

# THE Priest

“Who do you say I am”?

— Mark 8:29

# A New Language for the New Evangelization?

By Martin Pable, O.F.M. Cap.

**W**hat was the purpose of the Synod on the New Evangelization, and what is the purpose of the Year of Faith (Oct. 2012–Oct. 2013)? Certainly one purpose is to strengthen and deepen the faith of Catholics who are already living their faith.

As Pope Paul VI stated in *Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangeliæ Nuntiandi, 1975)*, “This faith is ... exposed to trials and threats, and even more, a faith besieged and actively opposed. It runs the risk of perishing from suffocation or starvation if it is not fed and sustained each day” (No. 54). For this reason we need to continually improve the quality of our preaching, our celebration of Mass and the sacraments, and our catechetical formation programs.

But the New Evangelization is in-

tended to stretch us beyond nurturing the faith of our already committed Catholics. The Church is deeply concerned about the vast numbers whom we are not reaching by our ordinary pastoral methods: those who have ceased practicing their faith or no longer identify themselves as Catholics; those who feel hurt or disappointed with the Church; those who have no ties with any religious community (“I’m spiritual but not religious”); and those who are secularists, agnostics, or atheists. Jesus asked His disciples to make His Gospel message known to all nations and peoples (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15).

## Do We Need New Language?

As I read *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other Church documents, I am struck by the logical

coherence and consistency of their teachings. Our liturgical language too is lofty and inspiring. But I’m not at all sure that it speaks to the busy, worldly, success-driven and scientific-minded people of our time. Hence my question: Do we need a new language for the new evangelization? I am not advocating a rejection of our theological, creedal, and liturgical language. But I am suggesting that we may need some new linguistic approaches in order to reach the post-modern, post-Christian people of our time. I do not want us to deny, water down, or cheapen any of the truths we have received from Scripture, tradition, or the Church’s magisterium. But I believe our message will be more effective if we try to communicate it by using: the language of relationship; the language of values; and the language of meaning and purpose.

## Language of Relationship

As we listen to people’s real-life stories or watch them unfold on news



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The Church’s message will be more effective if we communicate it by using the language of relationship; of values; and of meaning and purpose.

## IN BRIEF

- Do we need new language?
- Language of relationship
- The language of values
- The language of meaning and purpose
- Some practical aspects
- Lack of ‘churchy’ language

**The Bible is filled with stories of  
love among family members....  
Sometimes relationships require  
self-sacrifice to reveal true love.**

programs or TV dramas, it is not difficult to see that people's lives and choices are heavily focused on relationships.

They are seeking to connect or reconnect with a parent, a child, a family, a romantic partner, a group of friends or a community of support. They invest a significant degree of emotion and passion in these relationships, including love, care, sex, hurt, anger, remorse and revenge. This speaks profoundly about the human condition. "We are made for relationship," appears as a self-evident truth.

Are there not obvious connections here with our biblical-theological language? One of the first lines in the Bible: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him'" (Gn 2:18); and God goes on to create woman. Later on we read that Jacob fell in love with his uncle's daughter

Rachel and agreed to serve him for seven years in order to marry her; "yet they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her" (Gn 29:20). A wonderful testimony to the power of romantic love.

The Bible is also filled with stories of love between and among family members. Joseph in Egypt would not abandon his father and brothers in Israel during a time of famine, even though the brothers had sold him into slavery. He forgave them and provided for their welfare. Ruth insisted on leaving her own family and tribe in order to stay with her Israelite mother-in-law in a strange land. Jonathan risked incurring the anger of his father Saul in order to protect the life of his friend David. The

message: sometimes relationships require self-sacrifice in order to reveal true love. Contemporary people, even

if they are not believers, can resonate with stories like these.

The language of relationships is even stronger in the New Testament. Most of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is about how to treat one another with respect, dignity, and love. At the same time, he forbids acts of revenge, unforgiveness, and retaliation. We are to view and treat one another as our God in heaven views and treats each one of us: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Mt 7:12) has come down to us as "The Golden Rule."

Moreover, much of Jesus' ministry was directed toward healing: not only physical illness but also "wounds of the heart." He brought a renewed sense of dignity to people

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**Jesus invites us ... into personal relationship with himself ... and to express our love concretely — through service and sacrifice.**

who had felt rejected or marginalized by the society around them: lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, the woman who couldn't stop hemorrhaging and was thereby regarded as ritually impure. Indeed, it has been estimated that nearly one-fifth of the Gospels are about healing. These stories will have strong appeal to contemporary people who are carrying heavy burdens from physical and/or emotional disabilities.

As he was about to give his very life for us, Jesus' language becomes even more daring: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. (Instead) I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15). Jesus invites us into friendship, into personal relationship with himself. And with the strength and power of that relationship, he asks us to express our love concretely—through service and

even sacrifice (Jn 15:12-14).

To people who are hungry for meaningful relationships, these stories and teachings can speak powerfully. Many have had experiences of hurtful relationships, rejection, betrayal, and the like. And sometimes they have been the cause of hurt and pain to others. To discover a vision of relationships that speaks of profound acceptance, of personal worth, of the undimmed capacity to both give and receive love, of the necessity of sacrifice, of the need to offer and accept forgiveness—this is a "gospel" that can touch the hearts of people today.

**The Language of Values**

Another connection between evangelization and the people of

our time is the concern about values. While it is true that some secularists and postmoderns hold that all values are

individual and relative, most people continue to believe that some values are more human, more honorable, more likely to foster personal and communal well-being than others. Still, on a practical level, there remains a widespread tendency to "live and let live" when it comes to values. You want to be a rock star? That's fine. You want to play major league sports? Go for it. You want to be CEO in a Fortune 500 company? Why not?

But how far can that outlook be stretched? Could it include: I want to be a drug lord? I want to be a Mafia hit man? Most people would recoil from granting approval to such life choices. Still, if all values are relative and purely individual, why not? That

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neuralgic question reveals the dead-end outcome of value neutrality.

So here is another entry point for Christian evangelization. Christians have always claimed that personal gain and personal satisfaction are legitimate pursuits, but are not of themselves adequate guides for making choices. There are values that transcend individual self-interest. Both Hebrew and Christian

Scriptures reveal a value structure that points us beyond ourselves. They make it clear that some values are more worthy of our loyalty than others:

- Speaking the truth is better than deception and lying.
- Treating people with kindness is better than cruelty.
- Fulfilling responsibilities is better than renegeing on them.
- Affirming and encouraging people is better than ridiculing them.
- Respecting people's property is better than stealing.
- Using time and talents productively is better than squandering them.
- Respecting the freedom of others is better than controlling them for our own advantage.
- Sex with love and commitment is better than casual sex.

Values like these, I believe, are neither partisan nor sectarian. They are not the sole possession of any particular culture or religion. They are grounded in our common humanity. As such, they can form the basis of respectful dialogue with individuals and groups who are searching for something to give moral direction to their lives and their choices. Ministers of the New Evangelization will pay close attention to the language of values in their attempts to connect with people immersed in a secularized culture.

### **The Language of Meaning and Purpose**

Of all species on earth, humans appear to be the only ones who face and deal with questions of meaning and purpose. Why am I on this earth? What is the purpose of life—and of my life? How can I find mean-

ing in life? Or is it simply absurd and devoid of meaning? What happens after death?

It has been claimed that most people do not attend to these philosophical questions until later in life. They are busy acquiring an education, finding a place in the world of work, finding a marriage partner and starting a family. Others distract themselves through entertainment, social gatherings, sports, travel, social networking and the like. I am reminded of the haunting line from the song Yesterday, When I Was Young: "I ran so fast that time and youth ran out; I never stopped to think what life was all about."

Sooner or later, though, the meaning/purpose questions have to be addressed. It is said that when the first Christian missionaries came to England in the seventh century, King Ethelbert invited them to his banquet hall. After eating and drinking, the king rose and said something like this: "Brothers, it seems to us that life is a great puzzle. See how the birds fly through the windows of this hall: they come here and are warmed for a while from the cold; then they fly out again. That is how our lives seem to be: We are born, we are warmed and fed for a while; but then we die. My lords, if you have any answers to these mysteries, please share them with us." The missionaries proceeded to evangelize the king and his court by sharing with them the Gospel of Christ.

That story might serve as a parable for our own times. How many of our contemporaries—inactive Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims; non-believing secularists, agnostics and atheists, half-hearted believers—are struggling, at some level of awareness, with the great questions of life's meaning and purpose? As someone has said: once you start asking those questions, you won't be satisfied until you find some answers.

And here is another entry point for evangelization. The Christian Gospel proclaims some stunning truths about the meaning and purpose of our lives:

- God chose us before the founda-



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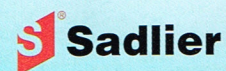
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tion of the world (Eph 1:4). We are not merely a product of evolutionary forces. The text dares to proclaim that even before the Big Bang and the formation of the galaxies, God chose each human being for the gift of life. Modern science, in turn, dazzles us with the fact that each human person is absolutely unique, with DNA unmatched by any other.

- God placed us in this world for a purpose—not merely to enjoy the good things of the earth, but “to cultivate it and care for it,” as the command given to the first human creatures (Gn 2:15). Here is a clear call from the Creator to exercise good stewardship over this beautiful planet, not exploit it for personal or national gain. Each person, of course, will do that in his/her own way—whether in teaching, research, science, business, the arts, agriculture, economics, health care, child care, social/psychological services, and the like. This purpose includes persons with disabilities, for even they can often develop skills and form loving relationships with others.

- We are called to make a difference—a positive difference—in this world by our manner of living. Jesus asked us to be “salt for the earth and light for the world” (Mt 5:13-16). Salt makes a difference in the taste of food; light makes a difference in the surrounding darkness. Young people today often give expression to this sense of purpose. They volunteer a year or more of service, often with disadvantaged people, or they choose careers wherein they are able to make a positive difference in their part of the world. But it is not only the young. We have all met people who have a strong sense of purpose and mission in life:

- To leave the world in a better state, more beautiful and peaceful.
  - To help others discover their own potential and giftedness.
  - To work with others to create a caring planet.
  - To help people move out of poverty and recover their human dignity.
- As George Bernard Shaw once

said: “This is the true joy in life: being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.”

### **Some Practical Aspects**

While I believe the language of relationships, of values, and of meaning can be utilized in our preaching and writing, it will perhaps be most useful in dialogue situations, whether with individuals or groups. Questions such as these could be very helpful: What kind of relationships have been healthy and life-giving for you? Which have been painful or hurtful—and why? What are some of your deepest convictions or values—and why? I often tell people: what we say we value may not be what we really value. To know my real values, I need to ask: What do I spend time on? What do I spend money on? And what do I spend emotion on (happy when it's there; angry when it's not; sad when it's lost)? In regard to purpose: What gives direction/meaning to your life? What are your goals? What gets you up in the morning? What makes you feel fulfilled and alive? What are you willing to sacrifice for?

Finally, perhaps you have noted the relative absence of “churchy” language in this reflection. I have no intention of denying the importance of our traditional biblical, theological, and creedal language. That will always be an integral part of Catholic evangelization. But if we hope to reach the alienated and secularized people of our time, I believe that the different “languages” I have described will serve us well as “pre-evangelization” and preparation for the fuller revelation of God in Jesus Christ. **P**

**FATHER PABLE, O.F.M. Cap., a priest-psychologist, is the author of many books, including *Prayer: A Practical Guide, Catholics & Fundamentalists: Understanding and Response, and the award-winning Remaining Catholic: Six Good Reasons for Staying in an Imperfect Church*. He lives and works at St. Anthony Retreat Center in Marathon, Wis.**