

Catholic

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Evangelization and Dialogue

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Jesus said the kingdom of God "is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade."

Mark 4:31-32

The New Evangelization calls each of us to deepen our faith, believe in the gospel message and go forth to proclaim the gospel. The focus of the New Evangelization calls all Catholics to be evangelized and then go forth to evangelize.... The New Evangelization invites each Catholic to renew [his or her] relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church.

US CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS (USCCB)

Christianity is a missionary religion. It takes its identity from Jesus' command to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Few may realize that the greatest numerical missionary success in Christianity's history took place in the 1900s. Ten million Christians lived in Africa in 1900; by 2000, the total had grown to a staggering 360 million!

Events in the early twenty-first century have underscored there remains a need for dialogue and mutual understanding among representatives of the great religions of the world. The missionary dimension of Christianity is made abundantly clear in the New Testament. Without ignoring this fact, Christians must also recognize that the New Testament encourages us to engage in both missionary activity (evangelization) and dialogue (mutual understanding).

The best-known and most influential Bible text pertaining to evangelization begins near the end of Matthew's Gospel, excerpted in a passage on the cover of this newsletter. The larger Gospel text recounts an appearance of the risen Jesus to his apostles, which takes place on a mountain in Galilee. When the men see Jesus, some pay him homage while others hesitate or even express doubt. This sets the scene for the words of our Lord traditionally known as the Great Commission:

...All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.

MATTHEW 28:18–20

It is possible to understand the Great Commission as a summary of Matthew's Gospel and of all the Gospels. Jesus, whose story is told in all four Gospels, appears late in Matthew as the risen Lord who is worthy of worship. As the glorious Son of Man (referred to in Daniel 7), Jesus declares that all power has been given to him in heaven and on earth. As the great authoritative teacher, Jesus commissions his closest followers to carry on his mission of teaching. As the Son of

God, Jesus directs all nations to be baptized in his name. And as Emmanuel ("God with us"), the risen Jesus promises to accompany his followers until the end of the age.

Likewise, the disciples—repeatedly characterized in Matthew as having "little faith"—now receive their commission to teach "all nations," not simply their fellow Jews. These words likely presented a special challenge to Matthew's community of Christ-following Jews around AD 90 to expand their own vision beyond those who were Jews by birth and include non-Jews in their mission.

Missionary Activity and Evangelization

The missionary impulse in Christianity is rooted in parts of the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah looked forward to the day when all nations might stream toward the Jerusalem Temple and when instruction might go forth from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2–4). The task of God's Servant in Isaiah is to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). Also in the Old Testament, "Many peoples and strong nations seek the LORD...in Jerusalem" as ten men take hold of Jews, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zechariah 8:22–23). In Jesus' time, Jews were scattered all over the Mediterranean world. Their cultural and religious centers, called synagogues ("gathering places"), attracted area Jews and some non-Jews who were impressed by Judaism's doctrine of one God, high ethics, and community celebrations. Scholars have long debated how aggressive Jews in Jesus' time were in carrying out missionary activities among non-Jews (see Matthew 23:15).

There is no doubt, however, that the Jewish movement that Jesus founded was missionary. *Evangelization* means "bringing the gospel" or "good news" (*euangelion* in Greek) to others. In the first phase of his public ministry, Jesus proclaims the nearness of the kingdom of God and urges belief in this Good News (Mark 1:15). When summoning his first disciples in the midst of their work as fishermen, he promises to make them "fishers of men" (Mark 1:17), active participants in his task of proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom. The essence



Praying With Scripture

Read the account of Jesus' conversation with the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24–30 or Matthew 15:21–28. Carefully follow the interactions between Jesus and the woman. How would you characterize Jesus and the woman?

- Does Jesus change his mind?
- If you believe he does, what leads him to do so?
- How might this passage help you approach Jesus and his Father in prayer?

**“It is not by
proselytizing
that the Church
grows, but by
attraction.”**

MISSIONARY MANDATE: Marta Barral, a Xavierian lay missionary from Spain, helps a girl read during an educational program sponsored by the Catholic Church in Atalaia do Norte in Brazil's Amazon region. “For the Church, a preference for the poor is not optional,” Pope Francis has stated.

CNS PHOTO, 2019/PAUL JEFFREY



of discipleship is to be with Jesus and to share in his mission (Mark 3:14), and so eventually Jesus sends the Twelve to do what he did (Mark 6:7–13, Matthew 10:1–42).

The earliest Christians were convinced that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God had done something decisive in bringing the kingdom of God near. And so, Jesus himself became the focus of their “good news” (Romans 1:3–4; 1 Corinthians 15:3–5). Having experienced God's kingdom in the person of Jesus, the first Christians wanted to share that experience with others. This impulse is the root of all genuine Christian missionary activity.

The first Christians were all Jews. Soon—much to the Jews' surprise—non-Jews (Gentiles) showed interest in their Good News and received the Holy Spirit and baptism (Acts 10–11). God called Paul, with his impeccable Jewish credentials, to bring the gospel to non-Jews. His letters record his efforts at extending pastoral care for the Gentile-Christian communities he had founded. The Acts of the Apostles recounts the spread of the gospel from “Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The time frame in Acts is roughly from Jesus' ascension and Pentecost (AD 30) to Paul's arrival in Rome (thirty years later). In Acts, the Apostles Peter, John, Philip, Barnabas, and Paul engage in missionary activity and have great success, especially among Gentiles.

The Value of Dialogue in the World Where the Gospel Spread

Dialogue implies conversation and personal interaction, with the goal of increased mutual understanding and respect. The Roman empire, where the gospel originated and spread, was a world of much religious diversity and little religious unity. All kinds of gods were worshiped, and all kinds of cults drew devotees. There were efforts to rally citizens of particular places to participate in displays of civic religion. And the Book of Revelation presupposes efforts in parts of western Asia Minor

(modern Turkey) to force everyone there to worship the Roman emperor as a god and the goddess Roma as a personification of the Roman empire.

In this pluralistic environment, Christianity emerged as a form of Judaism with monotheistic beliefs and high ethical standards. It was open to all kinds of people and no longer tied to Israel, except through Christ and the Scriptures. According to Paul the Christian missionary, conversion to Christianity was a life-changing event. In the earliest of his letters, Paul describes what happened to the Gentile Christians at Thessalonica in this way: “You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). In treating the pastoral problem of whether Gentile Christians at Corinth might eat food that had been used in sacrifices to pagan gods, Paul observes that “even though there are so-called gods in heaven and on earth...for us there is one God, the Father...and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:5–6). In his meditation on what God has done in Christ, Paul proclaims, “The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Paul's concept of “universalism” is decidedly Christ-centered. For him, all peoples are called to belong to Christ and to attain salvation through Christ. He does not deal with the salvation of those without knowledge of Christ or with the salvific value of other religions. But times change. Paul likely knew nothing about Hinduism and Buddhism. And Islam did not yet exist. Paul probably regarded his own conversion as a move from one form of Judaism (Pharisaism) to another (Christianity), not from one religion to another. Meanwhile, modern developments in travel and communications place us in continual contact with people of other religions. For the sake of world peace and human progress, we must foster interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding. Do our Christian Gospels contain anything that might help us?

At first sight, Jesus does not appear to be a promising model for promoting interreligious dialogue. According to John's

Gospel, he proclaims himself to be “the way and the truth and the life” (14:6). But in other Gospel texts, Jesus shows himself to be open to some surprising persons: women, tax collectors, “sinners,” and so forth. Indeed, one of the persistent complaints against Jesus concerns the company he keeps: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them,” said the Pharisees and scribes (Luke 15:2).

Jesus willingly debates with opponents about important issues in Jewish life, as illustrated in controversial stories found in Mark 2:1—3:6 and 11:27—12:37. While many of these conversations are emotionally charged and even hostile, Jesus patiently and clearly states his position, demonstrating his superior wisdom. And in the dialogue about the greatest commandment (Mark 12:28–34), Jesus and the scribe eventually find themselves in perfect harmony. When informed that someone is casting out demons in his name (Mark 9:38–41), Jesus makes a remarkably tolerant statement: “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40).

In two Gospel episodes, Jesus talks with non-Jews. In Matthew 8:5–13, a centurion (a Roman military officer) asks Jesus to heal his servant and professes his confidence in Jesus’ power to do so. Jesus in turn states that “in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (8:10) and heals the servant at a distance. In Mark 7:24–30 and Matthew 15:21–28, Jesus gets involved in a conversation with a non-Jewish woman. Matthew calls her “a Canaanite,” while Mark describes her as “a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth.” The woman wants Jesus to heal her daughter. At first, Jesus puts her off by restricting his ministry to his fellow Jews: “Let the children be fed first.” But she persists and points out that even dogs are fed from table scraps. Jesus marvels at the pagan woman’s faith, heals her daughter, and seems to learn from this dialogue that his mission concerns more than his own people.

With Jesus as his foundational role model, Pope Francis speaks to this universal right for all to have the opportunity to experience the gospel message and Christ’s love. In the Joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*), the Pope titles section three of this apostolic exhortation “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Faith,” stating:

Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty, and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction.

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem for his crucifixion, no one is excluded from the fruits of the fate that awaits him. He clearly articulates the conclusion of his journey narrative, saying, “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Near the end of his ministry in Jerusalem, Jesus offers a description of the Last Judgment at which the glorious Son of Man will preside (Matthew 25:31–46). The central issue in this judgment scene

is the criterion by which “all the nations” will be judged. That criterion turns out to be acts of kindness shown toward “these least brothers of mine...these little ones” (25:40, 45).

The Gospels do not present Jesus as presiding over a seminar or debating society. As documents of faith, they portray Jesus as the Word of God—God’s definitive revelation to humankind (John 1:1–18, Colossians 1:15–20, and Hebrews 1:1–4). But they hint that Jesus also entered into dialogue and sought mutual understanding. And at least in the case of the Canaanite woman, Jesus appears to come away from the conversation with new attitudes and perspectives about his own mission. This provides an important example of how we should embrace the goal of New Evangelization.

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In Sri Lanka in 2015, Pope Francis urges unity and reconciliation with the Sri Lanka mosque. R. Nanthapreecha / Shutterstock

Faith and Evangelization

- What makes Christianity a missionary religion?
- Is it still necessary for the Catholic Church to engage in evangelization?
- Who most needs evangelizing today?
- Why should Christians today be involved in interreligious dialogue?
- How can such dialogue help propel the goal of New Evangelization forward?
- How might New Evangelization contribute to human progress and world peace?
- Are there tensions or conflicts between evangelization and interreligious dialogue?
- How would you describe the goals of each?
- Does interreligious dialogue lead to relativism?

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