

From the Depths of Our Souls to the Ends of the Earth
The New Evangelization, Pope Francis and the Church's Mission Today
Solanus Casey Center
August 20, 2014

Introduction

It is a privilege to be able to share some thoughts with you this evening about some subjects that have received a lot of attention in recent years, both inside and outside the Church: the New Evangelization, Pope Francis, and how the Church can update its timeless mission to serve the needs of the world today.

Several months ago, I found myself sitting on the porch at St. Lawrence Friary in Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin, the site of the first permanent settlement of Capuchin friars in North America. It was an early Sunday morning. The sun had just risen and was promising warmth that had been too rare for us in the Midwest this spring after one of our snowiest winters on record. As I sat there enjoying a cup of coffee, reflecting on the Lectionary readings for the day, and looking over the homily I would preach at a jubilee Mass in a few hours, my attention was soon drawn to my immediate left.

There, on the other side of the road leading down the hill, was our Capuchin Cemetery. I gazed upon the long rows of headstones, each made of the same sober black granite, as well as the bronze sculpture of Sister Death embracing our brother, Francis of Assisi.

As I looked upon these graves and thought about the men who were buried in them, I couldn't help but recall that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Many of them were immigrants who built the Capuchin Order out of the rich soil of Central Wisconsin while others nurtured the Catholic faith and served the needs of the poor in cities like Milwaukee, New York and Detroit. Others were great educators, preachers, or servants of the poor and marginalized. Many, especially in our first 75 years, knew English only as a second language and lived in a province that was almost constantly in debt.

In the face of those challenges, they courageously did the work that they had been given, witnessing to a way of life that was often as austere as it was joyful and as regimented as it was liberating. They founded schools, established parishes, proclaimed God's word in missions across the country, and performed the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. They endured the Civil War, two World Wars and a host of smaller conflicts. They survived countless recessions and a Great Depression. They fulfilled what God had given them to do in response to the signs of their times.

We are now several months removed from our annual liturgical walk through the Acts of the Apostles during the Easter season; and we are nearing a year since the publication of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. This past Ash Wednesday, the Archdiocese of Detroit began a Year of Prayer for a New Pentecost, which Archbishop Vigneron convoked in preparation for an Archdiocesan Synod that envisions for some time in 2016. With all of that as background, what can we learn not only from the Holy Father but also from some of the challenges and opportunities that the church has faced from her earliest days?

What I hope to do in the coming minutes is to weave together some of the Pope's observations, some stories and themes from Acts, and some contemporary issues to stimulate your own reflections and conversations about how to answer that question.

Reawakening the Spirit within Ourselves (Ch. V, *Evangelii Gaudium*)

In Chapter V of *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis recognizes that we can have little hope to evangelize the world if we do not reawaken the Holy Spirit within us. He notes five different elements in this process:

- (1) Recognizing that the Spirit is working all around us and within each of us.
- (2) Having a personal encounter with Jesus.
- (3) Being one with God's people, especially the poor and marginalized (e.g. gentiles, sick, crippled, etc.).
- (4) Trusting in Easter and the resurrection not just an event in history but a living reality, part of the Paschal Mystery.
- (5) Entrusting ourselves to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I would like to address each of these elements in turn.

Recognizing That the Spirit is Working All Around Us and Within Each of Us

One of the remarkable things about the Acts of the Apostles is the pervasive presence and dynamic action of the Holy Spirit throughout the narrative. In Acts 1, the risen Jesus tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Spirit and promises them that they will be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and

to the ends of the earth." In Acts 2 that same Spirit comes to the disciples at Pentecost and gives them the power to speak in various tongues of "the mighty acts of God."

In Acts 4, the Spirit gives Peter and John, "ordinary men," the boldness to speak the truth about Jesus to the powers of their day. In Acts 6, when the need for a new ministry arises, the Twelve call together the community of disciples to choose seven men "filled with the Spirit and wisdom" to serve. In Acts 7, one of those seven, Stephen, is inspired to forcefully challenge the religious leaders of his day to conversion; and in the following chapter he is stoned to death when his challenges are met with hostility rather than *metanoia*. As he is dying, he asks that his killers may be forgiven before he surrenders his spirit to God.

A little later in Acts 8, the Spirit drives Philip to his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch—an example of what we have come to know as evangelization *ad gentes* (to the nations)—and just as quickly snatches him away. By now you undoubtedly get the picture: the Holy Spirit is constantly at work among those called to be disciples of Jesus. Where is that Spirit at work among us today? How is it working? In whom might it be working in a special way?

Having a Personal Encounter with Jesus

After its first eight chapters, Acts takes a dramatic turn. This rather unorthodox and rapidly growing community of believers is now under persecution and has offered up its first martyrs. Now one of their most prominent persecutors, the one at whose feet those who executed Stephen piled their cloaks, becomes a follower of the Way and will go on to be the greatest missionary they had ever known.

Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus is so central to the narrative of Acts that it is told and retold several times (in Chapters 9, 22 and 26). This not only underscores the central role of the man who would come to be known as Paul in the life of the early church, it also provides a model for generations of Christians who would come after him. Indeed, the story of the conversion of St. Paul is the story of our own conversion.

- (1) We're going about our business.
- (2) Something stops us in our tracks.
- (3) We go through a period of "blindness" and uncertainty.
- (4) God sends people into our lives to help us out.

(5) We receive a calling that is part old and part new.

(6) We go through a period of trying it out and gaining trust.

I believe that, as we continue to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, we find ourselves in what might be called one such “Pauline moment” in the life of the Church. One of the reasons that St. John XXIII convoked the Council was because he recognized that the world in which the Church found herself in the middle of the 20th Century was rapidly changing while, in many respects (particularly liturgically), she was still living in the 16th Century. Things were getting a little musty, so it was time to throw open the windows and let in some fresh air.

We did that. Our liturgical life was radically altered; those who had been previously condemned as outside the embrace of salvation were beckoned as “separated brethren” to reconciliation; religious men and women were called to renew their lives in the charisms of their founders; and lay men and women were challenged to see themselves as part of a priesthood of believers called to minister in their own right. As with most major reforms, Vatican II was welcomed by some and loathed by others.

Even as the Church has been attempting to implement the reforms of Vatican II, we have also been trying to decide what the council fathers really intended. Should the council be viewed through a hermeneutic of continuity or one of discontinuity, elaboration or eruption? As we have wrestled with these questions, the world around us has continued to change; and in many respects, the pace of that change has accelerated. The global locus of vitality in the Church has shifted from North to South and from West to East. Places that once sent priests and religious to the so-called “godless” or “pagan” mission territories are now becoming mission territories themselves through a combination of secularization, scandals, and materialism and consumerism.

We thus find ourselves in a state of liminality, experiencing a blindness as real as St. Paul’s, where we often find ourselves stumbling and groping for the ways to evangelize in a world that is far different than 25, 40 or 50 years ago. Due to the grace of God, we are blessed to have those who, like Ananias did with Paul, draw us to see the world anew. They range from Pope Francis, who has called us to embrace anew the wordless gospel of compassion and mercy, to the young people who are drawn to religious life by some of the traditions and practices that we were once ready to discard as irrelevant but which retain their power to create sacred spaces in a world that too often seems devoid of them.

Being One with God's People, Especially the Poor and Marginalized

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis notes that the Church has made the option for the poor not only an expression of our priorities in the exercise of Christian charity but also a foundation for our own conversion.

This is why I want a Church which is poor for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them (EG 198).

This option for the poor has been at the heart of the Church's life and mission from the very beginning. In Acts 2 the community of believers centers their spiritual life not in large or ornate buildings but in people's homes, praying and breaking bread together. In Acts 3, Peter and John have little or nothing material to give a crippled man in need; but they share what they have—healing power in the name of Jesus—and he is made whole. In Acts 10, Peter, inspired by his vision of a "big tent," reaches out to Cornelius and the rest of his gentile household and begins to realize that God shows no partiality in bestowing the gifts of the Spirit or in accepting people into his family, as long as they act in accord with God's will. In Acts 18, Paul—rejected by his fellow Jews at Corinth—reaches out to the gentiles.

Over and over again, the community of believers in Acts stretches itself more and more to the margins and frontiers. This presents a special challenge today to our Church in North America. Many of parishes are dominated by older members who are at a time in their lives when they naturally look toward conserving energy rather than expending it; seeking safety and security rather than taking risks; and comforting themselves with the stories and legacies of the past rather than charting new courses for our future.

Many parishes in the Archdiocese are shrinking; and the latest round of mergers and consolidations are a testament to the reality that the church our parents or grandparents knew is dying, the efforts of the Detroit "Mass Mob" notwithstanding. What will replace it is not entirely clear. This calls us to consider the fourth of the elements mentioned by Pope Francis that are part of our spiritual renewal.

Trusting in Easter and the Resurrection Not Only as an Event in History but also a Living Reality

In Acts 14, we find Paul and Barnabas preaching the gospel at Lystra. When Paul heals a man crippled from birth, and he and Barnabas are hailed as gods and can barely keep the locals from offering sacrifice to them. Shortly thereafter, however, they are set upon by Jews from Iconium. Paul is stoned nearly to death and is dragged out of town to be left for dead. But he soon gets up, dusts himself off, and returns to town to continue his mission. Throughout his journeys, Paul would similarly share in the Paschal Mystery.

The Church has certainly shared in the experience of Christ's passion and death in recent years. In some parts of the world like the Middle East, Northern Nigeria or Orissa state in India, it has been experienced primarily in the form of discrimination and sometimes deadly persecution. In our own country, probably the most prominent experience has been in the sexual abuse crisis.

Any consideration of suffering and trauma, of course, must begin with the victims and survivors of abuse by priests and religious; but it certainly does not end there. It has affected us all in various ways; and while it has generated some needed reforms, heightened senses of vigilance and accountability along with hopes that the Church will emerge from this crisis wiser, humbler, and stronger, these have often been accompanied and complicated by fear, anger, mistrust and shame—hardly the emotional foundation for effective evangelization.

How do we draw strength from the promise of resurrection at a time when the realities of the cross and tomb feel more real to us? How do we get up, dust ourselves off, and get back to our mission—remembering, of course, that addressing any crisis is not a distraction from that mission but must rather become a vital part of it?

Entrusting Ourselves to Mary

The Pope has urged us to entrust our work of evangelization to “the mother of the living Gospel” (EG 287).

How can we follow the example of the woman who is sometimes called “the First Disciple?” How can we work through our fears to honor God's presence among and within us? What does it mean to bear Christ and bring him into the world today?

As we think of the Blessed Mother, it is hard to forget that she and St. Joseph brought Jesus into the world as what we would likely recognize today as poor pilgrims and refugees seeking asylum from the mad and murderous designs of Herod. A little over a year ago, Pope Francis was at the Sicilian Island of Lampedusa, which some have referred to as the “Ellis Island of Italy.” It is the nearest point in Europe from the shores of North Africa and consequently it has become a magnet for migrants desperate to escape poverty, political repression and violence. Over 20,000 people have perished trying to make the journey. In his homily at a Mass on the island to remember those who had perished, the Pope said:

We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of "suffering with": the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep! In the Gospel we have heard the cry, the plea, the great lament: "Rachel weeping for her children . . . because they are no more." Herod sowed death in order to defend his own well-being, his own soap bubble. And this continues to repeat itself.

Let us ask the Lord to wipe out [whatever attitude] of Herod remains in our hearts; let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves, and even in those who anonymously make socio-economic decisions that open the way to tragedies like this.

What might he say standing in Arizona or Texas, along our own border with Mexico, where thousands have risked and lost their lives seeking freedom from poverty, violence, and repression in the countries of Central America? What might he say to our elected officials in Washington, DC who have yet to fix our broken immigration system?

Principles of Evangelization (Ch. IV, *Evangelii Gaudium*)

So as we renew ourselves in the Holy Spirit and allow ourselves to be (re)evangelized, how do we go about the work of the New Evangelization? In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis notes four principles that need to undergird the work of “building a people in peace, justice and fraternity” (221), that is building a world renewed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. These principles are:

- (1) Time is greater than space.
- (2) Unity prevails over conflict.

(3) Realities are more important than ideas.

(4) The whole is greater than the parts.

In the few minutes I have remaining, let us briefly turn to these four principles.

Time is Greater than Space

This principle is another way of stating what we already know from experience: “A constant tension exists between fullness and limitation....People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself” (222).

When Jesus’ promise to his disciples was fulfilled with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they were sent forth as witnesses. Success was not instantaneous. There were many fits and starts, triumphs and failures. As Acts and his own letters to the various churches demonstrate, St. Paul’s missionary efforts were similarly marked by varying degrees of accomplishment. Some efforts bore fruit and others did not. Even today, evangelization and pastoral planning are not so much projects but rather ongoing processes that involve patiently and steadily developing people and communities; regular reflection and evaluation; and measuring results and successes and failures over the long haul.

Unity Prevails Over Conflict

In a church as diverse as our own, this principle is often tested. Because our lives as people of faith mean so much to us, matters of faith and our way of life often engender great passion; and that passion, in turn, can lead to conflict. If we turn again to the Acts of the Apostles we are reminded that such conflicts have been with us from the earliest days of the Christian community; and we can also find a model for how to deal with them.

In Acts 15, we see the community confronted with fundamental questions of membership and initiation. How much of the Jewish Law must gentile believers embrace before they could be considered “saved” and part of the community? Rather than allowing these questions to fester and tear apart the community, Paul and Barnabas decide to bring them to the apostles and presbyters in Jerusalem. What follows is four-step process that can serve as a model for us:

- (a) Recognizing and owning conflict.
- (b) Discussion (debate) and discernment.
- (c) Compromise, consensus and decision.
- (d) Implementation and integration.

At what we have come to know as the Council of Jerusalem did not shy away from dealing with “the tough stuff.” Those gathered recognized and wrestled with the conflicts; they passionately debated the issues; they reached a compromise (rejecting mandatory circumcision and insisting instead on some dietary restrictions and avoidance of unlawful marriage); and they sent those gathered out to deliver the message and implement the decision. It took a while for the message to be accepted and integrated. Indeed, in the very next chapter, Paul has his co-worker Timothy circumcised “on account of the Jews” (Acts 16:3)! But over time, the integration of gentile believers into the community became a matter of course, particularly as the church more clearly emerged from its Jewish roots.

There are many things that can divide us; but God—the communion of Father, Son and Spirit—helps us to stick together and remain focused on our mission.

Realities Are More Important Than Ideas

We all know that there’s a difference between the Church as it is and what we would like it to be. The idyllic community described in Acts 4:32-35—“of one heart and mind,” generous and gracious, claiming nothing for themselves—doesn’t last very long. In the very next chapter, Ananias and Sapphira sell a piece of property and don’t quite hand over everything that they have received. Their dishonesty leads to their demise (cf. Acts 5:1-11).

In the Acts 6, the ideals of the community are again put to the test when they are confronted with the pastoral problem of the “neglect” of Greek-speaking widows in distribution of bread. Rather than retreating into denial, however, the leaders of the community accept this reality and seek to find a solution. They develop a new ministry of service; the community discerns and calls those who seem most suitable; and those called are confirmed or commissioned in their new roles.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis insists that there needs to be “a continuous dialog” between realities and ideas so that the word we proclaim is incarnated (cf. 231-233).

“Not to put the word into practice, not to make it a reality,” the Pope maintains, “is to build on sand, to remain in the realm of pure ideas and to end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centeredness and Gnosticism” (233).

The Whole is Greater Than the Parts

In describing this principle, Pope Francis uses some images from geometry:

Here our model is not the sphere, which is not greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness (236).

Look around the dining room this evening. You are definitely not a study in uniformity! The Church herself is a community of believers among many and part of a wider human family. We are always and everywhere part of something bigger than ourselves.

While this may seem rather obvious, it is an increasingly counter-cultural idea. We live in the Age of the App, where consumer choice is exalted and we are able to customize our identities. While there is nothing inherently wrong with self-actualization and integration, we can easily lose our way and forget that we are not the center of the universe. Discipleship is not merely something we choose like Coca-Cola or Nike shoes. It is a response to a call that we have received from the One who created us—a call that is mediated, tested and lived in a rich community.

Conclusion

As we recall the many characters in the historical drama that unfolds in the Acts of the Apostles—Peter, Paul, Silas, Barnabas, Mark, Philip, James, Timothy, Prisca and Aquila, and many others—we are reminded yet again of what is often attributed to + Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador but was in fact written by + Bishop Ken Untener as part of a homily by + John Cardinal Dearden of Detroit:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

May God bless us with all that we need to be the workers, ministers and prophets that God has called us to be.

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