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What's in a word?

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What's in a word?

“Evangelization.” French speakers would spot the word “évangile” — their word for gospel — among its first three syllables. English speakers would recall the Four Evangelists — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Evangelization and gospel go hand in hand. Unfortunately, Evangelization and current church priorities sometimes go separate ways.

Those who write about Mission choose the word “Evangelization” to describe what missionaries are sent to do, usually overseas: proclaim the person of Jesus, his teachings, his mission.

Today we’re called to a New Evangelization, not only overseas, but also here at home. We’re called to reawaken a taste for religion in our very secularized cultures. Mission is everywhere today. The ‘home to overseas’ approach is no longer the sole missionary focus.

Start with people

A song from *The Sound of Music* encourages us. Maria is teaching the Von Trapp children to sing: “Let’s start at the very beginning, It’s a very good place to start.” Taking her advice to heart, evangelization starts with people, not with textbooks, not with liturgy, not with theology.

Get to know the people. Speak their language. Connect to their daily lives. Read the gospels to discover how Jesus connected to the people of his time, how he used examples drawn from their day-to-day activities, how he compared the action and presence of God to events in their lives. He chose very

ordinary apostles. He really brought God down to earth. He made God very approachable.

Let’s go back thirty-eight years and take to heart the words of Pope Paul VI: “Evangelizing is the Church’s deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” In his 1975 encyclical on *Evangelization in the Modern World* he wrote: “Evangelization will not be effective a) if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, b) if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, c) if it does not answer the questions they ask, d) if it does not have an impact on their concrete lives.”

For the last thirty-eight years Pope Paul’s encyclical has remained a key document among missionaries and those who wish to understand the church’s missionary outreach. The modern world has changed since its publication, but its insights are as valid now as when they were first written.

The language used to describe evangelization can get very technical: there is *primary evangelization* — the mission or outreach to those who do not believe in Christ; *re-evangelization* of those in previously Christian regions or those in the church who have been baptized but are not ‘practicing Catholics’; and then *the new evangelization* — outreach to those who grew up church-ed, but who never really bought into what Christ or Christianity mean.

Fr Ron Rolheiser describes them as follows: “[They] are Christian in name, come from Christian backgrounds, are

familiar with Christianity, believe that they know and understand Christianity, but no longer practice that faith in a meaningful way ... Their attitude towards Christianity, in essence is: I know what it is. I've tried it. And it's not for me."

A motley crew

Jesus started with the ordinary people of his day. He had no doubts about what his mission, his purpose on earth, was: "I must proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God. That is what I was sent to do." To help him, to make sure his work would continue when he was no longer around, he gathered a somewhat motley crew, invited them to travel around with him, see him in action, listen to his teaching and 'pick up his moves'. Then he sent them out in pairs, on their practise mission. They returned very pleased with themselves — only to hear him say, "You've made a good beginning — but there's more to come." Bit by bit, they began to discover what it meant to be "missionaries", to be sent "to transform humanity from within and make it new." (Pope Paul VI)

That transformation didn't happen just through word of mouth and formal lessons. It happened above all through the witness of the early Christians' lives: Why were they like this? Why did they live in this way? What or who inspired them? Why had they come among us?

Mission and missionaries give of their energy towards liberating people from whatever keeps them on the margin of life: famine, illiteracy, chronic diseases, poverty, injustice, colonialism. Evangelization and liberation are the two hands of missionary activity.

Don't just tell me. Show me

Pope Paul's famous words are as true today as when he first said them: "Modern men and women listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." Don't just tell me. Show me. Live what you preach.

The Pope went on to say, "Modern men and women are sated by talk, they are tired of listening to words. They want to see words made flesh, words in action, words lived out."

Had he read Hamlet's advice to the actors: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action"?

The missionary's task is to absorb the Gospel message and transpose it into the languages of different peoples, different ages, different cultures and backgrounds. The resulting church communities will take on different external expressions in different parts of the world without betraying the gospel truth.

Under the action of the Holy Spirit

Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended on Jesus at the moment of

his baptism. "Led by the Spirit ... in the power of the Spirit" he began his preaching in Nazareth, applying to himself the passage of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Later, as the risen Christ he commissioned them to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Techniques of evangelization are good, but unless they are open to the sometimes gentle, sometimes vibrant action of the Spirit of the Lord they will not proclaim the gospel. It is not by chance that the great missionary inauguration took place on the morning of Pentecost, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Let's picture it happening: "*When Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of*



"Use their language, their signs and symbols ... answer the questions they ask ... have an impact on their concrete lives."

them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

The evangelizers

What's in a word? If the word is "evangelization" the answer given by Pope Paul VI thirty five years ago continues to challenge our church today: "Take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed ... use their language, their signs and symbols ... answer the questions they ask ... have an impact on their concrete lives."

Bernadette Gasslein got it right: "To cross our fingers and hope that the same cultural and religious resources that existed fifty years ago, and promoted evangelization in families then, exist today ... is simply unrealistic." (*Celebrate*, March-April 2009).

The present century thirsts for authenticity. Young people especially have a horror of the phony. In their search for truth and honesty they call out, "Don't just tell me. Show me."

More of the same will no longer "cut it". Our church in general and our missionaries in particular are being told, "Believe what you proclaim, live what you believe, proclaim what you live."

Led by a new Pope, is it too much to hope for a new evangelization? ■