our desperate need for powerful catechetical and evangelization programs that inspire the people of our times to embrace the life-giving ways of the Gospel. For the past decade I have focused on developing catechetical programs with the incredibly dedicated team at Dynamic Catholic.

In each of these contexts, the concept of becoming the-best-version-of-yourself has played a critical role in engaging the people of our time in a vibrant conversation about entering into deep relationship with Jesus and his Church. But the concept is the result of striving to find language that attracts, resonates, invites, encourages, and challenges people in a way that they can hear.

In every place and time God desires to awaken new forms of Catholic creativity. Some ages embrace it, some ages reject it, some ages persecute it. The question is, are we open to a new era of Catholic creativity and imagination?

Language *may* be one area God is calling us to unleash this creativity, so that we can reach the people of our age, especially those who seem most unreachable. Both language and witness play pivotal roles in the process of evangelization. Witness speaks the language of all men and women in all places and times. Language is burdened with greater limitations.

It is the limitations of language that require us to continually revisit its effectiveness.

Language engages or disengages. Language encourages or discourages, creates clarity or confusion, unites or divides, is constructive or destructive. It invites people or alienates them. Language can be casual or formal, humble or arrogant, effective or ineffective.

In one way or another every topic we have discussed this week deals with the effectiveness of our efforts to carry out Jesus' mandate to his disciples – his mandate to us (Mark 16:15). In our efforts to share the Gospel with all men, women, and children to the ends of the earth it seems the Holy Father is inviting us to examine and question our effectiveness. It is a bold challenge. Will we meet it with fear or hope?

To reflect on the effectiveness of our efforts to evangelize will require all the courage we can muster.

During the early days of the civil rights movement, which sought equality for all people regardless of the color of their skin, James Weldon Johnson wrote, "We need to hold a mirror up to this country." Ever since Pope Francis stepped onto the balcony here at Saint Peter's on March 13, 2013, in almost everything he has said and done, he seems to have been saying to us: We need to hold a mirror up to ourselves. We need to hold a mirror up to the Church.

This can be frightening, because mirrors don't lie.

It is a bold challenge. One that we can all avoid with the busyness of our lives, even the busyness of ministry. Even this week, here in this context, where if nothing else we should courageously explore and boldly discuss the effectiveness of our efforts, it would be ever so easy to speak about everything but this critical issue.

How effective has the New Evangelization been to date? Do we have the faith and the courage to face this question with rigorous honesty?

On the most basic level we discover our failure by randomly asking a dozen Catholics, even those who attend Mass faithfully, “What is the New Evangelization?” This will almost certainly be met with a dozen different answers, or worse yet, a blank stare and a shrug of the shoulders.

The average Catholic doesn’t know what the New Evangelization is and they don’t know how to participate in it.

Since Pope Paul VI first proposed the New Evangelization in his 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* his dream has been expanded on and promoted by John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now, Francis. For twenty-five years during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI there was no more dominant theme. And yet, in holding a mirror up to our efforts to evangelize the modern world, how successful do we believe we have been? An honest exploration of this question leaves us humbled by what we discover.

There are of course reasons for our failure to engage the people of our age, but do those reasons lead us to the self-satisfied righteousness of justification - or do they jolt us to search for new and more creative ways to evangelize?

Our failure is twofold. Our efforts to evangelize the modern world have failed in witness and language.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* our Holy Father wrote, “the Catholic Church is considered a credible institution by public opinion, and trusted for her solidarity and concern for those in greatest need.(65)” In the six short years since this document was written this has tragically become less and less true. Countless Catholics and non-Catholics no longer see the Catholic Church as a credible institution worthy of their trust. This produces a significant obstacle to all our efforts to evangelize as trust and respect are essential to the process.

The faith has always been most effectively spread through the trust, joy, and respect of friendship. If you want someone to hear a truth they don’t want to hear, the most effective person to deliver that message with success is a friend for whom the other person has mountains of trust and respect. Too many people no longer see the Church as that trusted and respected friend.

This makes it all too easy for people to fall into the trap of believing that the Church is irrelevant and breeds the greatest enemy to evangelization: indifference.

We can deny this, argue about it parsing it by degree, ignore it, or look deep into the mirror realizing our failures, and then, go forth more determined than ever to win back that trust and respect, so that we can effectively invite more people than ever before into a life-giving relationship with God and his Church.

This will require authentic witness and a new language.

We live in an age when much of our language pushes people away rather than drawing them nearer to the living God. The very language that should unite people with their Creator has become an obstacle awkwardly wedged between God and his people. This is unfortunate, and no doubt uncomfortable to admit, but it is so. The question is, how will we respond? Will we stubbornly cling to language that simply does not work and complain about the fact that people have become so disenfranchised from God, religion, and spirituality by modern secularism? Are we satisfied having the right words in the right place even if millions are unable to hear those words in a life-giving way? Or will we open ourselves to new language that enables us to fulfill our mission more effectively in this place and time?

Many people are allergic to Church language. If someone is allergic to a medication, you don't give them that medication. But you also don't refuse them medication altogether.

If we continue to see language as an end in itself rather than a tool with the specific purpose of leading people closer to God, our efforts to evangelize are unlikely to be any more successful. But language is a tool. It exists to communicate, to engage people, to educate people, and to inspire people. Language serves God by serving his people.

At this point, let me say that I am open to being wrong. What matters most is that we begin this conversation and others like it. I am may be wrong and we may find a new way to accomplish our mission with the old language. What we need to do is stop avoiding the conversation. When we refuse to engage in conversation we close ourselves off from the world.

Surely our faith is not so fragile and weak that it cannot stand up to vigorous conversation. Even when it comes to "settled questions" we should not be afraid to engage in conversation. We should in fact welcome the conversation as an opportunity to help people understand more fully the genius of our Catholic faith. For a question may be settled theologically or dogmatically, but if it is not settled in people's hearts they need and deserve as much conversation as necessary to work through that question.

Evangelization is after all a conversation between the Church and the world, between each baptized Christian and the people in his or her circle of influence.

Today, the phrase – the-best-version-of-yourself – has become ingrained in popular culture. Football coaches use it at press conferences, movie stars use it in interviews, business leaders speak about helping their people and their organizations become the-best-version-of-themselves, and millions of parents ask their children every day, "Will what you are about to do help you become the-best-version-of-yourself?"

For whatever reason this concept and language resonates with people of all ages, and perhaps it provides some insight into what is possible.

There is light and hope when we realize that this problem we face is not entirely new. The Church has been translating the Gospel into new languages for 2,000 years.

Saint Jerome translated the Scriptures into Latin to make the message accessible to as many people as possible, but he also wrote commentaries to provide even more accessibility and clarity. How effective would our efforts be today if the Church only communicated in Hebrew and Aramaic or Latin?

Over the centuries, hundreds of scholars have worked tirelessly and often anonymously to translate the Word of God into every language under the sun. The challenge before us today is to translate God's message into a cultural language, which is infinitely more difficult than translating it into French, Swahili, Chinese, Arabic, or English.

Dynamic Catholic is a grass roots lay ministry committed to re-energizing the Catholic Church in the United States. While it is a young organization, just ten years old, it has been incredibly successful at engaging disengaged Catholics. There are 15,000 parishes in the United States today and last year more than 12,000 parishes used at least one of Dynamic Catholic's catechetical or evangelization programs. During Lent and Advent almost a million people will visit DynamicCatholic.com each day to view our daily video reflections. I am often asked what the secret to this success is, especially in light of the fact that it seems to be harder and harder to reach Catholics in the current culture.

From the beginning we have used a phrase, "*Meeting people where they are and leading them to where God is calling them to be!*" Some people see it as just a marketing tag-line, but it is much more than that. It is an idea that many have adopted from us, but while it is easy to speak about, this concept which is at the heart of effective evangelization, is incredibly difficult to accomplish.

One of the mistakes that has plagued our efforts to evangelize and catechize the modern world is our tendency to misread where people are in the adventure of life, where they are in their spiritual journey, where they are in their ability to understand the life and language of the Church.

We assume that people know more than they do. We assume people are more committed than they are. We assume people understand the language we are speaking, yet often they have no idea what we are talking about. These false assumptions are massively undermining our efforts to lead people into deeper relationship with God. As a result, we are often answering questions people are not even asking and ignoring the questions their hearts and minds are preoccupied with.

Perhaps the most dangerous assumption we are making is to assume that the people in the pews have been evangelized. Over the past decade Dynamic Catholic has developed catechetical programs for each of the Sacraments and in the process we stumbled upon a significant discovery. Throughout the catechetical journey that a Catholic experiences if he or she was baptized as a child, we assume that he or she has made a choice and commitment to Jesus and his Church. It simply isn't true. The sacramental reality and the practical reality are not aligned. This is not an intellectual or theological assertion, but rather, a non-judgmental observation. Although people have experienced most of the sacraments, the fruit of their lives tells a different story. Their lives do not announce to the world, "I have made a choice and commitment to walk with Jesus and his Church." And yet, the great majority of catechetical materials are developed based upon the false assumption that participants have made this commitment.

You cannot catechize the unevangelized. They need to be evangelized before they can effectively catechized. Many of Dynamic Catholic's programs have a very different starting point for this reason, because the capacity and desire of the unevangelized to absorb catechesis is very minimal.

This effort to meet people where they are and lead them to where God is calling them to be has led to another discovery, which is both astounding and yet upon reflection unsurprising. More and more people in society are in need of a pre-evangelization experience prior to evangelization and catechesis.

My parents taught me to work hard, be honest, be happy for other people when they succeed, and to care for the poor. My brothers and I grew up in their love and care. This provided a natural foundation of goodness. The Gospel takes root very easily in that foundation of goodness, but fewer and fewer people are being gifted this foundation of goodness by their parents. Rather than being raised on hope and joy, they are raised on selfishness and enter the world afraid and questioning. These people need to be loved into a place of hope, so that the natural virtues of goodness can be nurtured in their hearts and souls. This is the pre-evangelization I speak of. Only then can the rich seeds of the Gospel take root in their lives.

Returning for a moment to our misguided assumption that people have made a choice for Jesus and his Church. This assumption undermines all our efforts to evangelize in another way which is immensely practical. The unevangelized cannot evangelize. It isn't because they are lazy, or ignorant, or bad people. It's because it simply isn't possible. You cannot passionately introduce others to a life-changing person and message if you have never experienced them for yourself. So, when we ask the unevangelized to join the New Evangelization it is an exercise in futility. This is why they look back at us with blank stares.

The most basic educational methods inform us that connecting new information to existing knowledge is essential to success. If a child enters a third level math class with a first level working knowledge of math he or she is unlikely to learn very much at all. It is therefore critical to know where a student's current knowledge stands so we meet them where they are.

In order to meet people where they are in the process of evangelization we need to know what occupies their hearts and minds. The reality is most people are worried and hurting about something.

What's on people hearts and mind? Money problems: struggling to pay the bills, drowning in debt, a job they hate, or no job at all. Health issues: they are sick or someone they love is sick. Marriage problems: their marriage isn't working, their spouse doesn't love them anymore, or they have a good marriage but don't know how to make it better. Children: they have a child they are worried about, or they desperately want to have children but cannot conceive, or they just want to be better

parents but don't know how. Addiction: they are addicted to something and desperately afraid someone is going to find out, or someone they love is struggling with addiction. Self: they don't know who they are or what they are here for, they feel lost and afraid, their life lacks meaning and purpose, but they are afraid to share that with anyone. And these are high-class problems compared to others that our Holy Father addresses in other parts of this document.

And yet, whatever their joy and whatever their burdens, they share one thing in common: the unchanging human need for healing and wholeness. This quintessential human yearning does not change, but people no longer look to God and his Church to deliver the healing and wholeness that they thirst for unquenchably amidst today's secular culture. They know their lives are not working. They know that something significant is missing. They are living what Thoreau described as "lives of quiet desperation," but they don't understand that God and spirituality are essential to their happiness.

And so the challenge for the modern disciple is to go to the people, to meet them where they are, both literally and metaphorically. This is where the indispensable role of the laity in the New Evangelization is highlighted. The laity are constantly moving along the highways and byways, passing through the marketplace and every professional environment, and enjoying places or recreation and entertainment. It is here that the great moments of opportunity exist to evangelize.

It is the casual encounters between the evangelized and the unevangelized that are rich with possibility. They are not opportunities to preach, but opportunities to live and love, to listen and bear witness to the joy God has filled us with – the joy of the Gospel.

This approach has its roots in the ministry of Jesus. As we reflect on his life and ministry it is no small matter that he almost never preached to someone before he had met a very human need. He fed people, healed people, encouraged people, and comforted the afflicted.

Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, famously said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." The people of today want to know how much Catholics and their Church care. They are sending us a very clear message, "Don't tell

me, show me.” They are tired of the lectures and preaching, they yearn to see someone, anyone, actually live the Gospel in the midst of this modern secular culture. Somewhere deep inside we all want to know that it is possible.

Love of neighbor is always triumphant. While secularism poses many challenges to our efforts to evangelize, it has become so pervasive now that people are surprised by genuine Christian love, compassion, and generosity. We have an opportunity to juxtapose the Christian life authentically lived with the emptiness and selfishness of secularism. The first Christians used the same juxtaposition to intrigue the people of their time. When the Gospel is lived it still holds the spellbinding power to capture the imaginations of the people of any place and time.

Our enemies can attack the Church in a thousand ways, but there are some aspects of our faith that are untouchable. My favorite is this: There is simply nothing more attractive than holiness. When somebody actually lives of Gospel it is incredibly attractive – and not just to Christians. Who loves Francis of Assisi? Just Catholics? No. Just Christians? No. Men, women, and children of all faiths and no faith. Why? Because there is nothing more attractive than holiness.

What is the source of this holiness? The Lord himself, of course. But in practical terms it all comes down to living in the presence of God. This is the source of our life, love, and joy. David danced for joy before the Ark of the Covenant, he danced for joy in the presence of God. John the Baptist danced for joy in the womb of Elizabeth acknowledging the presence of God when he heard Mary’s greeting. A life lived in the presence of God is a joy-filled life. But so many things can drag us away from God.

Those of us who have dedicated our lives to ministry need to guard our joy in a special way. Too many people in ministry have lost their joy. And perhaps the ugliest thing in the world is someone who is serving others and trying to bring people closer to God who has lost his or her joy.

The challenge is ever before us to animate the Gospel for the people of our age, so that we can effectively invite people to make the transition from tourists to pilgrims and from consumers to disciples.

There is so much more that could be said, but my time has elapsed. And so, I will leave you with this thought. The Church is not something we inherit from generations past or take over from our predecessors. The Church is on loan to us from future generations. The Church exists for people, people don't exist for the Church; and we have a responsibility to the children of God, not only here and now, but to every generation until the end of the world.

This may seem daunting and at times the obstacles may seem insurmountable, but let us never forget that the ways of truth, goodness, and love always triumph when they are lived. If this is the language of our lives it will be impossible for us *not* to attract people to God.