

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AS AGENTS OF EVANGELISATION. PROF. TRACEY ROWLAND



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Report

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche remarked that in order for him to believe in Christ as his Saviour Christians would need to look a whole lot more redeemed. He also said that they would need to sing better songs. In an earlier work, *Human, All Too Human*, he had written that if the joyful message of the Bible was actually written on the faces of Christians, they would not need to demand belief in the authority of the Bible in such a stiff-necked fashion.

Nietzsche lost his father in his childhood and was brought up by his mother and grandmother and two maiden aunts. Some biographers blame the allegedly puritanical maiden aunts for Nietzsche's adult aversion to all things Christian. Whatever of the justice of this thesis, and the academic authorities debate the point, the fact is that Nietzsche's claim that Christianity poisoned *eros* and deformed humanity and that Christianity is a mere ideology founded on the resentment of the weak, leading to the repression of talent, originality and all forms of creativity, was well accepted by the generation of 1968. This generation was so historically significant French sociologists now use the expression *soixante-huitards* as a sociological category. It is members of this revolutionary generation and their children who have held what Antonio Gramsci described as the switch-points of cultural influence for much of the last half century. This is especially so in Europe and the Anglosphere. Significantly Gramsci argued that if one wants to destroy a Christian culture, the most effective means is not with guns and military coups, but through a kind of evangelisation of the intelligentsia which he described

as a war of [cultural] position. The *soixante-huitards* were easily “evangelised” with Nietzsche’s cocktail of criticisms of Christian moral norms and within a generation they took control of almost all of the significant cultural institutions of the hitherto Christian West.

In the critical year of 1968 and for much of the next decade the Church herself was too weak to offer effective intellectual and spiritual opposition to this war of position and what we commonly call the ideology of secularism and its culture of death. There was the problem of internal corruption as well as a rather high level of theological conflict which is not uncommonly the side effect of a Church Council. Added to this is the fact that in Protestant cultures Calvinism was also in crisis. In the Anglosphere many of the *soixante-huitards* were as much in full rebellion against varieties of Protestantism as they were on the run from pre-Conciliar Catholicism. In the space of a short paper it is not possible to lay-out an extensive theo-political analysis of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and beyond. Suffice to say for our purposes today that Pope Francis clearly believes that Christians must bear at least some of the responsibility for the plausibility of Nietzsche’s indictment. In the first part of *Evangelii Gaudium* he identifies some spiritual pathologies which act as barriers to Christian belief and evangelisation and in the later sections he exhorts all the faithful, without exception, to be ‘agents of evangelisation’.

The first part of this paper will address the spiritual pathologies, and then, having identified what we should *not* be doing, the second part will sketch an outline of what we might call ‘the humanism of the Incarnation’ as the positive objective of evangelisation.

As far back as 1969, a year after the explosive Summer of 1968, a young Professor Ratzinger wrote:

The real answer to atheism is the life of the Church, which must manifest the face of God by showing its own face of unity and love. Conversely this includes the admission that the disunity of Christians and their consent to systems of social injustice hide the face of God.

It also implies that knowing the face of God is not a question of pure reason alone, that there is an obscuration of God in the world produced by guilt, which can only be removed by penance and conversion.[1]

In other words, Ratzinger acknowledged that atheism is not something as simple as an intellectual defect which can be remedied with clever syllogisms and more courses in apologetics or simply a symptom of a disordered will, resistant to grace, though this might sometimes be the case. Some people find it difficult to believe because of the persistence of evil. They have not consciously experienced the face of God and for this we Christians must take some responsibility.

Forty-three years later, Ratzinger/Benedict contrasted the joy to be found in the Christian account of the dignity of the human person with the rather bleak accounts on offer in various alternative cosmologies. He remarked:

When we consider the world’s cluelessness before the great questions of the present... then we should break out in joy all over, because God has shown us his Face and his Will although we are undeserving. If this joy re-surfaces in us, then we can touch the hearts even of non-believers. Without such a joy, we cannot convince others. But where this joy is evident, it has missionary power, even if unintended.[2]

These two statements seem to be directly to the point of one of the key insights of *Evangelii Gaudium* – that in seeking to bring Christ back into the cultures of the world it is counter-productive to comport ourselves like Nietzsche’s maiden aunts. As Pope Francis expresses the idea, we should not go about acting as though it is always Lent (#EG 6) or looking as though we have just returned from a funeral (#EG 10). When Catholicism takes on the traits of a puritanical Protestantism it can seem as though one is being presented

with the 'ecclesial version of the ethos of the Prussian state official' (to borrow a phrase from Fr Aidan Nichols). This is simply not attractive.

Catholic Christianity is a form of life, a form of being, and intrinsic to it is the quest for sanctification, or as the Greek Fathers dared to say, deification. It is about participation in the life of the Holy Trinity itself, and thus, a participation in all that is true, beautiful and good. Contrary to what Nietzsche believed, those who participate in this life do not end up with deformed personalities. A view of life as a theo-dramatic work of art does not lead one into a circle for nerds and boring bourgeois conformists. As Hans Urs von Balthasar expressed the idea in his work on St. Thérèse of Lisieux:

For each Christian, God has an Idea which fixes his place within the membership of the Church, this Idea is unique and personal, embodying for each his appropriate sanctity... The Christian's supreme aim is to transform his life into this Idea of himself secreted in God, this 'individual law' freely promulgated for him by the pure grace of God.[3]

Significantly, this Idea is unique for each individual person. This means that there is not one blue-print for holiness, not a one-size fits all approach to spirituality. As St Paul asserted and Pope Francis has emphasised at #EG 130 the Holy Spirit enriches the evangelising Church with different charisms. The People of God are blessed with different gifts and entrusted with different missions and if these missions are authentically a response to the work of Holy Spirit they will contribute to the work of evangelisation in a symphonic fashion. This is an important point to remember when dealing with critiques of Christianity which flow from the nihilist wing of 19th century German Romanticism. While it might be accurate to accuse varieties of Calvinism of hostility to what the Romantics called *individualität*, this is an unfair criticism of the Catholic form of Christianity. As Jean Daniélou observed: [for a Catholic] the 'real measure of history is not to be sought in the level of technical attainment, but in the more or less effective production of personalities, which represent the highest things we know in the mundane realm'.[4] The saints provide us with numerous examples of what can be made of human nature when it is sanctified and they are all very different.

Catholic beliefs include a cosmology, a soteriology and an anthropology and there are moral norms which flow from this anthropology, but the norms exist to *promote* freedom and human self-development, not to thwart it. If people end up obsessed with the moral norms disconnected from the anthropology, soteriology and cosmology, if they end up suffering from what French psychiatrists call the '*maladie catholique*' – a kind of neurotic fear of impurity - the flaw lies not with Christianity as such but with some piece of the overall form of life which has been disconnected from the rest and blown out of proportion.

In this context it was one of the central insights of von Balthasar that in the post-Reformation era, the trinitarian relationship between the true, the good and the beautiful was severed, and each of these transcendental properties went off on a frolic of its own.

The end result was a multitude of spiritual pathologies, depending on which particular transcendental came to dominate the spirituality of an individual person, religious order or indeed entire culture. For example, in the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant tried to reduce Christianity to a mere moral code. Truth (in the sense of Christian revelation) and beauty were both marginalised and privatised. Kant was so anti-Trinitarian he claimed that it didn't matter whether there were 3 persons in the Godhead or ten. While some follow Kant over the cliff into moralism, others commit a more nineteenth century error of being intoxicated with beauty for its own sake and indifferent to truth and goodness.

The People of God as agents of evangelisation must resist these temptations to lock onto one transcendental and pursue it in isolation from the others. As Pope Francis states at #EG 167, 'every form of Catechesis would do well to attend to the "way of beauty" (*via pulchritudinis*)'. Although he does not elaborate on this point, the catechetical vision of Sofia Cavalletti, the co-foundress of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, is consistent with this principle. The Missionaries of Charity have been using this approach

with children all over the world, including many children in highly socially disadvantageous circumstances, and they are finding that it is a very effective way to form the children in their care with a Christian imagination. Perhaps even more well-known is the statement of the Irish Dominican, Fr Vincent McNabb, to the effect that there are two gates into the Church: the gate of wisdom and the gate of beauty and that he was inclined to think that the gate of wisdom was the narrow gate and the gate of beauty 'the wide gate, through which millions pass'. As he expressed himself:

She [the Church] welcomes from time to time the few philosophers and thinkers who crucify themselves by thought, but she welcomes unceasingly the countless numbers who come for her colour, for her song, for her smile – as they go afield for the warmth and light of the spring sun.

A development of this theme of the evangelical significance of the transcendental of beauty can be found in many of the publications of Pope Benedict, especially his Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, in which he argued that absolutely everything associated with the Eucharist must be marked by beauty.[5]

Pope Benedict also categorised two contemporary spiritual pathologies which marginalise one or other of the transcendentals as pious pelagianism and bourgeois pelagianism. The pious pelagians want a contractual relationship with God. In return for good behaviour they want an entry ticket to a good seat in heaven. They have the same approach to the Christian faith as they have to the development of their curriculum vitae. They are pragmatists. They do care about morality and truth but they miss the intrinsic beauty in the faith itself. The bourgeois pelagians, in contrast, take the view that God really can't be as demanding as the Church's moral teaching suggests. In any case, even if the Church is right, they believe that God's mercy can fix everything in such a way that it does not really matter what they make of His gift of life. It is of little or no consequence in eternity.

In #94 of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis uses the terms Gnosticism and Self-Absorbed Promethean Neo-pelagianism to describe similar pathologies. He defines gnosticism as a 'subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings'. The Gnostics lose touch with the deposit of the faith. They take bits and pieces from the fabric of the whole and construct their own subjective ideologies with scrapes from the greater Tradition. In contrast, the Self-Absorbed Promethean Neo-pelagians:

...trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past.

A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelising, one analyses and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying.

While similar pathologies have been around in the Church before, for example, the Cathars and the Jansenists might be regarded as sub-species of the genus Self-Absorbed Promethean Neo-Pelagian, the strength of these dispositions in our present times can be tracked, at least in part, to what has been called the post-Conciliar 'hermeneutic of rupture'. When there is little or no consensus among ecclesial leaders and scholars about the central theological questions of the day, this sociological reality gives rise to another hermeneutic, a kind of 'hermeneutic of suspicion' – a don't trust the elite attitude – with the result that people band into small groups and associations in which they feel as though they can trust whoever their chosen group leader is. They form their own alternative elite.

Instead of the magisterium being the arbiter of sound belief and practices, dissent within the ranks of the hierarchy and scholars give rise to alternative authorities of soundness.

Instead of one's belief and practices being something as normal as breathing oxygen,

being a Catholic becomes another lifestyle choice, with individuals deciding on which particular style of Catholicism they want to embrace.

Thus, a first summary point to be made about the People of God as Agents of evangelisation is that, as Marshall McLuhan expressed the principle, the medium is the message. Unless the People of God actually look and act redeemed, unless they display at least some of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (joy, love, kindness, patience etc) they will not have the capacity to evangelise others. To use the Latin maxim favoured by equity lawyers, *nemo dat quod non habet* – you can't give what you don't have.

A secondary point is that the People of God themselves are agents of evangelisation and they should not assume that evangelisation is a job to be undertaken solely by some Church agency. Rather, as Pope Francis says, 'mere administration' can no longer be enough. We must be in a "permanent state of mission". (EG# 25).

A third point which flows from this is that evangelisation is not some kind of ecclesial marketing programme. Catholicism is not another ideology to be promoted with five year plans, mission statements and posters with intriguing slogans. Being an evangelist is simply being authentically Catholic. As Pope Francis wrote (#EG 12):

In every activity of evangelisation, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to co-operate with him and who leads us on by the power of the Holy Spirit. The real newness is the newness which God himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways.

One especially large problem with treating evangelisation as a marketing project is the temptation to water down the kerygma so that it is not quite so challenging. A particular version of this temptation is to offer the world a package of "Christian values" somehow distilled from Revelation, especially from the Person of Christ. To borrow an expression from William T Cavanaugh, the temptation is for people to think that Christian symbols need to be 'run through the sausage-grinder of social ethics before coming out at the other end as publicly digestible policy'.^[6] The idea is that since many people desire the social side-benefits of Christianity, but they don't want to buy the whole package, for example, the sacramentality or the morality, the best way forward is for some intellectual "sausage grinder" to extract the Christian values from the Christian cosmology and anthropology before offering the sanitised values to the post-Christian world. Such practices have a self-secularising effect on Catholic institutions and are a new kind of Kantianism, a new attempt to separate Christian morality from the much larger kerygma.

John Henry Newman alluded to this problem when he wrote that 'in every age of Christianity, since it was first preached, there has been what may be called a religion of the world, which so far imitates the one true religion, as to deceive the unstable and unwary'.

Newman went on to explain that different generations have a tendency to fasten on to some one aspect of Christianity, profess to embody this in its practice, while neglecting all other parts of the Church's teaching. He concluded that those who cultivate 'only one precept of the Gospel to the exclusion of the rest, in reality attend to no part at all'.^[7]

Against this tendency to highlight only those aspects of the kerygma that are likely to be popular or politically correct, in his recently published book *New Evangelisation: Pastoral Strategy for the Church as the Beginning of the Third Millennium*, Archbishop Julian Porteous noted:

The Church is not a philanthropic institution. It is not a humanitarian organisation. It is not a social service agency. It is not focused on professional excellence as an end in itself. The Church does what [she] does because knowing Jesus Christ has so altered [her] approach to human life that [she] is inspired to self-sacrificing love and to an orientation towards the poor and needy. It is the example of Christ who came not to be served, but

to serve that inspires the generous dedication and service to the suffering, the sick and the impoverished.[8]

Contrary to the various self-secularising distillation projects, in *Evangelii Gaudium* # 164 Pope Francis emphasises that the kerygma is Trinitarian. This means that if any of the three Persons of the Trinity is occluded in the work of evangelisation, there are catastrophic consequences. Indeed my colleague Michael Hanby has argued that 'at issue within the culture of modernity is the Trinity itself and specifically whether the meaning of human nature and human agency are understood to occur within Christ's mediation of the love and delight shared as *donum* between the Father and the Son, or beyond it'.[9]

He observes that Pelagianism instituted a rupture in the Christological and Trinitarian economy, creating possibilities for human nature 'outside' the Trinity and the mediation of Christ. This is perhaps the tap root of secularism. As Michael Schmaus put the matter more positively, 'nature cannot come to its fulfilment in the antechambers of God's love and glory, but only in the inner chamber of his Trinitarian divine life'.[10] This is because 'Man exists, not in himself, but for God...Only when God draws him into his own triune life does man find his own deepest being; his ontic determination is a copy of God's tri-personal life'.[11]

It is perhaps for this reason that St John Paul II devoted his first suite of encyclicals to an analysis of the human person's relationship to each of the Persons of the Trinity: *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Dives in Misericordia* (1980) and *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986).

A presentation of the kerygma in all its Trinitarian depth also has the side effect of amplifying the specifically Catholic understanding of sacramentality and of sexual difference. This is extremely important for distinguishing between Catholic and Calvinist understandings of how God relates to the world and distinguishing between Catholic and non-Christian (especially Islamic) understandings of how the sexes stand in relation to one another. The first distinction may not be of much evangelistic significance in countries like Spain and former Spanish colonies where Calvinism never took root, but it is very important in countries where people's understanding of what Christianity is, is partially formed by their experience of Calvinism.

In his mid-twentieth century work *The Primacy of Peter* Cardinal Charles Journet distinguished the Catholic from the typically Calvinist forms of Christianity by their different understandings of the way in which the presence of Christ constitutes Christianity. The first he described as the Protestant mnemonic concept, the second, the Catholic ontological concept. In the Protestant account, Christ is only present in time by way of signs, tokens, and promises. Journet suggests that from a Catholic point of view this is a kind of nostalgic return to the Old Testament. In stark contrast, in the Catholic account, Christ is *actually present* in time *under* the guise of signs, tokens and promises.[12] This difference is of enormous importance in the work of evangelisation. The Catholic difference, let's call it a sacramental vision of reality, will not be understood by those we seek to evangelise unless we explain the work of the economic Trinity in individual human lives. If we side step this because of its catechetical complexity we should not be surprised if surveys reveal that a high proportion of baptised Catholics regard themselves as generic no-brand Christians who rarely go to Mass or the sacrament of Reconciliation. How could they be otherwise if they have never understood sacramentality? Similarly, when dealing with contemporary hot button issues like sexual difference, the Trinity is a major help in explaining concepts like equality within difference and it is almost impossible to explain the teachings of the Church on marriage and on the reservation of the priesthood to men without it.

A deep appreciation of the difference that a specifically Trinitarian understanding of the meaning of human life and history can make may be found in Martin D'Arcy's work *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred*. Fr D'Arcy (1888-1978) was an English Jesuit renowned for converting a rather large number of Oxford undergraduates, including Evelyn Waugh. In *The Sense of History* he endorsed the idea of Abbot Christopher Butler of Downside Abbey that 'the period between the two comings – the Incarnation and the

Last Day – has a special mark like that on the doorpost of the Israelites on the night the Egyptians were smitten’. Following Butler, he describes the change effected by the Incarnation as a ‘prevenient grace, which prepares nature and dresses it for the time when all things shall be made new’.

According to Butler, for a Christian, the purpose of life should not be to ‘pass through it, get it over, and arrive, without baggage but personally safe’, rather the Christian should arrive ‘at the final customs house’ ‘with all that he acquires along the road’ and it is precisely what he has to declare that will ‘determine forever his enjoyment of the fatherland’.[13] In D’Arcy’s words, ‘toys in themselves are of no account, but to children they are so dear that they take them to bed with them; and when we go to sleep and awake to everlasting joy the toys of this life may well be part of our transfigured humanity...What we do now prefigures what we shall do with complete happiness, even as the doll cherished by the child is the first love of the future mother’.[14]

This is a very different account of the ultimate meaning of human existence from that found in Kant or Calvin or the contemporary radical materialists who believe that even love can be explained biologically, that is, by chemicals. For the radical materialists there is no customs house, no redemption, no resurrection, no renewal of the cosmos, no immortal love, no sacraments, only the drama of the survival of the fittest.

In this historical moment, guided by the Holy Spirit and Sacred Scripture, Pope Francis exhorts his fellow Catholics to bring this joyful vision of the meaning of human life and salvation to those who have only experienced an incomplete or warped version of it. He emphasises that this work of evangelisation requires a process of mystagogic initiation (#EG 166) and spiritual accompaniment (#169 and 170). In other words, we have to do more than throw books at people or refer them to a Catholic enquiry line. We have to enter into a spiritual relationship with others and accompany them in their search for their own self-understanding. We have to help them to understand what sanctification is. Unlike Nietzsche’s experience, it has nothing to do with being a nerd or placating some deity with displays of virtue and the performance of duties. Being a Catholic is something very different from Prussian military service. It is also something very different from what Nietzsche called being a ‘member of the herd’ – just one of the masses with low materialistic horizons and ambitions. It is ultimately about a participation in the life and love of the Trinity and the sacraments and the liturgy are absolutely central to this.

If we ignore the power of the sacraments and treat the liturgy in a Protestant way, as a mere memorial of something that took place in the past, then we are not letting God be God and the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the primary evangeliser, is thwarted. If the People of God detach themselves from sacramental participation, then they are not so much the People of God as the People of the people.

In conclusion, much of the above positive vision of an Incarnational Humanism as the artwork of grace and the objective of evangelisation, can be summarised in the following paragraph from Martin D’Arcy who shares with the author of *Evangelii Gaudium* a common Ignatian spirituality:

The New Adam, like the old, gives a name to creatures, a new name, and His re-creative act has become part of the texture of history. It does not abolish but transfigures historical values. The harvest to be reaped at the end of time is homogeneous with the historical seed, and in its growth that seed exercises its mysterious, biological alchemy on the inanimate matter wherein it has been placed...In this hope the Christian looks on the kingdom of God as sacramentally present and as subject to the vicissitudes of history, though triumphant over them. It is the object of violent struggle, the pearl of great price, the hidden treasure, and also it establishes and renews on an eternal basis every human value.[15]

[1] Joseph Ratzinger, 'The Dignity of the Human Person', in *Commentary on the Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, Herbert Vorgrimler (ed); (London: Burns and Oates, 1969): 157.

[2] Benedict XVI, Homily for Ratzingerschülerkreis, [http://freeforumzone.leonardo.it/lofi/BENEDICT - XVI-NEWS-PAPER-TEXTS,PHOTOS29/02/2012](http://freeforumzone.leonardo.it/lofi/BENEDICT-XVI-NEWS-PAPER-TEXTS,PHOTOS29/02/2012).

[3] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thérèse of Lisieux: A Story of a Mission*, translated by D. Nicholl (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953), pp, xii-xiii.

[4] Jean Daniélou, *Essai sur le Mystère de l'Histoire*, 100. English translation in Marc Nicholas, *Jean Daniélou's Doxological Humanism: Trinitarian Contemplation and Humanity's True Vocation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012): 37.

[5] SC # 41.

[6] William T Cavanaugh, *Theo-political Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time* (London: T & T Clark, 2002): 81.

[7] John Henry Newman, *The Heart of Newman: A Synthesis*, Erich Przywara (ed), (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1947): 371.

[8] Julian Porteous, *New Evangelisation: Pastoral Strategy for the Church as the Beginning of the Third Millennium* (Connor Court: Melbourne, 2014).

[9] Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003): 73.

[10] Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik II* (München: Max Hueber, 1949): 100

[11] Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik II* (München: Max Hueber, 1949): 70-72.

[12] Charles Journet, *The Primacy of Peter* (Westminster MD: Newman Press, 1954): 33.

[13] Abbott Christopher Butler, "The Value of History", *The Downside Review*, 68 (July 1950): 290-304 at 299.

[14] Martin D'Arcy, *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1959): 211.

[15] Martin D'Arcy, *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1959): 182-183.