

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Doctrinal Note on some Aspects of Evangelization

I. Introduction

1. Jesus Christ was sent by the Father to proclaim the Gospel, calling all people to conversion and faith (cf. *Mk* 1:14-15). After his resurrection, he entrusted the continuation of his mission of evangelization to the Apostles (cf. *Mt* 28:19-20; *Mk* 16:15; *Lk* 24:4-7; *Acts* 1:3): “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (*Jn* 20:21, cf. 17:18). By means of the Church, Christ wants to be present in every historical epoch, every place on earth and every sector of society, in order to reach every person, so that there may be one flock and one shepherd (cf. *Jn* 10:16): “Go out into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned” (*Mk* 16:15-16).

The Apostles, therefore, “prompted by the Spirit, invited all to change their lives, to be converted and to be baptized”,¹ because the “pilgrim Church is necessary for salvation”.² It is the same Lord Jesus Christ who, present in his Church, goes before the work of evangelizers, accompanies it, follows it, and makes their labours bear fruit: what took place at the origins of Christian history continues throughout its entire course.

At the beginning of the third millennium, the call which Peter and his brother Andrew, as well as the other first disciples, heard from Jesus continues to resound in the world: “put out into the deep and lower your nets for a catch” (*Lk* 5:4).³ And after the miracle of a huge catch of fish, the Lord revealed to Peter that he would become “a fisher of men” (*Lk* 5:10).

2. The term *evangelization* has a very rich meaning.⁴ In the broad sense, it sums up the Church’s entire mission: her whole life consists in accomplishing the *traditio Evangelii*, the proclamation and handing on of the Gospel, which is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* (7 December 1990), 47: *AAS* 83 (1991), 293.

² SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 14; cf. Decree *Ad gentes*, 7; Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3. This teaching does not contradict the universal salvific will of God, who “desires that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth” (*1 Tim* 2:4); therefore, “it is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for salvation” (JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 9: *AAS* 83 [1991], 258).

³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), 1: *AAS* 93 (2001), 266.

⁴ Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), 24: *AAS* 69 (1976), 22

who believes” (*Rom* 1:16) and which, in the final essence, is identified with Jesus Christ himself (cf. *1 Cor* 1:24). Understood in this way, evangelization is aimed at all of humanity. In any case, *to evangelize* does not mean simply to teach a doctrine, but to proclaim Jesus Christ by one’s words and actions, that is, to make oneself an instrument of his presence and action in the world.

“Every person has the right to hear the ‘Good News’ of the God who reveals and gives himself in Christ, so that each one can live out in its fullness his or her proper calling”.⁵ It is a right which the Lord himself confers on every person, so that every man and woman is able truly to say with Saint Paul: Jesus Christ “loved me and gave himself up for me” (*Gal* 2:20). This right implies the corresponding duty to evangelize: “If I preach the Gospel, this is no reason for me to boast; it is a duty for me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (*1 Cor* 9:16; cf. *Rom* 10:14). Thus, it is evident how every activity of the Church has an essential evangelizing dimension and must never be separated from the commitment to help all persons to meet Christ in faith, which is the primary objective of evangelization: “Social issues and the Gospel are inseparable. When we bring people only knowledge, ability, technical competence and tools, we bring them too little”.⁶

3. There is today, however, a growing confusion which leads many to leave the missionary command of the Lord unheard and ineffective (cf. *Mt* 28:19). Often it is maintained that any attempt to convince others on religious matters is a limitation of their freedom. From this perspective, it would only be legitimate to present one’s own ideas and to invite people to act according to their consciences, without aiming at their conversion to Christ and to the Catholic faith. It is enough, so they say, to help people to become more human or more faithful to their own religion; it is enough to build communities which strive for justice, freedom, peace and solidarity. Furthermore, some maintain that Christ should not be proclaimed to those who do not know him, nor should joining the Church be promoted, since it would also be possible to be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ and without formal incorporation in the Church.

In the face of these problems, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has judged it necessary to publish the present *Note*. This document, which presupposes the entirety of Catholic doctrine on evangelization, as extensively treated in the teaching of Paul VI and John Paul II, is intended to clarify certain aspects of the relationship between the missionary command of the Lord and respect for the conscience and religious freedom of all people. It is an issue with important anthropological, ecclesiological and ecumenical implications.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 46: *AAS* 83 (1991), 293; cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 53 and 80: *AAS* 69 (1976), 41-42, 73-74.

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Mass celebrated at the outdoor site of the Neue Messe in Munich* (10 September 2006): *AAS* 98 (2006), 710

II. Some anthropological implications

4. “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (*Jn* 17:3). God has given human beings intellect and will so that they might freely seek, know and love him. Therefore, human freedom is both a resource and a challenge offered to man by God who has created him: an offer directed to the human person’s capacity to know and to love what is good and true. Nothing puts in play human freedom like the search for the good and the true, by inviting it to a kind of commitment which involves fundamental aspects of life. This is particularly the case with salvific truth, which is not only an object of thought, but also an event which encompasses the entire person – intelligence, will, feelings, actions and future plans – when a person adheres to Christ. In the search for the good and the true, the Holy Spirit is already at work, opening the human heart and making it ready to welcome the truth of the Gospel, as Thomas Aquinas stated in his celebrated phrase: *omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto est.*⁷ It is important therefore to appreciate this action of the Spirit, who creates an affinity for the truth and draws the human heart towards it, by helping human knowledge to mature both in wisdom and in trusting abandonment to what is true.⁸

Today, however, with ever-increasing frequency, questions are being raised about the legitimacy of presenting to others – so that they might in turn accept it – that which is held to be true for oneself. Often this is seen as an infringement of other people’s freedom. Such a vision of human freedom, separated from its integral reference to truth, is one of the expressions “of that relativism which, recognizing nothing as definitive, leaves as the ultimate criterion only the self with its desires and under the semblance of freedom, becomes a prison for each one”.⁹ In the various forms of agnosticism and relativism present in contemporary thought, “a legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today’s most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth. Even certain conceptions of life coming from the East betray this lack of confidence, denying truth its exclusive character and assuming that truth reveals itself equally in different doctrines, even if they contradict one another”.¹⁰ If man denies his fundamental capacity for the truth, if he becomes skeptical regarding his ability really to know what is true, he ends up losing what in a unique way draws his intelligence and entralls his heart.

⁷ SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 109, a.1, ad 1: “any truth, no matter by whom it is spoken, is from the Holy Spirit”.

⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* (14 September 1998), 44: *AAS* 91 (1999), 40.

⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome “Family and Christian community. formation of the person and transmission of the faith”* (6 June 2005): *AAS* 97 (2005), 816.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, 5: *AAS* 91 (1999), 9-10.

5. In this connection, when it comes to the search for truth, whoever trusts only in his own individual efforts and does not recognize the need for help from others, is deceiving himself. Human beings “from birth, therefore, are immersed in traditions which give them not only a language and a cultural formation but also a range of truths in which they believe almost instinctively... Nonetheless, there are in the life of a human being many more truths which are simply believed than truths which are acquired by way of personal verification”.¹¹ The need to trust in the knowledge handed on by one’s culture or acquired by others, enriches a person with truths that could not have been attained on one’s own, as well as by the interpersonal and social relationships which this process develops. Spiritual individualism, on the other hand, isolates a person, hindering him from opening in trust to others – so as both to receive and to bestow the abundant goods which nourish his freedom – and jeopardizes the right to manifest one’s own convictions and opinions in society.¹²

In particular, the truth which is capable of shedding light on the meaning of one’s life and giving it direction, is similarly attained through trusting acceptance with regard to those persons who are able to guarantee the certainty and authenticity of the truth itself: “There is no doubt that the capacity to entrust oneself and one’s life to another person and the decision to do so are among the most significant and expressive human acts”.¹³ Although it happens on a deeper level, the acceptance of revelation which takes place through faith also falls within the dynamics of the search for truth: “‘The obedience of faith’ (*Rom* 16:26; cf. *Rom* 1:5; *2 Cor* 10:5-6) must be given to God who reveals; by this obedience of faith man freely commits his entire self to God, offering ‘the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals’ and freely assenting to the revelation given by him”.¹⁴ The Second Vatican Council, after having affirmed the right and the duty of every person to seek the truth in matters of religion adds: “The search for truth, however, must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person and his social nature, namely, by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. It is by these means that people share with each other the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in such a way that they help one another in the search for truth”.¹⁵ In any case, the truth “does not impose itself except by the strength of the truth itself”.¹⁶ Therefore, to lead a person’s intelligence and freedom in honesty to the encounter with Christ and his Gospel is not an inappropriate encroachment, but rather a legitimate endeavour and a service capable of making human relationships more fruitful.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 31: *AAS* 91 (1999), 29, cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 12.

¹² This right was recognized and affirmed also by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948 (art. 18-19).

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, 33: *AAS* 91 (1999), 31.

¹⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 5.

¹⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 1.

6. Evangelization does not only entail the possibility of enrichment for those who are evangelized; it is also an enrichment for the one who does the evangelizing, as well as for the entire Church. For example, in the process of inculturation, “the universal Church herself is enriched with forms of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life... She comes to know and to express better the mystery of Christ, all the while being motivated to continual renewal”.¹⁷ Indeed, since the day of Pentecost, the Church has manifested the universality of her mission, welcoming in Christ the countless riches of peoples from all times and places in human history.¹⁸ Beyond its intrinsic anthropological value, every encounter with another person or culture is capable of revealing potentialities of the Gospel which hitherto may not have been fully explicit and which will enrich the life of Christians and the Church. Thanks to this dynamism, “tradition, which comes from the Apostles, makes progress in the Church by the help of the Holy Spirit”.¹⁹

It is indeed the Holy Spirit who, after having been operative in the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, animates the maternal action of the Church in the evangelization of cultures. Although the Gospel is independent from any culture, it is capable of infusing all cultures, while never allowing itself to be subservient to them.²⁰ In this sense, the Holy Spirit is also the principal agent of the inculturation of the Gospel, presiding in a fruitful way at the dialogue between the Word of God, revealed in Christ, and the deepest questions which arise among the multitude of human beings and cultures. In this way, the Pentecost-event continues in history, in the unity of one and the same faith, enriched by the diversity of languages and cultures.

7. The communication of religiously significant events and truths in order that they will be accepted by others is not only in profound harmony with the human phenomena of dialogue, proclamation and education, it also corresponds to another important anthropological fact: the desire, which is proper to the human person, to have others share in one’s own goods. The acceptance of the Good News in faith is thus dynamically ordered to such a communication. The truth which saves one’s life inflames the heart of the one who has received it with a love of neighbour that motivates him to pass on to others in freedom what he has freely been given.

Although non-Christians can be saved through the grace which God bestows in “ways known to him”,²¹ the Church cannot fail to recognize that such persons are lacking a tremendous benefit in this world: to know the true face of God and the friendship of Jesus Christ, God-with-us. Indeed “there is

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 52: *AAS* 83 (1991), 300.

¹⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Slavorum Apostoli* (2 June 1985), 18: *AAS* 77 (1985), 800.

¹⁹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 8.

²⁰ Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 19-20. *AAS* 69 (1976), 18-19.

²¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Ad gentes*, 7; cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 16; Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him”.²² The revelation of the fundamental truths²³ about God, about the human person and the world, is a great good for every human person, while living in darkness without the truths about ultimate questions is an evil and is often at the root of suffering and slavery which can at times be grievous. This is why Saint Paul does not hesitate to describe conversion to the Christian faith as liberation “from the power of darkness” and entrance into “the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins” (*Col* 1:13-14). Therefore, fully belonging to Christ, who is the Truth, and entering the Church do not lessen human freedom, but rather exalt it and direct it towards its fulfilment, in a love that is freely given and which overflows with care for the good of all people. It is an inestimable benefit to live within the universal embrace of the friends of God which flows from communion in the life-giving flesh of his Son, to receive from him the certainty of forgiveness of sins and to live in the love that is born of faith. The Church wants everyone to share in these goods so that they may possess the fullness of truth and the fullness of the means of salvation, in order “to enter into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (*Rom* 8:21).

8. Evangelization also involves a sincere dialogue that seeks to understand the reasons and feelings of others. Indeed, the heart of another person can only be approached in freedom, in love and in dialogue, in such a manner that the word which is spoken is not simply offered, but also truly witnessed in the hearts of those to whom it is addressed. This requires taking into account the hopes, sufferings and concrete situations of those with whom one is in dialogue. Precisely in this way, people of good will open their hearts more freely and share their spiritual and religious experiences in all sincerity. This experience of sharing, a characteristic of true friendship, is a valuable occasion for witnessing and for Christian proclamation.

As in any other field of human activity, so too in dialogue on religious matters, sin can enter in. It may sometimes happen that such a dialogue is not guided by its natural purpose, but gives way instead to deception, selfish motives or arrogance, thus failing in respect for the dignity and religious freedom of the partners in dialogue. For this reason, “the Church severely prohibits forcing people to embrace the faith or leading or enticing them by improper techniques; by the same token, she also strongly defends the right that no one be deterred from the faith by deplorable ill treatment”.²⁴

²² BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Pontificate* (24 April 2005). *AAS* 97 (2005), 711.

²³ Cf. FIRST VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, 2: “It is indeed thanks to this divine revelation, that those matters concerning God, which are not of themselves beyond the scope of human reason, can, even in the present condition of the human race, be known by everyone without difficulty, with firm certitude and with no admixture of error (cf. SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.1, a.1)” (DH 3005)

²⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Ad gentes*, 13.

The primary motive of evangelization is the love of Christ for the eternal salvation of all. The sole desire of authentic evangelizers is to bestow freely what they themselves have freely received: “From the very origins of the Church, the disciples of Christ strove to convert men to faith in Christ the Lord; not, however, through coercion or tactics unworthy of the Gospel, but above all by the power of the word of God”.²⁵ The mission of the Apostles and its continuation in the mission of the early Church remain the foundational model of evangelization for all time: it is a mission that has often been marked by martyrdom, as demonstrated by the history of the twentieth century. It is precisely martyrdom that gives credibility to witnesses, who seek neither power nor advantage, but instead lay down their lives for Christ. Before all the world, they display an unarmed strength brimming with love for all people, which is bestowed on those who follow Christ unto the total gift of their existence. So it is that Christians, from the very dawn of Christianity up until our own time have suffered persecution on account of the Gospel, as Jesus himself foretold: “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (*Jn* 15:20).

III. Some ecclesiological implications

9. Since the day of Pentecost, one who fully accepts the faith is incorporated into the community of believers: “those who received his word [Peter’s] were baptized and that day about three thousand people were added to them” (*Acts* 2:41). Since the beginning, the Gospel, in the power of the Spirit, is proclaimed to all people so that they might believe and become disciples of Christ and members of his Church. In the writings of the Fathers of the Church, there are constant exhortations to fulfil the mission entrusted by Christ to his disciples.²⁶ Generally, the term *conversion* is used in reference to bringing pagans into the Church. However, conversion (*metanoia*), in its precisely Christian meaning, signifies a change in thinking and in acting, as the expression of the new life *in Christ* proclaimed by faith: a continuous reform of thought and deeds directed at an ever more intense identification with Christ (cf. *Gal* 2:20), to which the baptized are called before all else. This is, in the first place, the meaning of the call made by Jesus himself: “repent and believe in the Gospel” (*Mk* 1:15; cf. *Mt* 4:17).

The Christian spirit has always been animated by a passion to lead all humanity to Christ in the Church. The incorporation of new members into the Church is not the expansion of a power-group, but rather entrance into the network of friendship with Christ which connects heaven and earth, different continents and ages. It is entrance into the gift of communion with Christ, which is “new life” enlivened by charity and the commitment to justice. The Church is the instrument, “the seed and the

²⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 11

²⁶ Cf., for example, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Protrepticus* (*Exhortation to the Greeks*), IX, 87, 3-4 (Sources Chrétiennes 2.154-155); SAINT AUGUSTINE, Sermo 14D [=352 A], 3 (*Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana*, XXXV/1, 269-271).

beginning”²⁷ of the Kingdom of God; she is not a political utopia. She is already the presence of God in history and she carries in herself the true future, the definitive future in which God will be “all in all” (*1 Cor* 15:28); she is a necessary presence, because only God can bring authentic peace and justice to the world. The Kingdom of God is not – as some maintain today – a generic reality above all religious experiences and traditions, to which they tend as a universal and indistinct communion of all those who seek God, but it is, before all else, a person with a name and a face: Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the unseen God.²⁸ Therefore, every free movement of the human heart towards God and towards his kingdom cannot but by its very nature lead to Christ and be oriented towards entrance into his Church, the efficacious sign of that Kingdom. The Church, therefore, is the bearer of the presence of God and thus the instrument of the true humanization of man and the world. The growth of the Church in history, which results from missionary activity, is at the service of the presence of God through *his* Kingdom: one cannot in fact “detach the Kingdom from the Church”.²⁹

10. However, the Church’s “missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle)”.³⁰ For a long time, the reason for evangelization has not been clear to many among the Catholic faithful.³¹ It is even stated that the claim to have received the gift of the fullness of God’s revelation masks an attitude of intolerance and a danger to peace.

Those who make such claims are overlooking the fact that the fullness of the gift of truth, which God makes by revealing himself to man, respects the freedom which he himself created as an indelible mark of human nature: a freedom which is not indifference, but which is rather directed towards truth. This kind of respect is a requirement of the Catholic faith itself and of the love of Christ; it is a constitutive element of evangelization and, therefore, a good which is to be promoted inseparably with the commitment to making the fullness of salvation, which God offers to the human race in the Church, known and freely embraced.

²⁷ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 5.

²⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 18: *AAS* 83 (1991), 265-266: “If the kingdom is separated from Jesus, it is no longer the kingdom of God which he revealed. The result is a distortion of the meaning of the kingdom, which runs the risk of being transformed into a purely human or ideological goal, and a distortion of the identity of Christ, who no longer appears as the Lord to whom everything must one day be subjected (cf. *1 Cor* 15:27)”.

²⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 18: *AAS* 83 (1991), 266. On the relationship between Christ and the Kingdom, cf. also CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (6 August 2000), 18-19: *AAS* 92 (2000), 759-761.

³⁰ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 4: *AAS* 92 (2000), 744

³¹ Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 80: *AAS* 69 (1976), 73: “Besides, it is added, why proclaim the Gospel when the whole world is saved by uprightness of heart? We know likewise that the world and history are filled with “seeds of the Word”; is it not therefore an illusion to claim to bring the Gospel where it already exists in the seeds that the Lord Himself has sown?”

Respect for religious freedom³² and its promotion “must not in any way make us indifferent towards truth and goodness. Indeed, love impels the followers of Christ to proclaim to all the truth which saves”.³³ Such love is the sign of the authentic presence of the Holy Spirit who, as the principal agent of evangelization,³⁴ never ceases to move people’s hearts when they hear the Gospel, by opening them to receive it. It is a love which lives in the heart of the Church and from there, as burning charity, radiates out to the ends of the earth, as far as the heart of every human being. The entire heart of man awaits the encounter with Jesus Christ.

Thus one understands the urgency of Christ’s invitation to evangelization and why it is that the mission entrusted by the Lord to the Apostles involves all the baptized. The words of Jesus “go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (*Mt* 28:19-20), are directed to everyone in the Church, each according to his own vocation. At the present time, with so many people in the world living in different types of *desert*, above all, in the “desert of God’s darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life”,³⁵ Pope Benedict XVI has recalled to the world that “the Church as a whole and all her Pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance”.³⁶ This apostolic commitment is an inalienable right and duty, an expression of religious liberty, with its corresponding ethical-social and ethical-political dimensions.³⁷ It is a right which in some parts of the world, unfortunately, has not yet been recognized and which in others is not respected in practice.³⁸

11. He who announces the Gospel participates in the charity of Christ, who loved us and gave himself up for us (cf. *Eph* 5:2); he is his ambassador and he pleads in the name of Christ: let yourselves to be reconciled with God! (cf. *2 Cor* 5:20). It is a charity which is an expression of the gratitude that

³² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia offering Christmas Greetings* (22 December 2005): *AAS* 98 (2006), 50: “...if religious freedom were to be considered an expression of the human inability to discover the truth and thus become a canonization of relativism, then this social and historical necessity is raised inappropriately to the metaphysical level and thus stripped of its true meaning. Consequently, it cannot be accepted by those who believe that the human person is capable of knowing the truth about God and, on the basis of the inner dignity of the truth, is bound to this knowledge. It is quite different, on the other hand, to perceive religious freedom as a need that derives from human coexistence, or indeed, as an intrinsic consequence of the truth that cannot be externally imposed but that the person must adopt only through the process of conviction”.

³³ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 28; cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 24: *AAS* 69 (1976), 21-22.

³⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 21-30: *AAS* 83 (1991), 268-276.

³⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Pontificate* (24 April 2005): *AAS* 97 (2005), 710

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 6

³⁸ Indeed, where the right to religious freedom is recognized, the right to share one’s own convictions with others in full respect for their consciences is usually recognized as well; this sharing is aimed at having others enter one’s own religious community and is an established right in numerous legal systems, with a well-developed jurisprudence.

flows from the heart when it opens to the love given in Jesus Christ, that Love which, as Dante wrote, is displayed throughout the universe.³⁹ This explains the ardour, the confidence, and the freedom of speech (*parrhesia*) evident in the preaching of the Apostles (cf. *Acts* 4:31; 9:27-28; 26:26, etc.) and which Agrippa experienced when he heard Paul speaking: “You will soon persuade me to become a Christian!” (*Acts* 26:28).

Evangelization is not only accomplished through public preaching of the Gospel nor solely through works of public relevance, but also by means of personal witness which is always very effective in spreading the Gospel. Indeed, “side by side with the collective proclamation of the Gospel, the other form of handing it on, from person to person, remains valid and important... It must not happen that the pressing need to proclaim the Good News to the multitudes should cause us to forget this form of proclamation whereby an individual’s personal conscience is reached and touched by an entirely unique word that he receives from someone else”.⁴⁰

In any case, it needs to be remembered that, in transmitting the Gospel, word and witness of life go together.⁴¹ Above all, the witness of holiness is necessary, if the light of truth is to reach all human beings. If the word is contradicted by behaviour, its acceptance will be difficult. However, even witness by itself is not enough “because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run, if it is not explained, justified – what Peter called ‘giving a reason for the hope that is in you’ (*1 Pet* 3:15) – and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus”.⁴²

IV. Some ecumenical implications

12. From its beginnings, the ecumenical movement has been closely connected with evangelization. Unity, in fact, is the seal of the credibility of missionary activity and so the Second Vatican Council noted with regret that the scandal of division “damages the most sacred cause of preaching”.⁴³ Jesus himself, on the night before his death, prayed “that they all may be one.. so that the world may believe” (*Jn* 17:21).

The mission of the Church is universal and is not restricted to specific regions of the earth. Evangelization, however, is undertaken differently according to the different situations in which it occurs. In its precise sense, *evangelization* is the *missio ad gentes* directed to those who do not know

³⁹ Cf. DANTE ALIGHIERI, *La Divina Commedia: Paradiso*, 33.87: *che per l’universo si squaderna*

⁴⁰ PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 46: *AAS* 69 (1976), 36.

⁴¹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 35.

⁴² PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 22: *AAS* 69 (1976), 20.

⁴³ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 1, cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 1 and 50: *AAS* 83 (1991), 249, 297

Christ. In a wider sense, it is used to describe ordinary pastoral work, while the phrase “new evangelization” designates pastoral outreach to those who no longer practice the Christian faith.⁴⁴ In addition, there is evangelization in countries where non-Catholic Christians live, including those with an ancient Christian tradition and culture. In this context, what is required is both true respect for the tradition and spiritual riches of such countries as well as a sincere spirit of cooperation. Catholics, “avoiding every form of indifferentism or confusion, as well as senseless rivalry, through a common profession of faith in God and in Jesus Christ before all peoples – insofar as this is possible – may collaborate with their separated brethren in social, cultural, technical and religious matters in accordance with the Decree on Ecumenism”.⁴⁵

Different dimensions of the work of ecumenism can be distinguished: above all, there is *listening*, as a fundamental condition for any dialogue, then, *theological discussion*, in which, by seeking to understand the beliefs, traditions and convictions of others, agreement can be found, at times hidden under disagreement. Inseparably united with this is another essential dimension of the ecumenical commitment: *witness and proclamation* of elements which are not particular traditions or theological subtleties, but which belong rather to the Tradition of the faith itself.

Ecumenism does not have only an institutional dimension aimed at “making the partial communion existing between Christians grow towards full communion in truth and charity”.⁴⁶ It is also the task of every member of the faithful, above all by means of prayer, penance, study and cooperation. Everywhere and always, each Catholic has the right and the duty to give the witness and the full proclamation of his faith. With non-Catholic Christians, Catholics must enter into a respectful dialogue of charity and truth, a dialogue which is not only an exchange of ideas, but also of gifts,⁴⁷ in order that the fullness of the means of salvation can be offered to one’s partners in dialogue.⁴⁸ In this way, they are led to an ever deeper conversion to Christ.

In this connection, it needs also to be recalled that if a non-Catholic Christian, for reasons of conscience and having been convinced of Catholic truth, asks to enter into the full communion of the Catholic Church, this is to be respected as the work of the Holy Spirit and as an expression of freedom of conscience and of religion. In such a case, it would not be a question of proselytism in the negative sense that has been attributed to this term.⁴⁹ As explicitly recognized in the Decree on Ecumenism of

⁴⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 34: *AAS* 83 (1991), 279-280.

⁴⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Ad gentes*, 15.

⁴⁶ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), 14. *AAS* 87 (1995), 929.

⁴⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, 28. *AAS* 87 (1995), 939.

⁴⁸ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3 and 5.

⁴⁹ The term *proselytism* originated in the context of Judaism, in which the term *proselyte* referred to someone who, coming from the gentiles, had passed into the Chosen People. So too, in the Christian context, the term proselytism was often used as a synonym for missionary activity. More recently, however, the term has taken on a negative connotation, to

the Second Vatican Council, “it is evident that the work of preparing and reconciling those individuals who desire full Catholic communion is of its nature distinct from ecumenical action, but there is no opposition between the two, since both proceed from the marvelous ways of God”.⁵⁰ Therefore, the work of ecumenism does not remove the right or take away the responsibility of proclaiming in fullness the Catholic faith to other Christians, who freely wish to receive it.

This perspective naturally requires the avoidance of any undue pressure: “in spreading religious faith and introducing religious practices, everyone should refrain at all times from any kind of action which might seem to suggest coercion or dishonest or improper persuasion, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people”.⁵¹ The witness to the truth does not seek to impose anything by force, neither by coercive action nor by tactics incompatible with the Gospel. By definition, the exercise of charity is free.⁵² Love and witnessing to the truth are aimed above all at convincing others through the power of the word of God (Cf. *1 Cor 2:3-5*; *1 Thess 2:3-5*).⁵³ The Christian mission resides in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the truth itself which is proclaimed.

V. Conclusion

13. The Church’s commitment to evangelization can never be lacking, since according to his own promise, the presence of the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit will never be absent from her: “I am with you always, even until the end of the world” (*Mt 28:20*). The relativism and irenicism prevalent today in the area of religion are not valid reasons for failing to respond to the difficult, but awe-inspiring commitment which belongs to the nature of the Church herself and is indeed the Church’s “primary task”.⁵⁴ “*Caritas Christi urget nos* – the love of Christ impels us” (*2 Cor 5:14*): the lives of innumerable Catholics bear witness to this truth. Throughout the entire history of the Church, people motivated by the love of Jesus have undertaken initiatives and works of every kind in order to proclaim the Gospel to the entire world and in all sectors of society, as a perennial reminder and invitation to every Christian generation to fulfill with generosity the mandate of Christ. Therefore, as Pope Benedict XVI recalls, “the proclamation of and witness to the Gospel are the first service that Christians can render to every person and to the entire human race, called as they are to communicate

mean the promotion of a religion by using means, and for motives, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel; that is, which do not safeguard the freedom and dignity of the human person. It is in this sense that the term proselytism is understood in the context of the ecumenical movement: cf. *The Joint Working Group between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches*, “The Challenge of Proselytism and the Calling to Common Witness” (1995).

⁵⁰ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4.

⁵¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 4.

⁵² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* (25 December 2005), 31 c: *AAS* 98 (2006), 245.

⁵³ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 11.

⁵⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Homily during the visit to the Basilica of Saint Paul outside the Walls (25 April 2005): *AAS* 97 (2005), 745.

to all God's love, which was fully manifested in Jesus Christ, the one Redeemer of the world".⁵⁵ The love which comes from God unites us to him and "makes us a 'we' which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is 'all in all' (*1 Cor 15:28*)".⁵⁶

The Sovereign Pontiff Benedict XVI, in the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect on 6 October 2007, approved the present Doctrinal Note, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 3 December 2007,
Memorial of Saint Francis Xavier, Patron of the Missions

+ William Cardinal Levada
Prefect

+ Angelo Amato, SDB
Titular Archbishop of Sila
Secretary

⁵⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the participants in the International Conference on the 40th anniversary of the conciliar Decree "Ad Gentes"* (11 March 2006): AAS 98 (2006), 334.

⁵⁶ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, 18: AAS 98 (2006), 232.