

Benedict XVI (2006)
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BENEDICT XVI AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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Throughout his eight-year pontificate, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI made an initiative closely associated with his predecessor—the New Evangelization—a priority. A term coined by Blessed John Paul II, the New Evangelization refers to using new means, methods and ardor to reach alienated or poorly catechized Catholics, and by these means compellingly proposing to them the timeless message of the Gospel anew. In addition to other new initiatives promoting the New Evangelization, Benedict convened a synod of bishops in October 2012 in Rome to deliberate on the subject of “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.”

Benedict XVI’s thoughts on New Evangelization predated his election to the Apostolic See. He gave a lengthy address on the New Evangelization to a group of international catechists and religion teachers gathered in Rome for the celebration of the Great Jubilee on December 12, 2000. As we shall see, many of the ideas he presented at that time later made their way into his writings after he became bishop of Rome. For then-Cardinal Ratzinger, the essential content of the New Evangelization was not complicated. It presented a message about how human beings may flourish and attain happiness under four essential themes: conversion, the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, and eternal life. He highlighted four practical consequences that flow from the New Evangelization. Firstly, all reasonable and morally acceptable methods should be used. Secondly, there should be an awareness that the communication arts cannot reach the depths of the person that the Gospel requires. Thirdly, we must remember that disciples for God are only acquired by God, and this necessitates an intense life of prayer on the part of evangelizers. Lastly, evangelizers must realize that the path of the New Evangelization is not different from the path of Jesus, the Paschal Mystery. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger reminded the catechists that unless the seed falls to the earth and dies, it cannot bring forth new life. Sometimes this involves martyrdom for the faith. But more often than not, it occurs through a God-aided process of dying to petty egoisms and growing in self-giving and solidarity with others.

The Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization

On September 21, 2010, Benedict XVI established a new dicastery or administrative office in the Roman Curia that would concern itself with the New Evangelization. The new dicastery was entrusted to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, former president of the Pontifical Academy for Life. The new office was tasked with examining the theological and pastoral meaning of the New Evangelization, disseminating the papal magisterium on the New Evangelization in collaboration with bishops' conferences, making known and supporting existing and future initiatives pertaining to the New Evangelization, studying and encouraging the use of new media for the New Evangelization, and promoting the use of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The seriousness with which the previous pontiff viewed the work of this new department of the Roman Curia was made evident by the cardinals he named to serve on the council, including such high-profile prelates as Cardinals Timothy Dolan of New York, George Pell of Sydney, Christoph Schönbron of Vienna, and Angelo Scola of Milan.

In the apostolic letter that erected the new dicastery, *Ubicumque et Semper* (US, 2010), the former Holy Father explained his understanding of the New Evangelization and the hopes he harbored for it. For Benedict XVI, the New Evangelization is an opportunity for the whole Church to be “regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit” so that it may present itself to the contemporary world with a “missionary impulse” (US, introduction).

He cautioned that careful discernment is necessary, for a single formula for the New Evangelization cannot be applied to all circumstances. The new evangelizers will first have to have had a “profound experience of God.” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI further specified that “[b]eing Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (US, introduction, citing *Deus Caritas Est* §1).

An interesting example of the breadth of Benedict's New Evangelization is the potential he placed in the artist's creative powers to elevate the mind, heart, and soul to God. This was a theme he took up in his address to artists in 2009. Subsequently, on the occasion of the dedication of the Church of the Holy Family in Barcelona in 2010, he reflected on the way that the Servant of God Antoni Gaudí, the church's architect, had whimsically and ingeniously employed modern architecture in the heart of the city to elevate the hearts and minds of men and women to both beauty and the Transcendent. Benedict extolled the Catalan architect for “overcoming the division between human consciousness and Christian consciousness, between living in this temporal world and being open to eternal life, between the beauty of things and God as beauty. . .[for] [b]eauty also reveals God because, like him, a work of beauty is pure gratuity; it calls us to freedom and draws us away from selfishness.”

Antoni Gaudí, Architect
Basílica i Temple
Expiatori de la Sagrada
Família, exterior
(1882-1926)
Barcelona, Spain



The Courtyard of the Gentiles

One of the new initiatives of the New Evangelization devised by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI himself is called the “Courtyard of the Gentiles.” It refers to the courtyard of the Temple of Jerusalem where those who sincerely sought God and wanted to worship him, though Gentiles, found admittance and welcome. During his 2009 Christmas address to the Roman Curia, the former Holy Father underscored the theological justification for this place of encounter between believers and unbelievers, namely, the idea that the Temple should be a house of prayer for all peoples as described by the prophet Isaiah (56:7). Even when these Gentiles did not know the God of Israel who remained a mystery to them, there was in them an earnest desire for the “Pure and the Great One,” and they wanted to pray to Him in some way in Jerusalem.

This outreach has been entrusted to the Pontifical Council for Culture (PCC). Under the leadership of its president Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the PCC has since 2011 organized a number of dialogues throughout the world among representatives of the world of culture who are not believers, yet are concerned with important issues that affect the entire human family. The new media of digital communications is another venue for the dialogue and outreach envisioned by the Courtyard of the Gentiles. A prevalent characteristic of the culture of the new media is a secularization that banishes almost all references to God from people’s everyday lives and consciousness. This is a mindset that is not as anti-Christian, anti-religious, and anti-clerical as the laicism of past centuries. Yet its widespread and insidious nature has taken on the more subtle cultural manifestations so that it poses not only an exterior threat to Christianity, but also an interior threat to the daily lives and values of believers. Throughout his pontificate, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI gave numerous addresses about the eclipse of God, especially in European society, and the perils it conjoins. In an address to the plenary assembly of the PCC in 2008, he noted that this

“death of God” mentality manifests itself especially in a culture of relativism. It is characterized by a lifestyle and value system prone to selfishness, hedonism, consumerism, a superficial and false spirituality, and a value system that denies the fundamental social structures of the natural law, such as the family built on heterosexual marriage.

The Year of Faith

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI proclaimed the “Year of Faith” October 11, 2011, which will run from the same date in 2012 through the Solemnity of Christ the King in 2013, when it will conclude with a solemn profession of faith at the liturgical celebration of this feast. This year of renewal in the faith also commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council and the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It was Benedict’s hope that the correct interpretation of the Council documents by means of a hermeneutic of renewal in continuity with the patrimony of faith and teaching of the magisterium, guided by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, would play an important role in the activities of this year.

In *Porta Fidei* (2011), the apostolic letter proclaiming the Year of Faith, Benedict XVI explained that it is meant to be a call to conversion to the Lord for believers, so that they may evangelize and render witness in the world to the Trinity that is more coherent, convincing and efficacious. Key in his thinking about the renewal that he hoped to see during the Year of Faith was to “rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith. In rediscovering his love day by day, the missionary commitment of believers attains force and vigor that can never fade away. Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy” (*Porta Fidei*, §7).

In keeping with his pedagogical nature, Benedict XVI employed the proclamation of the Year of Faith as an opportunity to reflect on two constitutive and inseparable elements of the faith: the act of belief and the intellectual content of that same belief. Additionally, he pointed out that the profession of faith is as much a communitarian or ecclesial act as a personal one. Assent to the faith with intellect and will requires knowledge of its content. In this way one can “freely accept the whole of the mystery of faith because the guarantor of its truth is God who reveals himself and allows us to know his mystery of love” (*PF*, §10). At Benedict’s instruction, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued a note on January 6, 2012 specifying pastoral ways in which dioceses may celebrate the Year of Faith. These suggestions included appropriate initiatives and celebrations on the level of the universal Church, bishops’ conferences, individual dioceses, parish communities, and apostolic movements and associations.

As with other initiatives of his pontificate, the New Evangelization is one that Benedict XVI inherited from his predecessor. As such, he sought to provide the New Evangelization with a clearer theological foundation. Benedict XVI viewed the New Evangelization not as a program, even though it has a programmatic aspect—as evidenced by his calling for a Year of Faith and the corresponding suggestions for pastoral programs enumerated by the CDF to aid its celebration. Rather, he viewed the New Evangelization as an opportunity for encounter with the living God in the person of Jesus Christ, which moves us to place our hope and trust in Him and assent to the path of life or happiness that He taught and handed down to the Church through His disciples.

Benedict’s New Evangelization was particularly attuned to the new atheism and secularity that has taken hold in many formerly Christian countries and societies of Europe, and which has also come to influence the lives of many believers and of the Church itself. A cornerstone of his New Evangelization was a championing of the historic contribution and continuing relevance of belief in God for societies at large. The Catholic tradition’s rich heritage of faith-inspired art, literature, theatre, and music also featured prominently in the former Holy Father’s understanding of the nexus between beauty and truth. Lastly, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s outreach to atheists and agnostics called the “Court of the Gentiles” spoke of the creative dynamism and tenacity that characterized his understanding of the New Evangelization.

