

2013

## Mission, Evangelization, and the Blessed Virgin Mary Today

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### Recommended Citation

Phalan, James (2013) "Mission, Evangelization, and the Blessed Virgin Mary Today," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 64, Article 5, Pages 1-13.

Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol64/iss1/5](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol64/iss1/5)

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# **MISSION, EVANGELIZATION, AND THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY TODAY**

**MARIOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA ANNUAL  
MEETING, MAY 22-24, 2013 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

*James Phalan, C.S.C.\**

As President of the Mariological Society of America I welcome you all to our 64th Annual Meeting. In these coming days we will be thinking together about a timely topic for the Church in the World today: Mary and New Evangelization. As we begin our reflections, I hope to set the stage in some way for what is to come, offering some background for our conversations and at the same time already trying to focus on some salient issues.

First, however, I would like to offer some words of gratitude. Heartfelt thanks to all who have worked hard to prepare this conference: particularly the MSA Council and the staff of the Marian Library. Thanks to those who have labored to prepare presentations for this meeting. Thanks to you all for having made the effort to be here for this meeting!

I know that this has been a labor of love for all. We come here because there is something important that draws us. Our Society does not exist for purely abstract academic reflection. We are indeed an academic society. Yet we promote academic excellence at the service of the Church. We foster that kind of theology that is best done on one's knees. Our reflection is not isolated from the mission and the devotion of the Church. Particularly, we see clearly that the topic of this year's meeting is very important, I would venture to say even urgent, for the Church.

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We meet during the Year of Faith, convoked by Pope Benedict as a time for the whole Church to re-ignite the flame of Faith. We meet shortly after an important Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization. The issue of New Evangelization itself is the context which motivates our meeting this year and it is urgent. With the whole Church we look now to our new Pope as we discern next steps.

We meet to consider the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in this New Evangelization. It is the shared conviction probably of all of us here that she has a very special place in responding to challenges that face the Church today. Further, I imagine that many of us share the view that her place is much more important than many Catholics, including many of the clergy, are aware, and this relative lack of attention to Our Lady must be addressed seriously for the well-being and the fruitfulness of our missionary efforts. Mary must be in practice, and not only in name, the Star of the New Evangelization.

On what basis can we present the importance of the role of the Blessed Virgin today? What specifically is that role in the Church, fifty years after the Second Vatican Council? How is it to be characterized and contemplated? What does this really mean, concretely, to the life and mission of the Church?

In the coming days we will be considering various aspects of these issues. Thanks to the works which will be presented we will enter into some depth in various directions. It will be important for us to continue a conversation which might help us to emerge with some unifying concepts. I hope as well, that areas that call for further research will emerge as well as topics for future gatherings of this organization.

As I studied the proposals that were accepted for presentation at this meeting I could see that our fare for the coming days will be rich and profound. However, I could see that before entering in depth into more specific areas of reflection we need to situate ourselves more broadly in the topic of New Evangelization itself. The way we use the very word Evangelization is quite different from how the Catholic Church used it sixty years ago and the phrase New Evangelization is a usage that is much more recent still. What, really, are we talking about in the Church today? I would like to spend some time addressing this question, as a foundation for our reflection these days.

In his encyclical on evangelization, *Redemptoris Missio*, in 1990, Blessed John Paul II wrote: "As the third millennium of the redemption draws near, God is preparing a great spring-time for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs."<sup>1</sup> He is repeating a constant theme in Magisterial texts since the Second Vatican Council that treat mission and evangelization: the coming of a New Pentecost of Christian faith for our world.

However, the signs that we see are NOT so clear, as these texts are also very willing to admit. Christian faith seems to be challenged now on very fundamental levels and on an unparalleled scale. Paul VI attempted to confront directly the Church's response and our own attitudes in his encyclical on evangelization, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, asking: In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man's conscience?<sup>2</sup> John Paul II felt compelled, in his encyclical, to address difficulties both internal and external [that] have weakened the Church's missionary thrust,<sup>3</sup> that seem to reflect the infiltration within the Church herself of today's challenges to faith. Contemporary texts prepared for the Synod of Evangelization have had to face this weakening the faith of many Christian communities head on.<sup>4</sup>

What then of the call for a New Pentecost? Is it simply fanciful? Is it merely a rallying cry on a sinking ship? Is it perhaps a prophetic pronouncement born of profound faith? As he comes to conclude in *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II reflects:

Like the apostles after Christ's Ascension, the Church must gather in the Upper Room "together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus" (AC 1,14), in order to pray for the Spirit and to gain strength and courage to carry out the missionary mandate. We too, like the apostles, need to be transformed and guided by the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Blessed John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (Dec. 7, 1990), no. 86. Hereafter cited as *RM*.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Dec. 8, 1975), no. 4. Hereafter cited as *EN*.

<sup>3</sup> *RM*, no. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Council for New Evangelization: Synod of Bishops for New Evangelization: *Lineamenta*, Feb. 2, 2011, and *Instrumentum Laboris*, May 27, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> *RM*, no. 92.

He then entrusts the missionary mandate in today's world to the Blessed Virgin whom he and these texts often address as Star of Evangelization and Star of the New Evangelization. This is not a casual reference. Implied is the vital role of the Mother of God in the task of Evangelization in all time and particularly the help she offers the Church today at a crucial moment in history. This is at the heart of the issue that we are trying to understand these days. I believe we come to see that, when we really try to understand the Catholic sense of evangelization, we find that the Marian dimension—Mary herself—cannot be separated from it.

What is this Catholic sense of evangelization? This word has undergone noteworthy evolution over the fifty-year span of the documents we are considering, to the point that we now note various dimensions of it. Particularly, new evangelization has become a common phrase in Catholic circles, but this evolution has not been simple.

Given that the word is so important to us now we might be surprised that it is used only twice in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. Was it an unimportant topic then? We need to remember that an entire decree, *Ad Gentes*, is dedicated to the themes of missions and evangelization. Still, this was according to the then-current usage of the word which was relatively uni-dimensional: *ad gentes*—to the peoples, the nations: the mission of evangelization of the people who have not yet known Christ. The first use of the term (in no. 6 of *Ad Gentes*) summarizes well the state of the conversation at that point: "The proper purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization, and the planting of the Church among those peoples and groups where it has not yet taken root." "Evangelization" is used twenty times in the text and always in a context that refers to proclamation in areas and to peoples who have never known Christ.

However, we should note that the text intends to apply a renewed vision for the mission of the Church, developed in *Lumen Gentium*, to the mission *ad gentes* in order to define, direct and organize it for our time. It admirably articulates foundations for the mission on which later texts will elaborate: Christian witness, preaching, the formation of Christian

community.<sup>6</sup> It insists on free acceptance of faith and a universal call to restoration in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Further, while directing their attention *ad gentes*, the Council Fathers had to take note of a new situation, and a new urgency.<sup>8</sup> The text does not elaborate much what this may be but opens a conversation in the magisterial missiology texts that will need to be continued in a world where "modern man" is becoming "a stranger to things divine."<sup>9</sup> The conclusion of the text invokes the intercession of Mary, Queen of Apostles.<sup>10</sup>

Ten years after the closing of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI returns to the topic of evangelization after a Synod on the theme in 1974. The Pope needed to address some pressing issues that required on one hand an expansion of certain concepts of evangelization while on the other, clear statements of them. After the Synod, the participating bishops asked Paul VI himself to prepare the post-synodal text. The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntianti* is a remarkable text and a milestone. With *Ad Gentes* clearly as his guiding text, he wrote a document that is a profound and personal meditation that directly, yet with precision and prudence, confronts emerging problems in the task of evangelization in the post-Vatican II Church.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntianti* (no. 2) sets out rather boldly that the objectives for the Second Vatican Council:

... are definitively summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century.

In other words now, we might say the objectives of Vatican II are summed up in making the Church better fitted for *evangelization* today. However, he did not say it that way. The uses of "evangelization" which are many in this text had taken on a certain ambiguity. Often there is an insistence on "evangelization"

<sup>6</sup> The Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, nos. 11-15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ad Gentes*, Chap. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ad Gentes*, no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ad Gentes*, no. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ad Gentes*, no. 42.

which is taken to mean *ad gentes*. Yet Paul VI needed to face the "new situation" and "new urgency" referred to in the document *Ad Gentes* much more directly, calling for a much broader usage. Nevertheless, his task was to be sure the word would not become watered down and meaningless.

He insists on evangelization *ad gentes* as he laments a lack of fervor on the part of those charged with evangelization, from within the Church.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the document he has to confront a reluctance to preach the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ that was manifesting itself in several postures and attitudes:

- Preaching the Gospel with the aim of conversion would be imposition, a violation of the liberty of the other.<sup>12</sup>
- Denial of an absolute truth upon which Christian faith is founded.<sup>13</sup>
- The Christian Gospel is optional<sup>14</sup>: one of many ways.
- Separation of a Christian way of life from the Person of Jesus. It is simply living a good life that matters.
- Separation of Christ from the Church: one can believe in Christ without entering the Church or receiving the Sacraments.<sup>15</sup>
- Manifestations of the Social Gospel that reduce it to a movement for social change, particularly as seen in some strands of theologies of liberation.<sup>16</sup>

In the face of these errors, Paul VI must insist on the fundamental importance of evangelization as *ad gentes*, directed to those persons and peoples who have not yet known Christ. He confronts these errors in an admirable nuanced way. Yet the existence of these errors itself helps to reveal a widespread situation that has emerged with ever greater clarity requiring Paul VI, without losing focus on the *missio ad gentes*, to begin to face a new reality. Throughout the text he has begun an analysis of the effects of secularist, relativist, and

<sup>11</sup> EN, no. 80, no. 4.

<sup>12</sup> EN, no. 80.

<sup>13</sup> EN, no. 78.

<sup>14</sup> EN, no. 5.

<sup>15</sup> EN, no. 16.

<sup>16</sup> EN, no. 30 ff.

materialist trends on the life of Christian faith that still retains its validity, at times in a prophetic way. He observes "frequent situations of dechristianization."<sup>17</sup>

He begins to reach for a usage of evangelization that is global in its scope, that will be able to respond to needs that are being seen as more and more urgent. He develops some concepts which attempt, with great success and relevance for today, to address both situations of evangelization *ad gentes* and this new, as yet unnamed, more general situation.

As Paul VI closes this text, he entrusts evangelization today to Mary Immaculate, in the hope of a new Pentecost, praying that she be the "Star of evangelization ever renewed."<sup>18</sup>

While the Servant of God Paul VI does begin to expand the use of the term "evangelization" for our time, it is understandable that he is trying to describe new situations which were still hard to name. Fifteen years later, Blessed John Paul II will be able to articulate some concepts with more clarity and definition.

In his encyclical on evangelization, *Redemptoris Missio*, promulgated in 1990 on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, he makes an important distinction that has become operative in the Church since then. He differentiates between *mission ad gentes*, evangelization of peoples who have not yet accepted the Gospel and do not know Christ, and what has come to be called *new evangelization*.

He declares that the "mission is one and undivided, having one origin and one final purpose; but within it, there are different tasks and kinds of activity."<sup>19</sup> Then he defines three tasks or situations<sup>20</sup>:

- First (as we have been discussing): "... mission *ad gentes* in the proper sense of the term."
- Second (situations of pastoral care): "Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures. They are fervent in their faith and in Christian living."

<sup>17</sup> *EN*, no. 51.

<sup>18</sup> *EN*, no. 82.

<sup>19</sup> *RM*, no. 31.

<sup>20</sup> *RM*, no. 33.



- Third: "There is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a 'new evangelization' or a 're-evangelization.'"

His analysis, in numbers 32 and 33 and elsewhere in the text, is penetrating and powerful and has continued to serve the Church as we try to understand the situation that calls for a *New Evangelization*.

At the same time, he is very insistent on the need to continue both our reflection and activity in the area of what has long been called *mission ad gentes*. He sees this as urgent as ever, particularly as the number of persons in areas that still need this first evangelization is huge: probably more than ever, and rapidly increasing as the population of the world increases. He needs to be insistent before the same questioning of the value of the evangelization *ad gentes* that Paul VI faced. His response is a potent and straightforward Scripture-based affirmation and demonstration that Christ is the universal savior of mankind and that by the working of the Holy Spirit this salvation is available to all through the Church.

This response also applies to orienting the New Evangelization. Indeed, John Paul II recognizes well that "the boundaries between *pastoral care of the faithful, new evangelization, and specific missionary activity* are not clearly definable . . . To be noted is the real and growing *interdependence* which exists between these various saving activities of the Church."<sup>21</sup>

However, he notes: "Without the mission *ad gentes*, the Church's very missionary dimension would be deprived of its essential meaning and of the very activity that exemplifies it."<sup>22</sup> Most of the second half of the text addresses specific settings, structures and needs of the mission *ad gentes*. In this text, John Paul II does not attempt to address more specific programs and structures for the New Evangelization. This is a task that has

<sup>21</sup> *RM*, no. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *RM*, no. 34.

confronted the Church more and more poignantly until recent initiatives of Pope Benedict, such as the institution of the Pontifical Council for New Evangelization and the convocation of the Synod on the theme. Still, *Redemptoris Missio* is something of a turning point in the evolution of our sense of evangelization today.

New Evangelization has been adopted as a working concept for the Church, though this has not been without resistance. The *Lineamenta for the Synod on New Evangelization* summarizes well the developing awareness of the need for a New Evangelization and in that context treats the development of the phrase since first used by Pope John Paul II:

5. Though well-known and undoubtedly a part of the Church's many projects, the "new evangelization" remains a relatively new expression and concept in ecclesial and pastoral circles. Consequently, its meaning is not always clear and precise. Initially introduced by Pope John Paul II during his apostolic visit to Poland, [11] without any specific emphasis or idea of its future role, the "new evangelization" was used again and given new life in the Holy Father's Magisterium to the Churches in Latin America. Pope John Paul II used the term to reawaken and elicit renewed efforts in a new missionary and evangelizing undertaking on the continent. . . .<sup>23</sup>

Pope Benedict, in his Motu Proprio *Ubicumque et Semper*, establishing the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, summarizes the development of the concept and the reality it tries to describe:

The Venerable Servant of God John Paul II made this urgent task a central point of his far-reaching Magisterial teaching, referring to it as the "new evangelization," which he systematically explored in depth on numerous occasions—a task that still bears upon the Church today, particularly in regions Christianized long ago. Although this task directly concerns the Church's way of relating *ad extra*, it nevertheless presupposes first of all a constant interior renewal, a continuous passing, so to speak, from evangelized to evangelizing. It is enough to recall what was affirmed in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*: "Whole countries and nations, where religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and capable of fostering a viable and working community of

<sup>23</sup> *Lineamenta*, no. 5.

faith, are now put to a hard test, and in some cases, are even undergoing a radical transformation, as a result of a constant spreading of an indifference to religion, of secularism and atheism. This particularly concerns countries and nations of the so-called First World, in which economic well-being and consumerism, even if coexistent with a tragic situation of poverty and misery, inspires and sustains a life lived 'as if God did not exist.' . . ."<sup>24</sup>

It is not my intention here to come to a short definition of New Evangelization. Rather I hope that through this brief survey we can grasp an evolution that raised an awareness in the Church of new situations and of her own need for new responses which begin with her "allowing herself to be regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>25</sup> Documents of the Year of Faith and those preparatory for and emerging from the Synod on New Evangelization deepen and give more shape to these contemporary situations and Church responses. Time limitations keep us from delving more into these texts now.

What we observe in these last fifty years, then, is a reevaluation of situations that call for evangelization, that has led simultaneously to an expansion of its practical meaning and usage and a greater specificity in identifying these situations, and the analysis needed to respond to them. However, this evolution has had its own complexity. As the Church has had to confront new situations externally, there have been internal challenges to the very task of evangelization itself, as voices have questioned the unicity of Christ, the universal efficacy of his Salvation, and the legitimacy of the goal of conversion to Christianity in a pluralistic world.

Further, I propose that, among the internal challenges that have affected the intensity of the missionary efforts of the Church, we should include the decline of "devotional life" and "popular religiosity" in traditionally Christian countries. The decline in devotional life is related to another internal challenge: the collapse of Mariology after Vatican II and the great decline of specifically Marian devotion in many parts of the world during this period.

<sup>24</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Moto Proprio Ubicumque et Semper* (Sept. 10, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> *Ubicumque et Semper*.

While the Conciliar texts had no intention of minimalizing the importance of the role of Mary in evangelization, the collapse of Mariology has indeed had this result in practice. The popes since Vatican II have all been persistent in their attempts to counter this, yet the Church as a whole has yet to follow their lead fully and take seriously that Mary is indeed the Star of Evangelization and to let her be that. Recent texts and initiatives in New Evangelization seem to be demonstrating something of a Marian re-awakening.

This is of great importance to the Church today. The Church needs Mary to be who she has always been if New Evangelization is to lead to the Springtime of Christianity, the New Pentecost that continues to be part of its fundamental vision. However, on what basis can we say this? These days we will look to the profound understanding of the Mission of the Church that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wanted to communicate to the world today. It has been from this understanding that the Successors of Peter have continued to face all these challenges we have been addressing. *Lumen Gentium* did not speak of New Evangelization. It could not. Yet the Second Vatican Council articulated a vision that remains the valid inspiration that we need today. The vision of the Second Vatican Council, as we will study these days, is sealed with a Marian imprint. A series of holy and very intelligent popes since then has been trying to get us to see this.

As we look at the challenges that call for the New Evangelization, I believe it is important to maintain a very conscious awareness that we are referring to a global situation that very much affects real people, human souls, and very many millions of them. We are not concerned because we cling to some waning power of the Church or because we are worried our churches and their coffers in many areas seems to be emptier. Rather persons, souls, are lost and hurting. Still the longing of the human heart and the search for the divine remain deeply a part of what it is to be human.

The great vision that the Second Vatican Council articulated and that still guides us now is fundamentally an expression of the Triune God's own will to gather all these souls to Himself. As we will be reflecting these days, its Marian dimension

particularly expresses personal dimensions of God's own mission. Our society has produced huge personal and communal needs for:

- True freedom (in the face of an apparent radical subjectivism that may well become, in reality, more clearly a method of collective control)
- Faith and hope (in the face of the demon of doubt and the lack of meaning)
- True community (in a world of social media yet of frightening isolation and alienation)
- Truth
- Peace
- True love: God himself.

I hope that our continuing theological reflections will lead us to appreciate how Mary's role in the Church today especially guides and leads Christian communities to respond to these real needs of real people whose joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties *Guadum et Spes* told us to make our own. I am convinced of this.

We should also be aware that our reflections here are very much a part of the ongoing mariological renewal that the Second Vatican Council intended. Since the acknowledged collapse of Mariology after the Council, the renewal has begun and this Society has played a noteworthy part. However, there is still much to do in what is recognized as a multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary task.

Stefano De Fiore, writing twenty-five years after the Council, and Pope Benedict, speaking fifty years after, concur in the basic areas of this ongoing work. Writing for Latourelle's *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*, De Fiore notes that the renewal had taken and should continue to take three paths: the theological, the devotional/charismatic, and the cultural.<sup>26</sup> In a corresponding way, in his address to the 23rd International Mariological Congress at Castel Gandolfo, September 8th of last year, Pope Benedict called mariologists to dedicate themselves to the *via veritas* (the way of truth), the *via amoris* (the way of

<sup>26</sup> Stefano De Fiore, S.M.M., "Mary in Postconciliar Theology," in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives, Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist, 1988-89), 523.

love/devotion), and to the *via pulchritudinis* (the way of beauty). Theological research, devotion and culture: these three areas form the ongoing task of Mariology that I believe can serve for something of a site map for our topic of Mary and New Evangelization specifically.

Surveying our presentations we can perceive that our conference will be strongest in dogmatic and systematic theological research, with a good look at *Ressourcement*, Vatican II, and Vatican II-informed mariologies. We will also open some doors in the area of culture as we consider Mary and New Evangelization in relation to Ecumenism, Atheism, University pedagogy, inculturation, human liberation, and the response to human suffering today. It seems that topics on Marian Devotion and New Evangelization are missing.

Of course in two or three days we can only do so much. My comments are meant for us to keep the various dimensions in mind. I do think that it is most appropriate that our emphasis during this conference be on fundamental and systematic theology, as much needs to be brought to light on this level to rediscover Mary's place as the Star of Evangelization. Then we should be able to see more clearly what needs to be continued. Perhaps in future meetings we will want to continue in some way our attention to Mary and New Evangelization from perspectives of devotion and culture: for example, the Rosary, liturgy, popular religiosity, media, Mary and the arts, the evangelizing effects of pilgrimage and of Marian apparitions and messages.

As we begin this meeting I hope my remarks help to locate and set a context for our discussion. We are talking about the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in orienting the task of Evangelization today. In Pope Benedict's address to the Mariological Congress to which I referred, with a beautiful phrase he located her as the *Nexus Mysteriorum*, the connecting point—the meeting point—of all the mysteries of our faith. Over these days we hope to bring into clearer view some of the ways through which, as ever, she calls and leads people out of the desert of today's world to the mysteries of life, of love, truth and freedom found in Christ. We do so as Church and for the Church. We do so as an offering with which we hope she will be pleased and she will utilize as she desires.

Star of Evangelization, guide us. Pray for us.